A Biblical approach to addictions

by **Dr. Sam Williams**

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> *"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 a definitive profile of 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 other behavioral addictions: pornography and gambling.

Who are the Addicts?

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, me and the addict is wafer-thin.

Currently, the medical disease model and 12-step recovery programs dominate 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?

Addiction as a "Worship Disorder"

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 worshiping the divine King, addicts worship idols that temporarily satisfy physical desire."[1]

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, "Everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin" (John 8.34 HCSB).

Saint Paul put it this way, "Do you not know that if you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of that one you obey-either of sin leading to death or of obedience leading to righteousness?" (Romans 6.16 HCSB)

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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.

Pastoral Care for the Addict

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.

> - ** Assess the lifestyle. It's important to know the details of their addiction and their daily life.*
> - ** Obtain a commitment to change.*
> - ** Engage accountability and prayer partners (usually several times per week).*
> - ** Help prevent relapses. Develop "ways of escape"[2]; construct "walls and fences" to minimize opportunities to backslide.*
> - ** Teach spiritual truth and disciplines. 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.[3] 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. Desires and affections must be redirected.*
> - ** Encourage love for others. This would include confessing sin to others and seeking forgiveness, reconciliation and restitution whenever possible.*
> - ** Deal with deception. Addictions and lies are bedfellows. Teach the importance of honesty.[4]*
> - ** Get others involved in the plan for change. This is a job for the church, not one person.*

Lastly, do not get discouraged with relapses. They are all too common. Those who have successfully conquered addiction usually fail several times before they achieve victory.

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Footnotes

1. Welch, Ed *Addictions: A Banquet in a Grave* , P & R, 2001
2. 1 Corinthians 10.13
3. Rom. 12.1-2; Ephesians 4; Colossians 3
4. Acts. 5.1-5

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