

Finding Hope in the midst of defeat and addiction

All sin is inherently addictive! Therefore, all of us need to know how to find hope and victory against the bad habits and sinful addictions that will, if left unchecked, destroy our lives. Discover both biblical principles and practical steps to aid in your fight for faithfulness.

This is personal because I am an addict... it was actually my son who brought it to my attention

- a couple months ago I was sitting on the couch with Luke
- I was *with* him... but also *not with* him... because I was lost in this (*phone*)
- Checking social media
- Luke is not one to keep his feelings to himself – so he pushed phone down, sat on my lap
- Said, “Daddy stop ignoring me. You’re spending too much time on your phone!”
- There are times when I love Luke’s brutal honesty! I needed that conviction!
- I was spending too much time on my phone and it was hurting my kids

Many of you know this addiction of which I speak!... Nomophobia

- = an irrational fear of being without your mobile phone
- you need to have it with you; need to check it frequently; feel anxious without it
- Now a recognized medical condition!
- Led experts to call smartphones: the cigarettes of the modern age
 - o everyone’s addicted... we pretend it’s harmless but we know better!
 - o we know our incessant use of these is hurting us, our kids, our relationships
- But we just can’t seem to stop checking the phone throughout the day

WHY is it so hard to stop doing something that you know is bad for you?

- Maybe it’s not the phone for you; maybe it’s:
- **Food:** You know you shouldn’t eat too much but you do and put on weight
- **Alcohol:** you know you shouldn’t drink too much but you do and get a hangover
- **Video games:** you know you need to step away and go to the gym... but you just keep playing
- **Porn:** you know you shouldn’t look but you do even though it makes you feel guilty
- **Shopping:** You know you need to stop spending \$ and save... but you just keep buying things

And the most troubling question of all: why is it so hard for *CHRISTIANS* to stop doing these things?

- We are filled with the Holy Spirit – we have God’s help
- So why are we struggling with destructive habits as much as the rest of the world?

The answer is our topic today: finding hope in the midst of defeat and addiction

- We’ll talk about the good mechanism of HABITS God designed into our brain
- We’ll talk about how sin twists that habit-forming mechanism and uses it to create addictions
- We’ll talk about how to find hope and victory when you battle harmful habits and addictions

The Good Gift of Habits

- A habit = a choice that has become automatic
 - o Much of what we think, say, and do is by habit – it’s automatic
- Those habits run our lives and allow us to function

- Imagine trying to **brush your teeth** – had to consciously think: left, right, left, right, left, right, up, down, up, down, up, down, spit...
- Or **eating** – chew, chew, chew, switch sides, chew, chew, chew, chew, chew, swallow... oops, not yet, chew, chew, chew, chew, now swallow. Not get another bite...
- Life would be exhausting and impossible without habits
- **So: habits are actually a GIFT from God that makes life possible**
 - Charles Duhigg author of *Power of Habit* – “Habits... emerge because the brain is constantly looking for ways to save effort. Left to its own devices, the brain will try to make almost any routine into a habit.”
- That’s what allows our brains to move up to higher levels of thinking
 - We can eat and have a meaningful conversation with a friend because we’ve automated the task of eating through the formation of a habit.
- Habits create efficiency that allows us to function fully as human beings
- So they’re good and necessary!

However, like all good and necessary things God designed into our body: habits are broken by sin

The Misuse of Habits: Addiction

- Habits are a gift that can be misused **by sin**
- Habits automate behavior – so if the behavior is bad, you automatically do bad things without even thinking about it – that can lead to even more sin
- These bad habits can grow so strong that they become **addictions** that destroy us
- “Particularly strong habits... Duhigg

So let’s define addiction...

