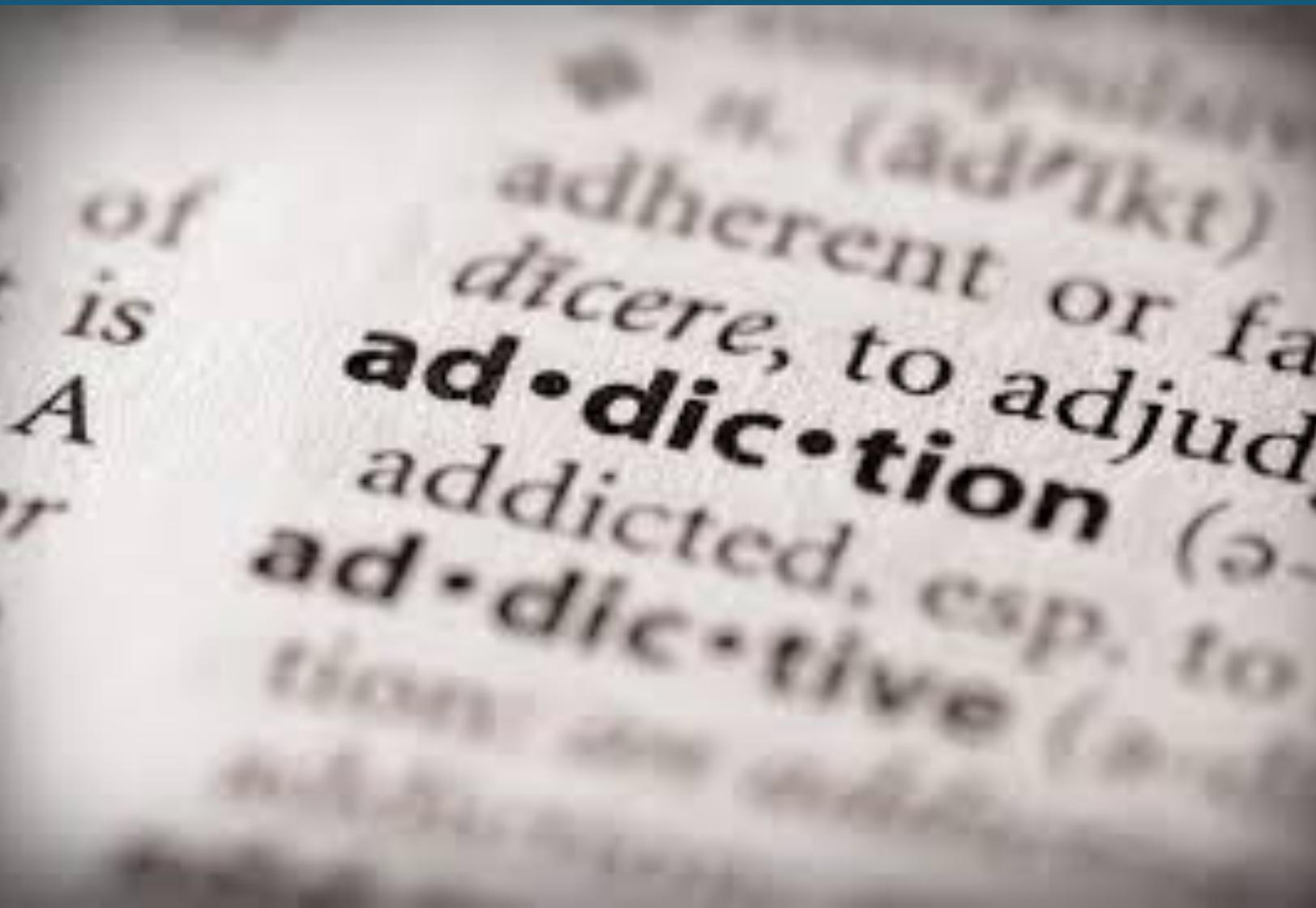


ADDICTION

BIBLICAL ANSWERS TO ADDICTION

Mark 7:20-23

Psalms 51:3-6



Biblical Answers to Addiction

Course Overview

What is an Addiction?

