

The Tragedy of Addiction

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[0 : 00] Well friends, let's pray. Our Father, we pray that you might speak to us from your word tonight, that we might conform our lives to be in accord with it, and that we might therefore glorify you and your Son.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, my guess is that you are probably of the generation, some of you, who may have grown up with, well, you may actually be just a bit too young for it, but some of you will have grown up with the Disney film Fantasia.

Now, if you have, you will know the music, even though you don't know it, of Paul Dukas, and both the film and the music were inspired by a poem by a German poet called Goethe.

And the story is simple, and maybe you might remember this story. The story is of a young boy, and in Fantasia it's played by Mickey Mouse. But anyway, it's a story of a young boy who is apprenticed to a sorcerer.

And who is desperate to learn music. However, all he's allowed to do is the daily routine chores. And one day this grand sorcerer leaves the castle, and as he's going gives orders to the boy to carry water from the well and to use it to scrub the floor.

[1 : 19] Now, one day the sorcerer leaves the castle and gives, and as he's doing, sorry, he leaves and he gives those orders, and the apprentice figures that he can try a magic spell that will bring a broom into life, and then the broom can do the job for him.

And he tries it out. And sure enough, it works. He shows the broom how to pick up a bucket and carry the water to a tub so it can be used to wash the floor.

And before long, the tub is filled with water, and it begins to overflow. And the boy tries to use magic to stop the broom, but it just keeps on bringing water.

He becomes desperate. He grabs an axe, and he chops the broom into small pieces. And having assumed that he solved the problem, he then takes a nap. Well, the small pieces of broom become brooms in themselves.

And they get up, and there is an army of them, and this army of brooms begins carrying water, and a flood ensues. And before long, there is just everything.

[2 : 27] And Panic grabs this servant and this boy, and then finally the master returns. And the poem at this point has him crying out with these words.

Lord and master, hear my call. Ah, here comes the master. I have need of thee from the spirits that I called. Sir, deliver me.

In my own mind, the story of the sorcerer's apprentice is a great snapshot of addiction. It imagines someone calling on some external agent to help them, but before long, that external agent begins to assume a life of its own and a power of its own.

It becomes something that overpowers the person who sought it, takes over them, dominates them, and enslaves them. My own view is that one of the greatest problems facing contemporary Christians is the problem of addiction.

As a Christian, I have had addictions at various times in my life and found myself in the grip of them. And I've watched them sap my relationship with God.

[3 : 37] And I've observed other Christians, pastored other Christians, counseled other Christians, talked to other Christians, and I've found that I'm not alone. Addiction is a massive and growing problem for us as Christians.

And yet it's a problem I don't think I have ever heard addressed from the pulpit. So I'm going to have a shot tonight. And I know it's a problem for many of us here.

And so I want to see what God has to say about it. But before we start, I need to say that although our English Bibles don't contain the word addict or addiction, they have heaps to say about this

topic.

But it doesn't occur often in one place, but roundabout places. And so my approach tonight is that I'm going to have three stages to it. I'm going to look at the nature of addiction so that we can get a feel for it.

We're going to see if we can get a theological perspective on addiction. And then we're going to have a look at some practical tips from the Bible about escaping addiction. Now, I need to tell you that my approach tonight is not the usual one I take, where we work systematically through a passage.

[4 : 45] I'm going to take a rather different approach tonight. I'm going to look at the Bible, but we're going to take some key ideas from about three key passages. And we're going to look at them together.

So let's get started. First, I want to look at this problem of addiction. And I want to give an example of it. This is not an unusual example, though it's a rather extreme case.

And the story is a real one. It involves a man, even though this addiction I'm about to speak about normally involves women. But I thought we'd be fair, so it would involve a man.

It's a true story. Names are changed. But Gary grew up in a family that prized sporting ability. And the family sports were wrestling and football.

Success in these sports gave Gary value. The problem was that in order to succeed at one, you needed to build bulk. And in order to succeed at the other, you needed to fit into a right weight range.