- medically speaking: Addiction is a chronic brain disease that is progressive and can be fatal
 - The disease distorts thinking, feelings, and perception, which drives people to behave in illogical and destructive ways
- practically speaking, "Addictions = repetitive behaviors in the face of negative consequences"
- **Almost anything deeply enjoyable can turn into an addiction**
 - Any behavior – from abusing alcohol to gambling to shopping to sex – may start out as a habit but slide into an addiction
- **The primary culprit: the brain's reward system, powered by the neurotransmitter dopamine**
 - A pleasurable activity or substance – food, sex, drugs, alcohol
 - causes the brain to release dopamine which makes you *feel* good
 - That feeling reinforces the behavior making you want it again
 - But over time a given amount of substance or experience releases less dopamine
 - = desensitization – now you need more of it to get the same high
 - that causes the addiction to grow in power and destruction
- **It’s not hard to find examples of destructive addiction**
- Opioid crisis running rampant in America
 - 42,000 Americans died of opioid overdose in 2016 – more than of breast cancer!
- Alcoholism
 - 88,000 Americans die every year from alcohol-related causes
 - In 2015: 27% of Americans age 18+ engaged in binge drinking in the previous month
 - Washington Post: prevalence of “alcoholism” in US rose by 49% in 1st decade of 2000s
 - 1 in 8 American adults now meets diagnostic criteria for alcoholism
- Those numbers are dwarfed by the number of people addicted to porn or to digital devices

The scary thing: many of those same trends are true in the church

- Addiction is as great a risk for Christians as it is for non-Christians
- because we all share that same habit-forming, dopamine-releasing mechanism in our brains

How do we find hope for victory in the midst of defeat and addiction?

- Start by sharing the 2 most important passages in the Bible on habits and addictions
- These verses are crucial for understanding how to grow in obedience and overcome sin

Romans 6:15-16

- read v15 – the logical question
- read v16 – Answer: Slavery
- **Clarify: we have already been freed from sin through faith in Jesus**
 - o Sin has no legal ownership of a believer - we belong to God as members of His family
 - o v16 is about experiential slavery = living like a slave even when you aren't one
 - o If a believer sins regularly: he is allowing sin to master him – strengthening sin's power
 - o Conversely: obey regularly – strengthen power of obedience in your life
- **Paul's Point: You become a slave of whatever you choose to do day-after-day**
 - o That's God's habit-forming mechanism at work
 - o Whatever you do regularly becomes automatic - a habit that is incredibly hard to resist
- **If you choose to sin day after day... you become a slave of sin**
 - o Giving in rewires neural pathways in brain making sin more automatic in the future
 - o Timothy Keller quote
 - o Therefore: there are no "pet sins," no sins you can "manage"
 - o ALL SIN IS INHERENTLY ADDICTIVE
 - o Repeated sin fuels biological process of habit formation leading to further sin
 - o It also diminishes the reward so we need more tomorrow – leading to addiction
- **Result: if you let yourself become addicted to sin → leads to death**
 - o Repeated sins → sinful habits → addictions → death
 - o probably = physical death – addictions tend to kill – drugs, alcohol, sexual sin
 - o sin that becomes an addiction destroys your life and the lives of those you love
- **The good news: obedience works in the same way!**
 - o Repeated obedience → godly habits → sanctification
 - o Obey today and you will want to obey tomorrow... at least a bit more
 - o Again, this is that habit-forming process at work in you, rewiring your mind
 - o **Result → you will grow in righteousness** = sanctification
 - o you will become more and more righteous in your character and behavior
- Point of this passage: we cannot escape the habit-forming mechanism God designed into us
 - o Whatever we do regularly **WILL** become automated and therefore harder to resist
 - o So make sure your regular practice is obedience!

Now if we only looked at this passage it might seem like all that matters is what we do – our choices. Our choices certainly are important... but there is something else going on when we obey. Someone else is at work, too!

