**A Biblical Understanding of Addiction**

Jim Berg | October 21, 2021

News item: “More than 93,000 people died from drug overdoses in 2020, according to preliminary data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, making last year the deadliest on record for drug overdoses. American adults’ alcohol consumption appears to have increased during the pandemic, too, with nearly 1 in 4 adults reporting drinking more to cope with their stress in one American Psychological Association poll.”1

In a world full of sin and suffering, many struggle with addictions. Contrary to what many in the world believe, addictions are not just a physical disease: they are primarily a spiritual issue. We were created with both a soul (sometimes called “heart”) and body.

People begin addictive behaviors in response to trials they do not know how to handle because of either the mind-numbing or mood-altering emotions and desires. However, anger, anxiety, despair, loneliness, guilt, shame, bitterness and other negative emotions are matters resolved only in the soul.

We cannot resolve soul-problems by putting a substance into our bodies (e.g., drugs, food), cutting our bodies, pursuing immoral sex with our bodies and so forth. Soul matters can be resolved only through a reconciled and growing relationship with Jesus Christ, a growing knowledge of and obedience to His Word, and a growing fellowship with and accountability to a local church.

As my colleague Bruce Meyer discussed in a recent Viewpoint blog post, the Bible is sufficient even for counsel because it addresses the issues of our hearts. Consequently, we need to have a biblical understanding of addiction — better called temptations and life-dominating sin — so that we can counsel and overcome it at its core.

UNDERSTAND ADDICTION THEOLOGICALLY

As created but fallen image bearers of God whom Satan has vandalized, we can flourish only as our Creator intended when we are:

Reconciled to God through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:1-6).

Cultivating a daily, fruit-bearing relationship with our Savior (John 15:1-16).

Governed mentally by God’s thoughts revealed to man in the Scriptures (Isa. 55:6-12; Rom. 8; 12:1-2).

Reflecting emotionally that we desire the same things God desires for Himself and His creation (Rom. 15:1-13; Phil. 4:4-13).

Making choices willingly that reflect a commitment to put God first in all things for God’s glory and not our own (Matt. 7:24-27; Rom. 6; Gal. 6:7-9; Col. 3:1-25).

These passages teach that our satisfaction and dependence are rooted in a relationship with Christ and His Word. Addiction is a “dependency disorder” (Prov. 3:5-6; Jer. 2:13; Rom. 6). We were created to be entirely dependent upon God for wisdom about how to live. That dependency has become even more important since the Fall since we now live as both sinners and sufferers. When we do not turn to God when we sin or suffer, we turn to ourselves for solutions. Often we choose a substance, behavior or relationship to find satisfaction or to handle pain apart from God’s way.

ADDRESS ADDICTION BIBLICALLY

Unaddressed biblically, wrong responses lead to sin and death (James 1:14-15). But God offers hope to us. He promises both the willingness and the ability to use our trials and our resulting losses as fitness stations to restore His image in us (James 1:2-8; Rom. 8:28-29). For God to work in us, we first need to biblically address the core of individual temptations and life-dominating sins by learning and applying lessons from James 1:14-15.

Lesson 1: Behind every fall is the pull of our desires/lusts.

When people do drugs, repeat the cutting, binge on food again or sneak back into porn, they must ask themselves, “What am I wanting so badly that I’m willing to disobey God to get it? What am I thinking will make me happy instead of a relationship with God?” Unless they are honest about what they really want, they cannot successfully battle their sinful habits. (For example, one person I met wanted to deal drugs because he actually wanted respect — which he thought he could get through the fast car and fancy clothes the life as a pusher could afford him.)

Sometimes our emotions help us recognize what we desire above God. Ask yourself and those you counsel, “Under what circumstances am I most likely to get angry, most likely to become fearful or most likely to despair and want to give up?” These emotions arise when we are not getting what we want. Addiction begins with sinful desires or super-sized legitimate desires pursued outside of God’s laws.

Lesson 2: Behind every fall is belief in a lie.

We interpret everything that happens to us through our belief systems. If we believe lies, we will interpret the situation wrongly, come to the wrong conclusions and make the wrong decisions. We must ask ourselves and those we counsel,

“What lies am I believing about God?”

“What lies am I believing about myself?”

“What lies am I believing about others?”

“What lies am I believing about the way God’s world works?”

Lies allow our sinful nature to justify our disobedience to God and our mistreatment of others. Satan uses the lies we hear from the world around us and the lies that our own sinful hearts generate to keep us in slavery. Jesus said in John 8:32 that the only way out of sin’s slavery is to know truth:

You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

The only source of absolute truth is the Bible — God’s Word. We cannot be free from life-dominating sins unless we are continually learning, believing and obeying truth from the Bible with God’s help.

Lesson 3: Behind every fall is a choice to obey God or to obey our own lusts.

Paul is clear that genuine believers who “are dead to sin” must not “live any longer therein” (Rom. 6:2). There are “just two choices on the shelf — pleasing God or pleasing self.”2 (Rom. 6:11-18.)

Lesson 4: Repeated sin always leads to the death/loss of something.

When we begin to lose our ability to choose, choice seems to die and an addiction is born. Life seems to be driven by triggers and cravings — our desires. Although no one is ever truly deprived of the ability to choose, it certainly feels as if we don’t have a choice. We are losing our freedom.

Certainly, we lose the ability to choose the consequences of our actions — death of health, employment, financial situation, relationships, emotional well-being and finally hope.

All of these “deaths” unfold because God promised that they would. He said that “sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:15) To get out of slavery, we must:

Commit ourselves to handling life God’s way instead of going our own way (Isa. 53:6).

Identify the losses that are painful to think about and learn how God wants us to handle them.

Identify the lusts or desires we pursue to relieve our pain.

Reject the lies that keep us enslaved.

Learn to walk in repentance and dependence upon God.

In other words, the ability to break the hold that sin has on our lives when addicted and handle losses wisely comes from a saving faith in Christ and then a maturing in our Christian walk. We could say that God’s recovery program is sanctification — Christian growth. Only God can sanctify us when battling addiction and help us become a different kind of person. Only then can we have lasting freedom, satisfaction, stability and fulfillment (Psalm 1; Matt. 7:24-27)