[5 : 43] And so it was that Gary started this endless round of dieting and overeating at high school. It became a part of life for him. And he went off to university.

And when he did so, he left his girlfriend behind. She started to go out with other guys. And he became lost and began to feel incredibly lonely. In his brain, he began to think that she would return to him if he lost weight.

And so he started to run every day and lift weights. And he cut his food intake in half. But then he would get so hungry that he would go out at night and he'd binge on junk food.

Binging brought him comfort. But it also worked against the goal that he had set himself. And so Gary worked out a way he could have it both ways. He would eat and then he would force himself to throw up afterwards.

And before long, he was addicted. Life became one long story of exercise, eating, throwing up. Exercise, eating, throwing up.

[6 : 52] Exercise, eating, throwing up. In fact, before long, that was all that life was for Gary. Life went on like that for 16 years. He would often find himself lying on the shower floor, crying his eyes out, calling upon anyone for help.

Gary's story shows us the characteristics of addiction, helps us come up with a ballpark definition, as it were. Addiction is a complex and progressive attachment to a substance or a behaviour in which someone compulsively seeks a change in mood.

So let me repeat it. It's a complex, progressive attachment to a substance or a behaviour where we're compulsively seeking a change in mood. Now, the substance or behaviour could be almost anything.

It might be good or bad. It might be harmful or harmless. It might be legal or illegal. It might be healthy or unhealthy. For example, the substance to which a person might be addicted could be illegal drugs, alcohol or even just plain, ordinary food.

Or the behaviour to which a person might be addicted might be viewing pornography or working hard or just plain old shopping. It could be almost anything.

[8 : 15] Most addictions start with some form of distress that a person's in and which they want to get away from. The distress might be relational stress or, you know, a fractured relationship.

Or it might be work-related or it might be financial or it could be any manner of thing. It may be that the distress disappears but the addiction stays on and grows of its own.

Before long, a person is totally hooked and they find themselves in the grip of something that they find deeply, deeply attractive. And yet at the same time, they feel themselves enslaved to and they want to seek release and escape.

The signs of addiction are common. They include increasing tolerance, increasing desire for more of the same thing, embarrassment about it and never, you know, not wanting to talk to anyone

about it, secretive behaviour to cover it up, rationalising, saying, oh, it's really not that bad, delaying tactics in terms of dealing with it, withdrawal symptoms when you can't have it, and then self-deception, deceiving yourself about that it is even an addiction.

And so we do such stupid things about it, such as calling an addiction to consumerism something plainly ridiculous like retail therapy. So there is addiction in a nutshell.

[9 : 41] What I'd like to do now is to start thinking about addiction from God's perspective. And I wanted to use some theological reflection from the Bible itself. Now, I want you to ask yourself, what does the Bible tell us about God?

Well, one of the things that it does from page one to the last page of the Bible is to tell us that God is a good creator. His creation of humanity and of the universe in Genesis one is a picture of a good God who creates a good environment in which humans can live.

God creates us. And Genesis one and Psalms like Psalm 104 tell us that God is a good God who creates the world a good place. He places within it all that we need and he fills the earth with good things.

Psalm 145 tells us that God is a great and good king full of abundant goodness whose hands, it says, are filled with good things.

But the Bible tells us more in numerous places in the Bible. We're told that God has fashioned us for him and placed a deep longing within us for him. The first three pages of the Bible and the last two pages of the Bible tell us that we were made to be related to God.

[11 : 01] They make clear that we find our ultimate peace and joy and happiness when we're in untainted relationship with him. And this is where I want you to open your Bibles at Psalm 42 with me.

So open at Psalm 42. Martin read it all for us. I'm just going to highlight a few parts. I'm going to highlight Psalm 42 and the first few verses. Can you see them there?

As a deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

Where can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night while people say to me all day long, where is your God? And as the psalm progresses, you find him so thirsting after God that he will lament before God and he'll say, where are you?

And I cannot, you know, I know you are good and I want to be where you are. Did you hear that as we read through it earlier on? It's his constant refrain.

