

Sermon 52: Romans 6:19: Addictions: Part three

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INTRODUCTION

Thomas Cranmer the one time Archbishop of Canterbury, appointed to the role by Henry VIII when he established the Church of England outside the Church of Rome, was a godly man who died a martyr's death. Cranmer came to a protestant view of things slowly under Henry's reign and by the time of his appointment he was a convinced Protestant. His greatest legacy is the Common Book of Prayer which is full of Lutheran and Reformed teachings. After Henry died, Edward VI took to the throne and the teachings of the Reformation had a time of unprecedented growth and support. But after only a short reign of 6 years Edward died of tuberculosis and was succeeded by his older sister 'Bloody Mary.' She was a devout Roman Catholic and under her reign many Protestants were martyred including Thomas Cranmer.

Cranmer's story is an interesting one because under the pressure of being in prison and being enamoured with the divine right of kings, he signed a recantation of his Protestant beliefs. One account writes: 'In a moment of weakness and terrible pressure which momentarily broke him down, he had signed a recantation of his views. He made ample amends for his weakness. In the church, on the morning of his martyrdom, he bore an unflinching testimony before his enemies. At the stake he showed the world his sorrow for signing the document. He threw it in the flames, pleading for God's pardon and the forgiveness of the people, and urging them to maintain the doctrines he had taught. He then held his offending hand and arm in the flames until they were burned to a cinder.'¹ I tell you that story so that the picture of a man burning off his offending hand will be embedded in your minds as one of the key truths we need to believe when dealing with addiction.

We have been spent several weeks now looking at the issue of addiction. We have seen that addiction is a worship issue not a disease. In fact the other day when discussing this issue with a friend he reminded me that a person is not an alcoholic, as if they have a disease, but rather they are a drunk. In other words, we need to avoid those terms and ideas that make drinking problems anything but a sin problem. The same goes for all addictions. What we call addiction finds its root cause not in the nature versus nurture debate but the sinful heart which happily enslaves itself to sin. We began to show last week that addiction is not merely an issue of a will that gladly hands itself over to sin, but a mind that willingly believes certain lies that entrench us in our sinful pursuits. We began to speak about some of the lies that the devil speaks to us in the areas of God, ourselves and our

¹ A. M. Renwick, *The Story of the Church*, (Bedford Square, London, Inter-Varsity Fellowship:1958), p134.

idols. Today we continue with that strand of thought looking at the truths we need to believe in order to overcome these besetting sins.

We will only have the time and space to deal with three truths about the war we are engaged in with sin. We will first look at the violent and pitiless way we need to amputate sin from our lives. Secondly, we want to remind ourselves that Christianity is the narrow and difficult path where God uses suffering to grow us. And finally we will make some observations about the nature and necessity of self-control.

Amputation

Amputation is the only biblical cure for idols. Matthew 18:7-9, 'Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! 8 And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.'

Jesus' advice to those who are constantly caught in sin is to cut it off. However, cutting off our dear darling sins are not so easy. Anytime we raise our hands against our sins they begin to squeal like wounded pigs. A. W. Tozer in his book *Pursuing God* speaks about the way in which Abraham was tested. Abraham was called by God to give up his son Isaac. Abraham was commanded by God to take his darling son, the promised son, the long anticipated son born to his beloved wife, and give him up to God. Comparing the love that Abraham had for creation above the Creator, the idolizing part of every one of us, Tozer writes: '...the touch old miser within us will not lie down and die obedient to our command. He must be torn out of our heart like a plant from the soil; he must be extracted in agony and blood like a tooth from the jaw. He must be expelled from our souls by violence as Christ expelled the money changers from the temple. And we shall need to steel ourselves against his piteous begging, and to recognize is as springing out of self-pity, one of the most reprehensible sins of the human heart.'²

In a world that treats our idolatry as a sickness that needs medicine to root it out the Bible gives us the hard words we need to hear. We cannot keep our sins, we cannot keep them in the hope that we can control them, we cannot have only a small part of them. Like the long loved family pet we need to 'put them down'. The world will tell you that gambling is fine because the Lotto supports many charities; or that pornography can improve one's sex life in marriage; or that drunkenness can be harmless fun when done in moderation and someone else is driving. The bible says, 'kill it!' We cannot be like the Israelites who were exiled by Assyria who served the Lord and their idols, 2 Kings 17:33, 'So they feared the LORD but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away.' The Lord our God is a jealous God and He will not tolerate

² A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, p30.

rivals. Jesus tells us that any who divide their worship, any who try to have God and their idols will lose their lives in judgement. Sin does not need therapy but amputation.

