

Sermon 50: Romans 6:19: Addiction

OUTLINE

Models for addiction
Universality of addiction
Description of addiction
Progression of addiction
Preventing addictions
Overcoming addictions

INTRODUCTION

When you are looking for a good doctor you are looking for someone who has a certain mix of skills. Sure you want someone with a bedside manner, but this will feature low on the list of necessary skills when you are dealing with Cancer or any other fatal condition. You want someone who is skilled and someone who is honest. Someone who will give you the bad news and take the drastic measures needed for your recovery. Someone who will correctly analyse your problem and tell you you are going to die, if that is the case. Paul is a good doctor of the soul and we find a fantastic analysis of sin in v19, 'lawlessness leading to more lawlessness.' Addiction is a modern day term for the enslaving habits we get bogged down in. Addiction today is under a medical model which sees addiction as a disease. Paul in talking about being a slave to our passions calls a spade a spade and in a very politically incorrect fashion calls it lawlessness. Lawlessness is a significant description for the destructive behaviour of addiction because it is not defined by the hurt we do to ourselves and called something like 'self-abuse' or 'self-destructive behaviour.' Likewise Paul does not measure addiction by the impact it has on society and call it 'anti-social' behaviour. He does not define it as modern movements do as a problem of knowledge, or a disconnect between the mind and will calling it merely 'irrational behaviour.' He does not enter into the nature versus nurture debate to decide whether we are victims of our genes or our environments. No Paul calls addiction sin, a deliberate, responsible, culpable breaking of God's law. And once having started sinning we go on to sin more and more, 'lawlessness leading to more lawlessness.' So today we want to fill out a little the bible's perspective on addiction. We want to look at how the bible differs with the world's understanding; who potential addicts are; the pattern and progress of addiction, as well as the prevention and overcoming of addiction.

Models of addiction

We will compare the biblical view with the modern 'disease' models of addiction. We will see that the disease models are fatalistic and do not have the vital spiritual perspective that the Bible reveals. Firstly, there is the view that sees addiction as the disease derived from our DNA. Brain structure and other physical traits that we inherit from substance abusing parents determine that we will be addicts. The Christian response to this view is to say that we believe that there may be certain physical traits that might predispose one to addiction

that are inherited but we are the sum total of our genes. Studies have been done with identical twins who have the same DNA, however we find that both twins do not end up being addicts. Secondly, the second view which says we are addicts because we are brought up that way or in situations that bend us that way is likewise inadequate. The nature versus nurture debate is able to identify aggravating factors that may influence why we turn to addiction but this explanation no matter what percentage you put on either side will be insufficient. The trouble with the disease model is that if you are genuinely sick with a disease you can be growing in faith, repentance and the fear of the Lord, but when you have an addiction you are violating your conscience and are turning from the Lord not to Him. A third wrong model is the one where Christianity has compromised with the world's definition. Some Christians will say that all addictions start off as sin but then lead to disease, this is usually because they are accompanied by physical effects like withdrawal. However Edward T. Welch in his great book, *Addictions a Banquet in the Grave*, highlights that the disease model is inadequate and as Christians we need to rather speak about the sins of the naïve and the one experimenting and entering the world of addiction and the sins of the hardened who have violated their consciences over and over again. It may be harder to make the choice to stop after you have already begun but it is still a choice we have. The bible shows us that it is sin when we start and we do not stop being responsible because we have come to have a physical dependence that needs medical treatment to control the symptoms. It is sin at the beginning and it is still sin all the way through, 'lawlessness leading to more lawlessness' not disease. If you are an addict for a month or ten years you are sinning.