Philippians 2:12-13

- **read v12**
 - o This is our part in sanctification: keep obeying and result → sanctification
 - that's what Paul means by "work out your salvation"
 - = you are applying salvation from sin to more and more of your life
 - o So our job is to keep obeying... but we are not alone in our struggle!
- **read v13 – This is God' part – As we obey, He works inside of us to do 2 things...**
- **1) He enables us to "work" = to obey = to do what pleases Him**
 - o enables / empowers our actual obedience
 - o No matter how far you fall into bad habits & addictions: sin is never inevitable!

- You have Almighty God living in you and He's promised to give you enough strength
- **read 1 Cor 10:13**
- God is ALWAYS stronger than our addictions – we never have to give in!
- That does not mean if you're an addict all you need is more faith in God
 - We should use every tool God gives to fight addiction – that's point of sermon!
- But even in the midst of addiction the Christian can say "NO" to temptation
- Because you have God in you and He is always enough!
- But here's the beautiful thing: God is working not just to empower you, but to transform you
- **2) He enables us to "will" to do right = to desire to do what pleases Him**
 - As we say "YES I will obey" God gradually transforms our desires so that our obedience will be slightly more desirable tomorrow
 - That's a great source of hope for the Christian!
 - Most people think of Christianity as a bunch of rules that keep you from doing what you want to do. No! Christianity is about changing what you want so that you no longer want the things that hurt you and instead want things that bless you!
 - God doesn't want a sad, boring life of obligation for you. He wants to transform you so that you love to do what He loves!
 - And as best I can tell, that transformation happens through the process of forming new habits that He designed into us! Every time we obey, God is gradually rewiring the neurons in our brains a little at a time so that we grow to want to obey more tomorrow. Old neural pathways that led to sin begin to fade – that's how God designed the brain to work – unused pathways diminish. New pathways leading to righteous behavior grow stronger, deeper, more inevitable. God works through that neurological process of habit-forming to reshape our desires and grow us in sanctification.
- If you choose obedience, God will give you the strength to obey today and He will use that wonderful habit-forming mechanism to make obedience more natural and desirable tomorrow.
- So there is always hope no matter how far you've fallen! The God who made you can use that habit-forming mechanism in you to conquer that bad habit or addiction and create a new habit of righteousness in your life.

Now let's get very practical. What concrete steps can you take this week to stop giving in to sinful habits and choose obedience instead?

4 Practical steps:

1) Talk about it

- Same step every week
- A bad habit left in the dark will grow – addiction left in the dark will grow
- They will master you until you bring them out in the light
- Talk about it with God – it won't surprise Him
- Talk about it with others
 - Especially a recovery group where you can honestly talk about bad habits or addiction
 - **Celebrate Recovery** – Christ-centered and Bible-based 12 Step Recovery Program
 - Here at SW Tuesday nights at 6:30 for a light dinner; large group starts at 7
 - **The Landing** – Celebrate Recovery for teens struggling with habits, hang-ups, and hurts
 - Also meets here at SW Tuesday nights at 6:30
- Talk about it with an expert
 - If a bad-habit has grown into an addiction that is consuming your life, you need to talk with a doctor as soon as possible – especially if it's some type of substance abuse. You may need medical help. You may need to spend some time in a clinic. You need to use the tools of modern medicine and therapy that God has given you to get help.

