

**14.6.09, 9.15am & 11am,  
addictions (Titus 2.1-14)**

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Here's the true story of a man called Dave. No one here knows him - he lives in another part of the country.

From his teens, Dave's refuge was alcohol - his refuge from grief over his father's early death, from severe loneliness and low self-worth. It was also a lubricant: "a couple of pints gave me all the self-confidence and self-esteem I had previously lacked."

After his wife died, Dave's drinking spiralled out of control. "There was no enjoyment. I was just desperately trying to suppress my feelings of grief, bitterness and anger. I was drinking several bottles a day to keep me going. People often think of alcoholics as men on park benches with a bottle beside them. My park bench was the sofa. "At the beginning of 2000 I nearly died due to alcohol. Strangely, after all the times I felt I wanted to die, I now wanted to live. After being released from hospital, my social worker told me about a Christian centre that works with addictions. As soon as I got there, I sensed God's presence.

"By taking away alcohol, I lost my comfort, my strength, my courage and support. I realised that only God could fill this big hole in my life, so I let him in. Whatever I need, he provides. Life isn't always easy, but whenever I'm struggling emotionally or physically, he provides what I'm lacking."

"The social worker who referred me told me when I completed the programme that, although he doesn't believe in God or in miracles, when he sees me he sees a miracle!"

That's one man's story of addiction. Each of us here will have our own story. Many of us will either know we've got an addiction ourselves - or we've suffered because of someone else's addiction. And some of us, I know, have suffered greatly.

Please don't expect this one sermon to take account of all the details of each of our own circumstances. That's not possible, because every addiction is different.

But there are some things that are universally true about addictions - and in Dave's simple story about himself, he puts across the key things about addiction that we've got to say from a Christian and biblical perspective.

First, addictions aren't just diseases. Take alcoholism. It may come to look and feel like a disease - but, it's not like having flu or getting cancer, because some of its key roots are emotional and spiritual.

Now some people have traumatic experiences early in life which put them at greater risk of serious addiction.

And others may have a greater genetic predisposition to addiction than others do. There are obviously physical sides to addiction. But no one is condemned by their genes alone, or their past history alone, to fall into addiction.

Someone who's met a lot of addicted people in his working life told me that he reckons the roots include: something missing in someone's life - blocking out unpleasant memories - boredom - peer pressure - dealing with the pressures of life. Addictions are ultimately spiritual issues.

That means, second, that the Christian gospel is good news for addicts.

Because some of the key roots of addiction are spiritual - the spiritual gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for addicts.

So, first, **addictions have spiritual roots.**

God created us to find our ultimate fulfilment and satisfaction in him. But sin has come in - and one of the perverse things that sin does is that it persuades us to look for fulfilment and satisfaction in things that don't really satisfy.

Open the Bible with me to Isaiah 55 [READ verses 1-2].

It's only God who really satisfies. 1500 years ago a theologian called Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless, till they find their rest in you." And do you see that this means one crucial thing? It means that all of us suffer from addiction in one way or another.

You may have thought that this sermon wasn't really for you - maybe it was just for those few poor drug addicts and alcoholics themselves, and their families.

But because sin is in all of us then the seeds of addiction are in all of us.

The literature produced by Alcoholics Anonymous is written by alcoholics for alcoholics. They say this: "*Selfishness - self-centredness! That is the root of our troubles. So our troubles arise out of ourselves, and the alcoholic is an extreme example of the self-will run riot - though he doesn't usually think so.*"

'The self-will' - that's the will that says: "I will deal with life my way, not God's way, even if in the end that destroys me and hurts those around me."

And that will is in all of us - even if it doesn't turn into addictions as obvious as alcoholism in all of us.

I need to be honest about myself here. When I'm feeling stressed, I become obsessively tidy. The slightest untidiness in the house feels intolerable to me - and too often I let the people around me know about it. It's a classic displacement activity: a frustrated attempt to deal with feelings of chaos and helplessness on the inside, by creating obsessive tidiness and order on the outside.

And there's something else, too. When I feel low, I often have a strong urge to buy myself some new clothes that I don't need. Quite a number of the shirts in my wardrobe were not bought when I needed them, but when I felt a bit low. And buying it made me feel better - for all of about five minutes.

These things in me may be mild - but they are addictions. They're my sinful self-will taking over - the will that says: "I will try and fill the holes that I feel in my life in my way, in the way I choose. I'll be God in my life - and what really counts here is my fulfilment."

And each one of you will have your own little addictions. You will know for yourself the ways in which your self-will runs out of control in your life: indulging in lustful thoughts - buying shoes - buying gadgets - over-eating - under-eating - exercising obsessively - over-working - spending money - earning money - complete the list for yourself.

Do you see that all these things are good in themselves. Food, sex, clothes, possessions, work - these are good things that God has given us to bring us pleasure, to show his Fatherly love for us. He gave them to us so that we would look beyond the gift to the giver - to the God himself, so that we'd attach ourselves to him in love.

But in our fallenness we attach ourselves not to God, but to these created things.

Your addictions may be mild or serious. But we have to say three spiritual things about them. Number one: addictions are idolatry. In addiction, our strong desires are focused on something other than God. We crave something else more than we crave God. That means that we worship something that's not God. We love something else more than God. The Bible's word for that is idolatry.

Number two: it's also slavery. Every addict lives under the tyranny of 'just one more': one more fix - one more hour at my desk to make the job really perfect - one more financial investment to make my future really secure.