Why are we fighting for a correct definition? Firstly, in order to fight any addiction we can't fight it with lies, just like a doctor can't heal with good intentions. We need to call it what it is in order that the correct cure can be applied. If we treat addiction merely as a disease we will never get to the root of the issue which is the fountain for all addiction our idolatrous hearts. Secondly, defining addiction correctly brings our true condition to light we are addicts because we are sinners. This has two basic parts. Firstly, because of the consequences of Adam's fall into sin we have a basic bias away from God to self, an almost animal irrationality that puts pleasure before common sense. Secondly, this leads to our sinfulness being a willing one not an unwilling one. We sin because we want to. We sin because we have a bias away from God and towards sin. The natural disposition of our sinfulness is to hate God and love sin, the root of our addictive tendencies is not outside of ourselves in our circumstances, nor even merely physical in that it lies in our DNA, sin holds all of us and turns our wills gladly to pursue self-destructive lusts. Thirdly, once we see that addiction is a sin problem, a worship problem, then we can administer the true cure. We take to our addictions not kicking and screaming and medicine is strong enough to shake us loose from them. No, we run to our lusts and cannot be shaken from them but for a work of grace done in the heart that remakes us as slaves of righteousness. God must hand us over to the true form of teaching for we cannot save ourselves and need another to rescue us. It is not a matter of finding the right formula, or regime of drugs, or rehab program. We need a heart transplant by the Spirit to enable us to overcome sin. There may be those who disagree with me and say, 'But Nick, what about all those unsaved people who have kicked alcohol or drugs, they have done it without getting saved?' And my response is: idols

of the heart are only ever replaced not removed. They have simply stopped serving self in one way and chosen another. But in their hearts their allegiance is not to God but sin. They are still slaves they have just taken a different master in the place of God. That is why in this section in Romans 6 where Paul is talking about the impossibility of Christians living in sin, he points to our union with Christ and being made by God to be slaves of righteousness. These are two actions we did not do for ourselves.

Universality of addiction

Who is an addict? Who will one day be an addict? Once again the world and the bible have different answers. The world will talk about those who have parents who are addicts, who are underprivileged, etc. The Bible says, we are all sinners, therefore we are all slaves, for the one who sins is a slave of sin (John 8:34). Here we really need to come to terms with the bible's teaching on sin. Every one of us is totally depraved. This does not mean that we are as bad as we could be but bad in every part. Potentially every single one of us is capable of the worst actions. Every single one of us is an addict in one form or another. Some are addicted to comfort, others security, there are the idols of sport, money, success, selfish ambition, vendettas, food, adrenaline, caffeine, youtube, exercise, you name it and it can probably become a god that people use to serve their own selfish purposes. I think it was both John Bradford and George Whitfield who walked past a gallows where criminals were hanging and said, 'there, but for the grace of God, go I.' Do you see yourself as an addict? You all are. You are weak and vulnerable, you have latent potential for self-destructive slavery and there is not one person in the room that is not.

This truth is necessary for two reasons. Firstly, you need to be on your guard. You cannot divide the world into those who are addicts and those who aren't and think that you are immune from being enslaved by something. Just because it is not a traditional addiction that has criminal activity attached to it does not mean that you are not an idolater of the heart that puts God's creation before Him in some self-serving way. If you think you are immune, remember, pride comes before a fall. Those who know their addict hearts pray as Jesus taught, 'lead us not into temptation.' Why? They know that they are weak and prone to stumbling. Secondly, you need to see your own weakness in order to bear more gently with the sins of the weak. If there is one sin that seems prevalent in Christianity it is the sin of thinking we are better than others and reacting in harsh criticism, lack of support, unrealistic expectations, and this will compound the problem of any traditional addict who comes to a Church. We are not above the temptation ourselves and may fall prey to it if we are not humble. Paul warns of this in Galatians 6:1-3, 'Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. 2 Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. 3 For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.' There were two men going to the house of a Christian who had fallen into adultery. Outside the door the older man turned to the other man and asked him, 'Do you think you could ever cheat on your wife?' The young man replied, 'Never!' The older man said, 'Then you are not ready to counsel this man.' The young man would not have come with a spirit of

gentleness nor would he have been guarding his own heart thinking himself immune from this particular sin.

As Christians we should be the most tolerant people in the world when it comes to addiction. Addiction is not a problem that afflicts those with 'bad blood', but every human being. Sure there are physical factors that aggravate the situation in the case of some, but really the root cause is the sinful nature that we have in common. This truth that we are all addicts should make us humble patient counsellors who can draw alongside the addict in genuine sympathy, even if you have never abused the same substance as them.

Description of addiction

Many people may think that the Bible is irrelevant to the modern problem of addiction. This would be true in the minds of those who have adopted a disease model and link the treatment of addiction to modern advances in medicine. The bible however is sufficient that the man of God is fully equipped for every good deed. The bible also describes the problem of addiction in various places. Although the modern substances are not mentioned in the bible it does speak to the addictions of sex, drink and food.