Difficulty

Overcoming addiction is not an easy overnight thing, but a life-long struggle. You will hear of presentations of the Gospel that promise that once you get Jesus everything becomes easier, that all your troubles will go away, that you will have instant success. There is some truth in this. We do receive the Spirit to help us, we do die to sin in the death and resurrection of Christ, we do experience growth in grace, but it is far from smooth sailing, but rather up a difficult narrow way. Let me read you the fine print that is often left out.

Growth in holiness is slow and does not happen apart from the desires for the idols we once loved. In many ways our temptations to our old sins are increased, especially at first. Now we are painfully aware of our idols, and the devil is seeking to embroil us in our old lives while we are still weak and wobbly on our legs.

Holiness is waging a holy war against our sins and it can be painful and violent, and like many wars endless cycles of defence and offence. And like the Vietnam war that America fought when the battle is done there is no clear winner, the sin still looks very much in tact and it appears as if we have made little headway. We fight but the final victory will only be given in death or Christ's return. Growth in holiness is not a once off thing but life-long sustained military discipline. Prov. 25:28 speaks of addicts as a city whose walls are broken down, and so they need their walls rebuilt. This includes many baby steps like getting rid of left overs, pipes, avoiding places where substance is encountered, cutting off friendships, throwing out souvenirs, like pictures, letters, etc., they are in a holy war cleansing their lives of idols (Deut. 7:1-5.) As part of the rebuilding they need to learn the life skill of self-control. You will remember that self-control is learnt through many difficulties and is not something natural to our sinfulness.

Addicts need to beware of fair weather Christianity that bargains blessings for goodness, that only pursues holiness when it pays and not because it is right. Growth is not instant and is always through trial this is how John Newton describes it in his poem, I asked The Lord that I might grow:

'I asked the Lord that I might grow
In faith and love and ev'ry grace,
Might more of His salvation know,
And seek more earnestly His face.

Tw'as He who taught me thus to pray,
And He, I trust, has answered prayer,
But it has been in such a way
As almost drove me to despair.

I hoped that in some favoured hour

At once He'd answer my request
And, by His love's constraining power,
Subdue my sins and give me rest.

Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart
And let the angry pow'rs of hell
Assault my soul in ev'ry part.

Yea, with His own hand He seemed
Intent to aggravate my woe,
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
Humbled my heart and laid me low.

'Lord, why is this,' I trembling cried;
'Wilt Thou pursue Thy worm to death?'
'Tis in this way,' the Lord replied,
'I answer prayer for grace and faith.'

'These inward trials I employ
From self and pride to set thee free
And break they schemes of earthly joy
That thou may'st find thy all in Me.'

Self-control

Self-control includes several things, firstly boundaries, like eating public for gluttony, pass words for Internet, etc. boundaries specific to your particular problems.

It includes thinking first before acting and discerning what lies behind our temptations. Many addictions are lazy short cuts. The shy person need not learn any real social skills and overcoming nervousness because alcohol will give them the Dutch courage they need to speak to a girl or dance or stand up for themselves. The person in emotional pain does not need to learn how to solve their problems or face the blame for what they have caused they can vanish in a cloud of forgetfulness. Sexual desire which was intended to be a picture of the joy between God and the believer which is experienced in salvation is not kept for marriage. No, it is pursued without the consequences and commitment of marriage. Masturbation, prostitutes, pornography and casual sex are all short cuts that get you the benefits without the responsibilities. All of God's gifts come with responsibilities. Self-control means having to go through the difficult training of learning the hard life skills that we have been looking to our idols to provide without the sweat and difficulty.

In the same vein, at the root of many addictions are habits of expressing emotions in wrong ways. It is also true that these emotions are often the triggers for our addictions. And pursuing these well worn grooves often enough we become institutionalized in them. Self-

pity mixed with self-hatred after failure or public embarrassment can take the expression of binge eating instead of evaluating oneself in light of the Gospel as loved, accepted and having a purpose. Unforgiveness which leads to revenge can be channelled by teenagers in self-destructive behaviour like drinking, drugs and casual sex. All of them are expressions of anger by breaking the parent's rules and expectations. In Christ we are to learn to forgive one another just as Christ forgave us, there is no debt against us that is greater than ours against God. Sorrow is handled not with reminding ourselves of our hope in Christ but rather with forgetfulness induced by drink, days of television watching, all night gaming. These are all attempts to put a false plaster on our wounds instead of seeing the long term solution in Christ to give us the joy and hope to get us through. Pain, revenge, self-pity, unforgiveness, worthlessness, sorrow, shyness, comfort, insecurity, desire for acceptance, rebellion, frustration, asserting independence, rejection, failure, in each case we need to learn the biblical responses. Failure to be self-controlled in the expression of these emotions allows for patterns of behaviour to arise that end up becoming programmed responses and well-worn grooves for our emotions to flow. In becoming a Christian and seeking to battle these tendencies, it will feel like we are fighting something like our skin colour because we are so engrained in our patterns of emotional response. Self-control includes the discipline of thinking before acting in order to chart the proper course for our behaviour to run in response to these emotions. God has put His Spirit within us and caused us to die to sin in Christ that we might now walk in the Spirit and not in the Flesh.