But 'just one more' is never enough. The people at Alcoholics Anonymous know the truth: we choose to walk into our addictions - but then they take over us and enslave us, and we're trapped.

Addictions are idolatry, and they're slavery. And they're also deceitful. They promise that they'll give you solace from guilt, or bitterness, or emptiness, but they never do, for more than a few minutes.

I appreciated Charlie's deep honesty in saying that it was feelings of guilt towards other people that led her into self-harming - but then she felt guilty for self-harming, and the vicious circle went on.

Addictions don't deliver what they promise. They lie to us. In that sense they're devilish - because Jesus called Satan 'the Father of lies'.

We are created to be spiritual people. Addictions have spiritual roots, and so all of us struggle with the idolatry, the slavery and the deceitfulness of addictions.

But that also means that **the gospel of Christ is good news for addicts.**

Turn with me to Paul's letter to Titus. Look with me from verse 11 [READ verses 11-14].

The key Christian message for addicts is actually just the key Christian message for everyone.

And it's there in verse 11 - the grace of God has appeared and offers us salvation - and it's that grace that will teach us to say 'no' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and will teach us to say 'yes' to living self-controlled lives.

The grace of God... God's grace is the freeness of his forgiveness.

'Forgiveness' we understand. What we struggle to get hold of is the graciousness and freeness of forgiveness.

We can't pay for it with a life lived well. We can't qualify for it by knowing that we've been better than plenty of other people.

That wouldn't be free grace. That would just be getting what you think you deserve.

Grace is this: 'even when we were still sinners, Christ died for us.' He willingly suffered all God's anger at our sin in himself, on the cross, and he satisfied it. So if we throw our lives on him and his mercy, then we're forgiven in him. That's the grace of God that has appeared.

You can't say to a hysterical person, "Oh just calm down!". And you can't say to an addict, "Oh just stop it", because addictions enslave us.

Instead, you've got to replace the relationship to the addiction with something else. You got to replace it with the grace of God.

That man, Dave, who I quoted at the beginning, said that taking away alcohol took away his comfort and strength. Surely if nothing had come in to replace that, he'd have gone back to the bottle.

But instead, he said, "I realised that only God could fill this big hole in my life."

The grace of God comes in, and provides what we think we'll find in our addictions.

Think of someone caught in addiction because they're in a cycle of guilt. They indulge their addiction as a way of dealing with feelings of guilt - but then they just feel more guilty for being addicted.

But if the grace of God comes into our lives, then we can start learning that God has dealt with all our guilt. He can begin to heal us from it, because in Christ he's taken it away.

Everyone knows that addicts can be really devious - hiding drink, stealing money.

But let's admit how devious our minds are. A Christian may insist that they don't feel forgiven - and that becomes an excuse for continuing to feel bad in order to justify remaining in my addiction.

One writer on addiction says that every addict has believed the big lie that says: "God is not good... God doesn't give me everything I need - and that justifies me in seeking some tawdry, instant, brief pleasure in my addictions."

But God says to us: “No! My grace is sufficient for you to say ‘no’ to ungodliness and worldly passions.”

Last week I was at Fosse Park. I’d already bought one shirt - which I think I did need. I was hanging around in another shop, while Erica was looking at something. It had been a long, tiring week, and I was feeling pretty flat.

I saw something I didn’t need, but I’d have got a temporary buzz out of buying it. However, I’d already been thinking about this sermon, and I repeated to myself: “God is good. In him is everything I need”. That made it much easier to walk away.

In our addictions, we can’t just abstain - because we can’t just stop. We’ve got to get into a learning process: learning to keep preaching the gospel of grace to ourselves.

The temptations will keep coming - to go to the bookies, visit a porn site, drink too much - and we’re vulnerable to them if we believe the lie that those things will satisfy us in a way that God never can.

And the only way to defeat a lie is by constantly preaching the truth to yourself: “God is good. I don’t need this other thing. In God is everything I need.”

Back in Titus chapter 2, it tells us five times that Christians should be self-controlled.

But that’s not just saying: “Just say no.” It’s not just abstaining - it’s replacing addiction as your master with God as your master.

Just saying to yourself, “I must not do it...” - that doesn’t work. It’s legalism - and we’ll never stick to it. But saying, “I need not - because God is bigger and better” - that’s the gospel of grace.

So what do you take away from this today? Let me just give you two things not to take away.

Don’t walk away thinking I’ve said that everyone who’s a real Christian never suffers from addiction. Addiction is an aspect of sin - and real Christians know that sin is with us till the day we die. We’re not shaken from our certainty that we belong to Christ when we discover how deep-rooted the patterns of addiction in us are.

And don’t walk away thinking that if someone becomes a Christian their addictions end instantly. Chemical addictions and life-long habits are profoundly difficult to deal with.

But if you trust in Christ you’re forgiven instantly. Feeling that forgiveness - letting God’s grace root out everything in us that leads us into idolatry and slavery and deception - that is a life-long battle, and every Christian fights it till the day they die.

But God’s grace has already saved us. And in his grace is the root of God’s answer, God’s power, for everything that afflicts us in this life.

And don’t walk away thinking that this is good news for everyone else, but it can’t be for you. God’s grace offers salvation to everyone.

As I close, let me recommend two books:

*Addictions: a Banquet in the Grave*, by Edward Welch. It's full of profound Christian insights into addictions.

*You Can Change*, by Tim Chester. This is an incredibly helpful, practical and radical book, which goes much wider than just addictions. It's superb for reading together with someone else.