Before we review the biblical answers to addiction (Drug, Alcohol, Sex, Gambling, tobacco, video games, etc.) we need to consider the experiences that an addict desires to be free from. Consider the case of 'Steve,' who exhibits the common experience that accompanies someone with addictions. Note that Steve's addictive experience started with video game playing and expanded to other areas of his life:

Steve started playing video games for fun to fill his time and to keep him occupied during a period in his life when he had declining friendships. Steve, started playing games just occasionally, and over time his game playing was taking time every weekend for 10 to 20 hours from Friday to Sunday. Eventually he was playing four to five days a week, limited only by work and occasionally spending time with his friends. At this time in his life, Steve was starving for relationships, but he thought of his game playing as only a hobby, even though he was now spending over 40 hours a week playing. He did not examine himself to see if this was good or bad, but there were several problems in his life that others would consider as symptoms that are common to cases of addiction.

- Steve drank a six pack of beer both on Friday and Saturday, even when he wanted to "cut back." Steve also drank when he played games, and played games when he drank, these went together.
- Steve liked playing games only when he could consistently win, he viewed himself as the ruler in each game, controlling everything in the game. Stress in his life was accompanied by more playing, and he eventually ordered his life around playing the games. Friends, work, and personal responsibilities were planned to make room for each game.
- If Steve let any of his friends know his schedule or true interests, his friends would say that he loved the games more than anything else. They may even wonder if Steve played the games, or if they controlled him. In fact, at the time Steve started seeking help, he realized how much the games dominated his life, however, his plans were to maintain his game playing while trying to fix the other areas of his life that were being deprived of time. "After all," he would think to himself "isn't this just a

problem with scheduling my time, and what else would I do for a hobby, when I enjoy this one so much and it costs me so little?"

Why would I write about video game playing when there are so many other "real addictions" to review? As we progress through this paper, we will begin to see the relationship in how these "symptoms" and Steve's desires are actually common to all addictions.

So then, what is an addiction? To answer this question we need to look at terms. In the medical field and in common expressions, the word addiction is used as a label to classify behaviors as being part of the person, this enables a label to be assigned that separates people that need help into types of cases.

For example, a person with an alcohol addiction has a problem with resisting alcohol, or a person with a gambling addiction has problems with compulsive betting, possibly at a casino or a race track.

To gain a better understanding, let's review a more common simplified definition of addiction supplied by Carlo DiClenente: "Addictions are understood as learned habits that, once established, become difficult to extinguish even in the face of dramatic, and at times numerous, negative consequences. This term enables assigning a label for someone who wants to get a specific type of help.

However, we will eventually need to look deeper for the root cause of the problem, and to do this I will use the term addiction to more closely address this central problem. To address the root issue, the term addiction means the presence of certain behaviors and experiences, as opposed to using it as a label for the person. Essentially, people may have addictive behaviors, but they should not be defined by these behaviors. The person is more than the issue and the behavior. So what are these behaviors and experiences?

The person with addictive behaviors experiences a feeling of lack of control over acting out the undesired behaviors. The addict feels like they need, or are helped, by the addiction. In the beginning, the addict may feel like the addiction is less troublesome than it is and will defend the addiction until they begin the long road to fighting it. They feel controlled by their addiction, and there is a persistent feeling of the lack of control over important areas of their life. There are also physical and mental effects to the urges including withdrawal symptoms. However, is this unique to the addict or is this a more common experience? If we examine closely, we all have symptoms that are similar to those for addictive behavior, we might just not have them at a debilitating level or for many months.

Has anyone tried lately to lose weight by eating less? What about cutting back on coffee so we are not so wired? Why is it sometimes hard to stop? I submit that this is a difference in the degree of the symptoms as oppose to the experience being a unique condition.

We all will probably agree that we have had these common experiencing, but does this apply to all additions? In order to answer the question, let's examine some examples of common addictions. However, before we list the examples, we need to establish a more appropriate definition.

Addiction is the experience of having behaviors that a person wants to stop, but cannot even in the face of the severe consequences. The person experiencing addiction wants to focus time or energy toward one set of priorities, like family or work, but instead focuses excessive resources of time, money, and health on the focus of the addiction.

The focus of the addiction can come from many sources, traditionally these have been alcohol, drugs, food, and more commonly sex. However, anything that feels controlling can be an addiction:

- Adventure
- Computer (The Internet/ Games)
- Exercise
- Family
- Fantasy/Dreaming
- Love
- Pain
- People
- Pornography
- Risk
- Sleep
- Sports
- Work
- And even church activities

Each of these is derived from things that are good, but how we use them and relate to them results in whether they are an addiction or not. Simple pleasures are good, God has designed them for us to enjoy life, but they are no longer simple pleasures when they control us.

Treating the Root Issue

So, now that we have provided a common definition, how do we treat addictions?

Recent history has exposed common problems with treating addictions. Since the 60's, addiction has been progressively seen as a disease, and many health practitioners look no farther for the source of the struggle and symptoms. The vast majority of recent interventions focus only on the symptoms, but they do not seek to find the cause unless it is to relieve the person of the symptoms.