Let me share with you just one description. As a young Christian I went evangelizing my old friends and one in particular was an alcoholic. I went to the back of my Gideon's bible and found that Proverbs 23:29-35 was mentioned and I read it to him. These verses played an important part in drawing him to Christ because they described his problem to the very details.

'Who has woe? Who has sorrow?

Who has strife? Who has complaining?

Who has wounds without cause?

Who has redness of eyes?

30 Those who tarry long over wine;
those who go to try mixed wine.

31 Do not look at wine when it is red,
when it sparkles in the cup
and goes down smoothly.

32 In the end it bites like a serpent
and stings like an adder.

33 Your eyes will see strange things,
and your heart utter perverse things.

34 You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea,
like one who lies on the top of a mast.

35 "They struck me," you will say, "but I was not hurt;
they beat me, but I did not feel it.

When shall I awake?

I must have another drink."

V29 opens with a question asking who has this particular list of tragedies associated with their lives. Woes-deep troubles; sorrows-emotional pain; strife-war and disruption in relationships with other people; complaining-nothing is going right everything is in a shambles; wounds without cause-injuries sustained by accidents like car crashes, blackouts, stumbling, etc; and an unhealthy looking face-red eyes.

V30 gives us the answer. The alcoholic, those who drink for long periods of time and who are experimental drinkers always going looking for the new mixer.

V31 speaks about the initial allure of what we become addicted to, the external exterior, the photoshopped advertising campaign. It is a deep attractive red, it sparkles in the cup. And it goes down smoothly, but all of that is a lie.

V32 tells us how it ends, it is a poison compared to the bite of a snake.

V33 describes the effects of drunkenness. There are the hallucinations that come from extreme use, and there is the foul outpouring of sin that comes out of your mouth. Alcohol takes the person that we have been nurturing inside and helps them find courage to make a public appearing, this is often manifested as a barrage of foul language, criticisms, hurtful words, etc.

V34 continues the physical description, as it compares being drunk to being in a ship in a high swell, while sitting on the top of the mast.

V35 portrays the typical brazen attitude held by alcohols, 'they struck me.' Firstly note that they have provoked a beating. Secondly, 'but I was not hurt.' Their dulled perceptions of the pain, and no doubt their clouded recollections of the event mixed in with the self-deceiving nature of our hearts makes braggarts of us, mistaking stupidity for machoism.

V36 portrays the bondage of the person who is an alcoholic, they can't wait to wake up and cast off sleep just so they can drink again. Some even avoid sleep for days while they binge. And we see that the cycle get repeated all over again. 'lawlessness leading to lawlessness.'

Do you see how the Bible is in touch with the terrible effects of addiction, the allure of addiction, the attitudes that addiction nurtures and the slavery of addiction. The bible likewise addresses the cure. Paul has been telling us about it in Romans 6. In being united to Christ we die to the power of sin, have our hearts made new and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. We now need to live out of this new reality of being dead to sin and alive with Christ. So whether our addiction is in the area of alcohol or selfish ambition, through Christ and His work in us we have a foundation to fight from and expect progress, but not perfection this side of eternity.

Progression of addiction

We need to illustrate what Paul is talking about when he talks about lawlessness leading to more lawlessness. He is highlighting how it is the tendency of sin to grow in one's life until it takes one totally captive. Addictions usually start in small and insignificant ways. Where does addiction begin? Before our first substance abuse! Addiction begins with moral laxity, unguardedness, and small casual acquaintances with the addiction. It begins when we are not deliberately cultivating a love for God but are coasting and can be easily resteeered.

We are going to use the story of Samson to illustrate how he became a slave to his desires. Samson's story is told in Judges 13-16. The book of Judges can be summarized in this one line, 'everyone did what was right in his own eyes.' Samson was a gift to a barren couple, and he was to be a Nazirite all his life. This meant that he was not to drink of the vine, cut his hair, or have contact with the dead. He was to be an Israelite who was separate from the nations and would be used by God to deliver Israel from her enemies (13:5). Chapter 14 shows the slow handing over of Samson to sin. Samson begins his tailspin by falling in love with a beautiful young virgin Philistine. If you like you can imagine it with gentle music, bashful looks and all the cinematographic additions that describe a teenage love story. Boy falls for girl, it all seems so innocent. However, Israelites were not to marry Philistines, God had forbidden intermarriage. But this love-justifies-all-things approach, a very modern approach, was the path taken by Samson and the beginning of a snowball rolling down the hill as something small and manageable. He may have thought to himself that he was strong he could convince her to leave her gods and convert to YHWH.