[12 : 06] He is made for God and he knows it. This is how God made us. He made us for him. And the ultimate disaster, the ultimate tragedy which this psalmist feels is when circumstances or difficulty or any other matter drags us away from this.

The absence of God is for the godly the worst thing that you could ever feel. We were made for God and fullness of life is found in him.

Now I want you in your Bibles to turn to Acts chapter 17. So flip over into the New Testament, Acts 17. And I'll find a page number in a moment for you.

It looks as though it's on page 1111. And see if you can track down verses 24 to 28. Paul is speaking to some ancient Greeks in this passage.

These are people who are not Jews. And yet Paul recognizes that even among non-Jews, there is this same desire, this same sense that this is what we were made for.

[13 : 17] Look at verse 24. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. He is not served by human hands as if he needed anything.

Rather, he gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations that they should inhabit the whole earth. And he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.

And God did this. Why? So that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any of us.

For in him we live and move and have our being. As one of your own poets have said, we are his offspring. Friends, we were made for this. To be in him, to live and move and have our being in God.

This is what God made us for. To be with him. So this is what we were made for. This is where we find fulfillment and joy.

[14 : 20] That's why the Bible will end with humans being in that place. But when we look at ourselves and the rest of humanity, what do we find? Well, the sad truth is that we know about ourselves is that we dodge this reality as much as we can.

We go about life trying to avoid God or replace God or find a counterfeit for God in our affections. So we work hard on turning his good creation to bad purpose.

So we turn good sex into tainted sex. We turn wine that God gave us to make our hearts rejoice to something we use to avoid facing life or to stir us up to do things that we'd never do when we're sober.

Atomic energy becomes something that we use to wipe out whole cities, though it is potentially so useful and helpful. And so on top of this, we work hard at substituting our longing for God with substitute and counterfeit longings.

No longer, you see, does our soul long for the living God, but it longs for more possessions. Another house or a better house.

[15 : 36] A husband or a wife. Another drink. Another shopping session. Another television show. Another bout of exercise.

A different sexual experience. Or a more intense one. Some more time on the computer. Or just another level of the computer game that I'm playing.

Or just one more session of gambling. Or whatever. You can fill in the rest. Can you hear what I'm saying, though? I'm saying that deep underneath addiction lies one of the most powerful, mysterious and vital forces of human existence.

You see, under nearly every form of addiction, there is an overriding sense that we humans have of longing. A longing that fundamentally doesn't come from the brain or the belly or the genitals. It is a longing that comes from the heart. It is a longing that comes from God. You see, underneath every human being, there is a longing for wholeness, for fulfillment, for the ultimate God who is God himself.

[16 : 46] And we have replaced this with counterfeits and with empty substitutes. Instead of longing for God, we long for transcendence or the buzz of the transitory experience.

Instead of finding joy in him, we find joy in pleasure. And instead of searching for him in the midst of pain, we become satisfied with just a mere escape from pain. So I guess the very big question is why?

You see, why is there this massive gap between what God made us for and what we are? Well, the Bible tells us the answer to that question. And the answer is sin.

Our desire is to rule our own lives in independence. And you can see that in Genesis 3. And we see it in places like Romans 1 as well. So you're now in Acts. So just flip through to Romans chapter 1, our second Bible reading.

And I want you to look at verses 18 through to 20. Look at them again and look at what they say.

[17 : 47] It says, That word for suppress is what you do when you push down on something until it submerges and is no longer seen.

And then what you do is you replace it with something else. So you suppress the truth by your wickedness. Since what may be known about God is plain to them because God has made it plain to them.

For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, his eternal power, divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made. So the people are without excuse. So we know of God.

But we suppress the truth that we know. God has made himself known in creation. These verses are clear about that. But we have suppressed it in unrighteousness. Because of sin, we push this truth underground.

And verses 21 to 23 tell us that we exchange the glory of the immortal God for images. That is, we press him underground. And in his place, we put something else.