Given these view points on behaviors and desires, and the inability of common interventions to address the core issue, where should we go for a better plumb line? To best understand the nature of this behavior, we need to go to the ultimate authority on behavior, and that will be found in the Bible. Now, many will say that the Bible does not go into details about what is considered mental illness or addictions and dependencies. So how can it help in this case? Actually, the Bible is explicit about our behavior, desires, and how we devote our time. God addresses the root of the condition that causes people to do destructive behavior, and he calls this sin. To put it another way, the Bible goes beyond describing behavior and points to the core issue, which is the person's desire. All malignant behaviors and desires are a matter of the heart condition and sin nature.

Because of this sin nature, we desire what is bad, and we are also bound by the desires of our sin nature. More specifically, one can read this in the book of Jeremiah where God describes man's heart condition:

“Judah's sin is engraved with an iron tool, inscribed with a flint point, on the tablets of their hearts and on the horns of their altars ...”

Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD. He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives ...”

‘The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve.’”

Jeremiah 17:1, 5-6, 9-10

King Solomon states this another way in the book of Ecclesiastes when he describes the common experience of man's condition.

“This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead.”

Ecclesiastes 9:3

Finally, Jesus describes the root of the problem being in people’s inner nature, or what the Bible calls the heart of man.

“What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean.’ For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’”

Mark 7:20-23

Interventions for Addiction:

Derived from the view of a chosen definition for addiction, interventions will address either the disease definition or a biblical heart condition. Most modern interventions are based on the external factors that are believed to cause personal behaviors. Whereas the biblical model depends on looking into the inner person, or into the heart and desires, in order to understand the source of behaviors. On the one hand, modern interventions are often useful to addressing the reduction in unwanted behaviors. However, they fail to address the heart of the issue. Modern interventions address the substance or activities that are a distraction that lead to behavior, such as avoiding the places where the behavior occurs. However, this is focused on blaming external ‘problems’ and not addressing the person himself. Instead we need to turn from blaming external sources to addressing the real issue of the heart condition, we need to address what the true consequences are. According to the Bible passages above, we are actually addressing God’s design for us when we address issues of desire.

Since we are actually addressing desires that are contrary to God’s desire and to his position as the ultimate person worthy of worship, these things we call addictions are actually idol worship. When we give ourselves over to our desires, we worship them instead of God. Worship is essentially serving anything with devotion or overarching desire. We are either worshipping our desires or God. Therefore, addictions are ultimately placing anything before God. Since God is before all things, any controlling behavior or desire that is pre-eminent in someone’s life comes before God, and this will result in disrupted relationships with people and destructive behavior toward other areas of life.

Finally, one additional word about Bible's description of addictions. Addiction and worshiping anything except God, what the Bible calls idolatry, is common to all people. The question is not who has addictions and who does not, it is more to what degree do each of us pursue our own selfish desires and idols. This can be seen in [Psalm 51, verses 3-6](#):

"For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place."

Delving Deeper into the Addiction Experience

Before we consider helping people who experience addiction, we need to better understand the experience that is felt by those we want to help. First, it is too easy to just call addiction sin and not address the difficulty experienced by those with addiction. The addictive issues are complex and we need to understand the challenge for the addicted person. We need to look into the connection between mental and physical urges and the choice to do these behaviors.

If the Bible equates addiction to idolatry, then why is this not easily cured by prayer and reading the Bible? Also, what comes first, the choice to engage in behavior that can become a habit, or the lure and control of the addiction? Answering the second question first, the Bible is clear that all sin starts with our own desires, and persistent idolatry is no different.

Passages that shed light on this are [James 4:1](#), [Luke 6:43-45](#), and [1 Corinthians 10:13](#).

"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?"

[James 4:1](#)

"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes, or grapes from briars. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks."

[Luke 6:43-45](#)

“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”

1 Corinthians 10:13

This sample of passages shows that the path to behaviors that feel controlling begins with a person's desires. First a person conceives something that they feel they must have, and then they begin on the path to submitting to the behavior by repetitively engaging in the activity. However, once a person starts to feed his or her desires, changes then begin to take place in the body and soul that give the addiction greater control over the person.

So, why does this happen? Primarily we need to remember that we are embodied souls; what takes place in our body affects the soul and what we spiritually think and pursue has an impact on our bodies. For example, consistent worrying over time can cause a person to age faster (the spirit affecting the body), and taking mind altering drugs clouds our ability to make good spiritual decisions (the body affecting the spirit).