Like most addictions it started off relatively small and there was no sense of danger, being out of control or massive consequences with sirens and flashing lights. The first cigarette, the first joint, the first drink, the first sexual experiment, the first time gambling, and many other firsts have the same innocent manageable feeling. The first step into addiction is hardly ever a big one, but it is this first step that gets its foot in the door. Samson probably walked away from his first private conversation with his prospective wife on cloud 9, he had seen that she was keen to marry him and he was getting really excited, it all felt so right. First steps in addiction also yield this honeymoon feeling, the thrill of the high, if you didn't vomit the first time. The feeling of being approved and accepted by the group you are with having passed a type of initiation. You feel like an insider who was once an outsider and part of a group that affirms you unlike the disapproving parents, teachers, cops and other authority figures in your life.

Samson was burnt by his first love and it all ended badly with the burning of the Philistine crops, the death of his wife and many Philistines. Chapter 16 picks up the developments in Samson's love life showing how sin snowballs and grows into controlling addictions. We see that Samson progresses from a young Philistine virgin to visiting a Philistine prostitute in 16:1. Here we see extra boundaries, things that he never would have seen himself doing, probably things that he promised himself he would never do, he now does. And this is the natural course for sin in our lives, it picks up speed and momentum as we give up more and more of our lives to accommodate it. Cigarettes give way to joints, joints to pills, pills to pipes, pipes to needles. A little sexual experimentation grows into giving up your virginity. Beers changes to whiskey. The lottery changes to horse racing and blackjack. Once we have crossed that line of God's law, once we have justified our actions by some self-serving agenda, what is to stop us serving ourselves more fully.

Then in 16:4 we see the famous relationship with Delilah. He loves her, she willingly betrays him. He loves her and she repeatedly betrays him. For loving her he is left powerless and blind. We see in this relationship that every last part of his Nazirite vows is finally given up. He drank wine at his wedding when he shouldn't have, he touched the

dead body of the lion he killed and ate the honey from it; he married a philistine; and to top it all off he gives up his Nazirite vow in causing his hair to be cut off. He is totally given over and controlled by his idol. Was it his need for a wife and companion, was it sexual lust that was his addiction? However you see it we see Samson putting these things that serve him before His service and calling to God. Samson was an idolater who worshipped at the shrine of self, offering gifts of women and sex to himself. Lawlessness leading to more lawlessness.

Samson is the potential story of all of our lives, we are all addicts who are born with idol factories for hearts and we have to guard them. Let me end by illustrating addiction from a movie, *The Little Shop of Horrors*.

The movie is set in a florist shop with a nerdy who likes a particular girl. A strange new plant is put in the window to draw customers and the shop experiences a little boom of customers. The plant begins to die and the florist, Seymour, does not know what to feed it. One day he pricks his finger on a rose and sucks his finger. The plant makes a sucking sound and he drops just one drop of blood into the plants 'mouth.' It doubles in size overnight. The popularity of the shop grows again and the florist becomes a celebrity because of his new growing plant that he feeds with his own blood. The plant gets bigger and his own blood is no longer enough as he has reached the end of his ability to feed it. The plant suggests that Seymour kill the bad dentist boyfriend of the girl he likes. Seymour initially rejects this idea but finally watches the dentist kill himself on happy gas and refuses to save his life. He cuts up the body and feeds it to the plant. It turns out that the plant is an alien who intends to reproduce itself in world domination. Someone suggests that he take cuttings to reproduce the plant so that every home in America can have one. This story has one of two endings. The Hollywood ending is a happy ending where there is a confrontation between the plant and the florist and the florist electrocutes the plant and it explodes. The theatre ending is darker and more true to the sad endings of addiction. The girl dies and the florist is eaten, the plant is dispersed all over America and the story ends with the statue of liberty overgrown with a version of this plant.

In Christ is our only hope of overcoming the idol factories of our own hearts. We will continue our study of addiction next week.