[18 : 53] And we exchange the truth of God for lies. And the end result, look at verses 24 following. God gives us over to our desires. And the end result is that we distort even the great and good gift of sex.

There's an example here of exactly that. Instead of being God seekers, what do we become? God haters. Instead of honoring the people who gave us birth, we become disobedient to our parents.

We become filled with every kind of wickedness and greed and depravity. That's what this passage is saying. And the point is clear. You see, our sinful nature turns us away from longing after God to long after created things.

And to find a counterfeit satisfaction in things that can never give enduring satisfaction. Now friends, that's our world. That's the world we live in. That's the world we often, unfortunately, inhabit.

This is our situation. And it's into that situation that God sends his only son, Jesus Christ. In another display of his great and overwhelming goodness, God acts in Jesus to enable us to be forgiven.

[19 : 59] And he proves himself again to be the good God who only wants good things for us. Whose hand is filled with good things. Prince, I wonder if you can grasp the tragedy.

It is incredibly deep. Here is God who is truly God. Here is God who truly has our good in mind. He has placed this deep desire within us to be with him, to love him and to be loved by him.

Through Jesus, he's enabled that desire to be fulfilled. He's brought us into his company. And we fill our lives with pale shadows. We Christians fill our lives with pale shadows and empty vapour.

We take good things that he created for us to enjoy and we turn them into ways of escaping him and expressing our rebellion. And the worst tragedy is when we as Christians do it.

When we should know better. So let me ask you what it is that you find yourself addicted to. Let me give you a hint as to how you can identify it.

[21 : 05] An addiction is that thing that you plan your day or your week around. You know, the thing that governs your life. It's the thing that captivates you more than God.

That you'll drop the God things for in order to do. It's that thing that shifts aside and often replaces your time in personal prayer and Bible study each day. An addiction, it can be chemical, social, relational, work related.

It can be any manner of things. What is it that you find yourself addicted to? Now we've identified the nature of addiction. We've done some theological reflection.

Now look at how we can escape from it. First thing to do is to actually recognise the problem. One way to do this is to ask the series of questions I've asked.

That is, what is the thing that governs your life? What is the thing that captivates you more than God? What is the substance or behaviour that shifts aside the important things? Or the thing that you will actually sort of almost try to blank God out for for a moment so that you can do it?

[22 : 11] Where does your mind drift to? And your being yearned for when you are idle. For where your heart is there, your treasure is also. For deep predictions, you might add some even extra questions like this.

What is it that will embarrass you when the secrets of all people's hearts and lives will be revealed on the last day? What is it that you try to give up on on an ongoing basis?

What is it that leads you to isolation? What is it that causes you not to do well in life and relationships as you might? Friends, these are the stuff of addiction. And the first step is to recognise them.

And the second thing to do is recognise the cause. And the cause of addiction is you. Oh, and me. It's us.

It is our desire to find escape or relief in something or someone other than God. So I urge you to flee to God and his grace. And I urge you to do three things.

[23 : 15] First, wake up to your deepest longing. You may have to dig very deep in your psyche to find it. But your deepest longing is for God. It is for the acceptance he gives.

For the love he gives. For the satisfaction he gives. God made you for him. And as Augustine said, Second, I urge you to accept and live in forgiveness.

You see, God sent Jesus into the world because he knows our sinful disposition. In Jesus he provides forgiveness. And he's willing to forgive you these things as well.

And you can go to him again and again and again and he will continue to forgive. For he's God who loves you and he loves to be in relationship with you. And he loves being reconciled to you.

So friends, the next is to call upon God for help. Now I don't think we often do this. We don't often turn to him as we should and say, Please get me out of this.

[24 : 19] Please help me. Please rescue me. So call on God for help. He longs for you to be free. He longs that you find perfect freedom in him and in the service of him.

He longs for your dependence and your trust. Next thing to do is to be honest with yourself about your weaknesses. There is nothing more painful, I think, as humans, is there, as to be honest about

our own weakness.