This progressive experience proceeds from interest in fulfilling desire through behaviors, then the overwhelming need for what was desired, and finally the experience of slavery to the desire, which is acted out through the repetitive behavior. For progressive addiction, this can also be seen experientially through physical and psychological withdrawal symptoms. The more a person practices a behavior to gain some desired effect, the more the person will feel like needing the behavior.

Now back to the first question, why can't someone stop an addiction immediately just through prayer and reading the Bible? Well, progressively feeding into sinful behavior requires progressively fighting against the desires and sin in order to overcome feeding the desire. Does this mean that prayer and reading the Bible cannot help? Definitely not, prayer and the truth of God's word are fundamental to overcoming sin. We will examine this more closely after looking into how the counselor can walk alongside and minister to a person who experiences addiction.

Ministering to a Person who Experiences Addiction

How do we minister to and counsel those who are entrapped by their desires?

First, we should view addicts that seek help as care seekers with addictions. The addiction does not define care seekers, it is something that they seek help with. Remember the review above that explained how feeling addicted to

something is a common experience on one level or another? We should avoid labeling people when these experiences are common, where the difference is more in degree than in a unique condition.

Next we will turn to the counselor. People experiencing addiction need counselors, and anyone who seeks to help an addict is providing counsel. Some of us are formal counselors, and many counselees with addiction experiences will benefit from seeing a trained counselor. However, all of us have the opportunity to counsel those who God brings our way. Anytime you give someone advice or recommendations about anything in their life, then you are providing counsel. In addition, all of us have to address sin, and we all will experience being a care seeker at one time or another, either formally or informally. Even if we do not experience addictions that are strong enough to require intervention for normal functioning, we will all have opportunities to address similar experiences and the underlying root problem of heart desires in ourselves and others.

Now, turning to addressing the addictions, since addictions at their root involve idolatry (as we discussed above), the solution will involve a right relationship with God. Addictions are idolatry that has us in bondage. The addictive desires and behavior are essentially idols that the addict worships; therefore the solution will be grounded on switching to a worship of God.

Ultimately care seekers with addictions that look for help are not worshipping God, a person cannot worship both God and the addiction at the same time.

Release from Idolatry is Found with Freedom in Christ

True release from addictive experiences and from idolatry comes through the work of Jesus Christ and through prayer and trusting in him. I mentioned above that prayer and God's word will not work alone, and that is because prayer and God's word are instrumental in the life of someone who has trusted Christ. The power over idolatry comes from Jesus's death on the cross, and God works in the life of the believer through the Spirit for the believer's sanctification. And the Holy Spirit works in the believer's life through prayer and the word of God, and these should be at the center of the life of those who would want to be free of addictive behaviors and experiences. So, prayer and internalizing God's word are critical, but sin and experience of addiction will not disappear immediately.

God works gradually through the life of those he loves. Even believers need to continuously go to him in repentance, forgiveness, and prayer; this is part of our sanctification.

Now, for the role of the counselor, he or she has the role of helping the care seeker by walking with this person as God works in his or her life:

- 1 The counselor gets to love the care seeker and to provide the help that the care seeker needs in order to recover from their addiction.
- 2 The counselor needs to understand each care seekers' specific life condition and addiction. Addictions are complex, involving little understood interactions between soul and body, and every care seeker is unique.
- 3 The counselor should speak the truth in love. The addict needs to know how God views the addiction and that the path to wholeness and wellness is to cooperate with God as he transforms the addict away from idolatry towards conforming to the image of his Son. The Scripture, including the verses we discussed today, should be a central part of the addict's growth and change.
- 4 The counselor gets to walk with the addict as God works in his or her life to free them from bondage to sin and as God transforms them into the image of his Son Jesus Christ.

A note about Perseverance:

The road away from addiction requires endurance and perseverance. Part of the Christian life is that God does not remove all sin immediately, but he allows struggles to continue to drive us to him and teach us relationally throughout our entire lives.

The Importance of Relationships:

One more note about relationships. People are created to be in relationship with both God and with each other. A person's growth out of addiction is closely related to his or her relationship with God. And as God works through the people around us, the addict is empowered when others work with them through accountability and encouragement.

In addition, acting our addictive behavior is going to cause damage to relationships, and people who are moving away from addiction will need to work towards healing hurt relationships. This will include asking forgiveness of those who have been hurt by the addictive behavior. The person experiencing addiction will also need to forgive those who have sinned against the addict or treated the addict in an unloving way due to the addictive behavior.