This is different to self-dependence that seeks all the resources and the motivations within ourselves. A life of discipline is encouraged in the Scriptures, we see a good example of this is Paul's instruction to Titus. Titus was ministering in Crete a place credited with people being overly indulgent and not self-controlled, Titus 1:12, 'One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons."', let's just read through chapter 2 to see how often self-control is encouraged. The power is available from our union with Christ and the indwelling Spirit blessing our efforts.

Wrong ways of wanting self-control: As a pill not long painful process, because I am supposed to want it but don't really, not forever, sometimes or only tomorrow, when God removes my cravings, to save money, when my life is easier and fixed first. We cannot determine the conditions we follow orders.

Self-control and the hope of glory are often coupled, 1 Peter 1:13, 'Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.' 1 John 3:2-3, 'Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. 3 And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.' It reminds us sin will one day be gone and the battle over, that if He arrives now in the midst of our sins that would be awful, it reminds us of who we really are and what we are intended for

Let me close by applying this to a relevant situation. Let's look at the lies homosexuals are being told and are believing and the truths they need to hear. By using this scenario I am

making a statement that homosexuality is not a natural option for us but life of bondage and idolatry and like any other addiction its power over us lies in the lies we believe about it.

Firstly, lies about God. The homosexual will think that God makes people gay, that He has no created people in the only two categories of male and female. And ignoring how the fall has complicated issues they take the current state of affairs as prescriptive instead of looking back to God's original for the proper intent of human sexuality. Homosexuals have developed a theology where God is indulgent and does not hate loving homosexual relationships. They have attempted to create a space for loving homosexual relationships by showing that there are laws in the OT that no longer apply and so that homosexuality is now allowed. This creates a God who is schizophrenic who vacillates and changes, they make God look like He can contradict Himself in the two different testaments. Sin is slighted, and as soon as sin is small God is small for sin is something that is against God.

Secondly, lies about themselves. That they are born that way, that they are the determined product of a combination of DNA and circumstance. That they are not responsible for their actions and cannot be called to account for their actions. They think that love legitimizes their actions, that the various body parts they are abusing are created for the actions they are using them for. The various diseases that accompany their actions show the folly of their ways.

Thirdly, lies about their idols. The big one is, they are made that way, they cannot help themselves and they cannot change.

I feel sorry for homosexuals, I pity them and I condemn the present government and those voices in society that repeat and entrench these blinded people in these lies. What they call freedom are prison bars. And even Christians who themselves are more influenced by the world than the Word are part of the problem. Here are the truths that homosexuals need to hear to be set free.

God is holy and calls your actions sin. He did not make you that way you are either a male or a female there is no third category. Any birth defects that relate to hormonal systems, brain structure etc., that may predispose someone to those things that may encourage homosexuality are part of the fall and will one day be reversed, we must not take our cues for our existence from the fallen state we find ourselves in but God's original and the destiny He has for us in Christ. Any environmental influences that shaped you like abuse or being socialised as the opposite sex, if your father died and you have the mannerisms of your mother or grandmother; if you have an artistic sensitive soul (if you are a boy), or if you have a hard competitive nature (if you are a girl), these are merely shades of personality and there are no personality types reserved for gays. These do not have a fatalistic effect upon you, there is an objective truth about you that you can educate yourself with, the way that God made you. You have been made for holiness and purity and true happiness is found in serving Him alone. Your search for love and acceptance has gone in the wrong direction and any need that you feel is unmet that you have pursued homosexuality to find can be found met in God. Love is not the set of butterflies we feel in our stomachs but is defined by God who is love, and His love is informed by holiness. Love that is not holy is empty emoting and is not worthy of the name. And no you do have a choice. You can be

set free. Paul spoke the same words to the Corinthians who were involved in homosexual prostitution, and he holds out hope in Christ for change (1 Cor. 6:9-11). In becoming a Christian you can be forgiven, the guilt and shame can be erased, you can know true love, true joy, and acceptance in a community. Your desires will not be removed overnight but with perseverance and taking thoughts captive to God's will you can progress in Christlikeness. You are not doomed to a life of celibacy but can be remade into the man or woman God made you to be, there have been many who have found fulfillment in marriage. They will struggle with contrary desires their whole life through, but they are now defined by who they are in Christ and not those contrary desires anymore. You can learn how to find your acceptance in Christ and not in homosexual relationships.

The devil is the father of lies but Christ has come to set us free.