And yet the testimony of nearly everyone that I've read, everyone that, everything that I've read about this problem, or the testimony of nearly every person I've talked to about this problem, with addiction, is that the first step they made was to recognize their own human weakness and their need for help.

My next bit of advice is to make some choices. And these steps come from the end of Ephesians 4 through into Ephesians 5. You might like to have that open in front of you, so I think it's about 4.17 through to about 5.2.

You see, this passage, it's there in Colossians as well, but this one will do. When I read the Bible about the Christian life, I find it's clear that the Christian life is about making choices. You see, here Paul tells people to put on or put off things, certain qualities, certain actions.

[25 : 43] The Christian life is about choosing to be the person God has chosen you to be in Christ. It's about choosing not to do or think certain things, about choosing actively to do or think certain things.

This language is there, Ephesians 5.17 to 5.2. So I want to urge you to be Christians here. Let me urge those of you who are caught up in addiction to make choices.

And the first choice to make is to stop the excuses you give. You know the ones I mean? The ones that say that you need to drink so that you can relax or unwind, or you've had a stressful day, then you need to engage in this or that activity, or the one that says you can only be acceptable to God or others if you look like this or have this or that.

The next choice is to make the choice to cut the ties. In other words, you make a strong, deliberate choice that you'll cut the ties with the activity or the attitude that is dragging you away from God.

Jesus talks about these things, doesn't he? Do you remember him talking about if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away, for it's better for you to enter into heaven with one hand than with two hands to be thrown into the fire of hell, and the same with eyes and so on?

[26 : 58] You remember the story. He's not talking about real things, I need to stress, because I've heard of examples where people have thought it's a real thing, you know, really cutting off your hand. No, it's metaphorical.

But what he means is clear. He's telling us that there comes a time when we will need to be rigorous with the things that separate us from God and that dominate us. There comes a time when we may need to determine that we'll shut these things completely out of our lives.

The next choice to make is to choose to flee from your heart's desire, to your heart's desire. That means we're to fill the void created by cutting the ties and fill that void with things of eternal value.

That's what Paul talks about in Ephesians 4. Do you remember he says this? He talks about filling our minds with things that are good and excellent. That is, we're to seek God and the things of God and fill our being with those things.

Recognise that life and fulfilment are found in him and in him alone. We are to choose to find these things in him. I've got two more bits of advice. The first bit of advice comes out of the fact that some addictions are, I think, very deep-seated.

[28 : 06] Some addictions need outside help. For example, some forms of sexual addiction or drug addiction or food addiction need professional help. There's someone that I know, I know quite well, who struggles with alcohol and often the only way she can fight this is to actually seek medical help and to go to hospital for a while or to have someone move in with her and actually have them watch and help her.

Other forms of addiction, such as addiction to pornography or alcohol, may just need the help of a trusted Christian friend. Christian accountability is a great asset here.

Find a trusted Christian friend, make yourself accountable to them, undertake that you regularly tell them how things are going and ask them to regularly check up how things are going.

I've done this with a number of Christian friends and I've asked other Christian friends to do it with my particular addictions. Last bit of advice.

Do it today. See, don't allow yourself to be led astray by counterfeits. You were made for God. You were bought with the price of the death of His Son.

[29 : 31] And I urge you to find your fulfillment in Him and as you do this, I want to tell you that you're not alone. You see, as I've prepared this talk, I have, as I always do when I preach this talk, worked hard at identifying my own addictions.

And I will tonight choose to do what I'm advising you to do. I want to deal rigorously with an addiction in my own life and I want you to feel free to check up on me in the coming weeks. I mean it. Ask me. Say, how's it going, Andrew? Pray for me. Hold me accountable. But I want to urge you to follow my lead. That is, I think you know what I know.

I think you know that Jesus alone satisfies the deepest longings of our hearts. And in that, I want to close with the words of a great Irish hymn that captures the thrust of this, which we're then going to sing.

And I'll just read the first verse because we can sing the rest. And it goes like this. Thanks, Timmy.