

## A BIBLICAL APPROACH TO ADDICTIONS

*“It is vain to contend with anything that hath the power of our affections in its disposal; it will prevail at the last.” John Owen*

Until about 20 years ago, psychologists searched for the “addictive personality”. What type of person became an addict? Was it the dependent, or the impulsive, or the weak-willed, or the depressed or anxious, or the type A person who was predisposed to develop an addiction? To their surprise, they didn’t find an “addictive personality”. Addictions, possibly more than any other human malady, portray in loud and living color the battle with sin that takes place in every human heart. Current estimates are that 27% of Americans will at some point in their lifetime abuse or become dependent on some substance. These estimates do not even include two recent behavioral addictions: pornography and gambling.

Addicts come in all shapes and sizes and smells. Some are CEO’s, white collar professionals, deacons and Sunday school teachers. Others are homeless street people and bag ladies whose aroma lingers in your office long after they’ve left. But, if you peer into the soul of any of these addicts, or your soul or mine, you smell the same thing: desire, thirst, hunger, longing, craving and lust. Addiction and the human condition live in the same family. The difference between you and me and the addict is wafer-thin.

Currently, the medical disease model and 12-step recovery programs control both the discussion and the response to addictions. There is one problem with the medical disease model, however. The cause of the “disease” has never been identified. There is no gene or virus or bacteria or metabolic deficiency or neuropathology that has been conclusively proven to be the cause of any addiction. Do addicts have a disease like cancer or diabetes? Or, is disease only a metaphor for sin-sickness and the devastation that follows?

According to clinical psychologist, Ed Welch, “The disease theory persists because there are no other readily available explanations...If Scripture doesn’t guide us, something else will...An addiction is a worship disorder. Instead of worshipping the divine King, addicts worship idols that temporarily satisfy physical desire.”<sup>1</sup>

From a biblical perspective, something has gone wrong with the desires of an addict; they’ve been hijacked and taken hostage. What began as a friendship becomes infatuation, then a love affair and eventually the addict is captive to a fatal attraction. An idol that was originally intended to serve him and do his bidding, turns the table until one day the addict wakes up and recognizes, “I’m hooked.” Choice by choice the addict forges the links in his own chain.

The Wonderful Counselor knew this, “*Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin.*” John 8.34 Saint Paul put it this way, “*Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?*” Romans 6.16

Worship and its perversion, idolatry, are biblical categories that capture both the life dominating and the against God nature of addiction. The Bible’s concept of sin matches up perfectly with both the voluntary/purposeful/rebellious and the enslaved/deceived/out-of-control aspects of addiction. Addiction is a form of bondage that you voluntarily sign up for, and then realize you got something you didn’t want.

If addiction is disordered, sinful, idolatrous worship then what would the solution be? Let me outline a few steps toward a Biblical solution for addiction.

1. Detection and Confirmation: Whenever an addiction is suspected, wise and loving pastors and church leaders look into it rather than avert their eyes because of fear or busyness.
2. Loving confrontation: The 12-step world calls this “intervention”. We must directly and gently address those who are overtaken by life-dominating sin. It’s simply a matter of convening a few relatives, friends, and church leaders who love the addict, calling them to repent, and presenting a plan for change. See Galatians 6.1-2
3. Triage: In cases of severe and long-standing addictions, radical intervention may be necessary. This may take the form of a Christian residential program which provides intensive around the clock supervision and counsel for 30-90 days. Know beforehand what your local resources are and how financial arrangements can be made.
4. Counseling: Following are critical issues that must be addressed when counseling an addict within the church.
  - Lifestyle assessment-it’s important to know the details of their addiction and their daily life
  - Obtaining a commitment to change
  - Accountability and prayer partners (usually several times per week)
  - Teaching spiritual disciplines
  - Developing “ways of escape”<sup>2</sup>; constructing “walls and fences” to minimize opportunities to backslide. This is simply common sense.
  - Instruction and life-on-life discipleship about how to do spiritual battle and fight the good fight for faith and obedience. This should include practical biblical teaching on sanctification and important concepts like putting off/putting on and renewing the mind.<sup>3</sup> The addict must understand sin and sanctification.
  - Replace idolatry with worship of the true God. Addicts must learn how to worship. Augustine said that the root of all evil is wrongly directed desire. Their desires and affections must be redirected.
  - Loving others. This would include confessing sin to others and seeking forgiveness, reconciliation and restitution whenever possible.
  - Dealing with deception. Addictions and lies are bedfellows. Teach them about how serious and important honesty is.<sup>4</sup>
  - Get others involved in the plan for change. This is a job for the church, not one person.
  - Lastly, don’t get discouraged with relapses. They are all too common. Those who have successfully conquered addiction usually fail several times before they achieve victory.

*Sam R. Williams, Ph.D.*

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<sup>1</sup> Welch, Ed *Addictions: A Banquet in a Grave*, P & R, 2001

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 10.13

<sup>3</sup> Rom. 12.1-2; Ephesians 4; Colossians 3

<sup>4</sup> Acts. 5.1-5