2) Find and fill the hole

- A famous line attributed to the great Christian writer GK Chesterton, "everyone who knocks on the door of a brothel, is knocking for God."
- What he's trying to say is that every time we give in to sin or to addiction, we are really trying to fill some hole deep down inside of us that, in reality, can only be filled by God or by something good God provides. We're trying to meet a deep and legitimate need in an illegitimate way.
- Examples are easy to come by:
- The man who habitually looks at porn... what good need is he trying to meet? Lots of possible options.
 - o Perhaps he craves genuine intimacy... but that's hard to find and takes a lot of work so he turns to porn as a substitute
 - o Perhaps he wants relief from depression or anxiety... God can provide that, we talked about that the last couple weeks, but that's hard and takes time, so he turns to porn to dull the pain. That's often what's behind drug or alcohol abuse. You use the substance to mute the pain and stress in your life rather than turning to God and the good solutions God has provided.
 - o Maybe he turns to porn because the images and videos make him feel desirable and wanted... rather than finding his value and worth in the eyes of God, he's looking for them in the eyes of a porn star.
- There are genuine needs behind most every addiction - whether drugs, alcohol, sex, porn, gambling, shopping...
 - o even addictions that seem innocuous, like addiction to approval – you overwork and cheat your family at home to impress people at work
 - o Why? Because there's a legitimate need in your soul that hasn't been met. You need to feel valued and loved. Maybe your parents didn't provide that for you. You feel that hole. And rather than turn to God to fill it, you turn to other people at work or in the community and try to impress them to fill that hole in you.
- Here's the deal: If you want to overcome a bad habit or addiction it really helps if you can identify the legitimate need deep in your soul that you are trying to meet through that sinful behavior.
- If you can identify the need, then you can begin to fill that need in legitimate ways
 - o By turning to God, to His Word, to His people in the church, to His mission in the world
- One of the most important things I try to teach men who struggle with addiction to porn:
 - o Don't just focus on the bad thing to avoid
 - o It's just as important if not more important to focus on good things to add to your life that will meet your deepest needs for hope, healing, friendship, and significance
 - A Bible study
 - A recovery group like Celebrate Recovery
 - A service project at the church or in the community where you can use your abilities to serve people in need
 - o Find good, godly things to fill your life with – to meet those deep and legitimate needs, and that will help make the addictive behavior less appealing.

3) Eliminate the triggers, if possible

- Every habit or addiction has one or more triggers that set it in motion
 - o For the alcoholic: the sight of a whisky glass, the smell of beer
 - o Triggers those neural pathways in the brain that lead inevitably to drinking
 - o For the porn addict: surfing a particular website, being alone on a digital device late at night
 - o Triggers chemical reactions in the brain that lead towards porn
- If you can identify triggers, you may be able to avoid them and greatly increase the probability of victory in your life

- So, if surfing Instagram at 11pm often leads to porn... don't let yourself have a phone in your hand at 11pm! Cut off the trigger. Have a rule in your house that all digital devices are off and charging in a public spot by 10pm.
- If hanging out with a particular group of people or in a particular restaurant leads you to really want to drink too much... don't put yourself in that place or with that group.
- Think of bad habits or addictions like a snowball rolling down the side of a mountain.
 - At first, the snowball is small and slow. Not a lot of momentum. Easy to stop.
 - But towards the bottom of the mountain, it's rolled up a huge amount of snow and is moving very fast – it's incredibly hard to stop.
 - Stop the snowball early – it's so much easier.
 - Stop sin at the trigger stage. Don't let it snowball and get harder.
 - Remove yourself from circumstances and situations that frequently lead you to an addictive sin.
- Now that's not a guaranteed solution – sometimes you can't control the situation you're in. You can't help being triggered but you still have to resist.
- But to the extent you can avoid the triggers – do it! So much easier that way!
- So identify the triggers of your bad habits or addictions and eliminate all you can.

4) Stop defining yourself by an addiction

- You have probably heard of Alcoholics Anonymous – incredibly good program – a blessing to many people who struggle with addiction to alcohol.
- There is, however, one common part of an AA meeting that I think we have to be careful about.
- You've probably seen a fictional AA meeting on TV or in a movie. Someone walks up to the front of the room and begins to speak, and what's the first thing they say?
 - "I am Bob, and I am an alcoholic"
- Now it is very good to admit our struggle with addiction – that was step 1.
- But we have to be so careful not to let an addiction or bad habit define us! Because that is not your identity before God.
 - No. If Bob has trusted in Jesus, then who is Bob? "Child of God made in the image of God... who happens to struggle with alcoholism."
 - Do you see the difference? It's all about what comes first. What's primary.
- If you are addicted to drugs, alcohol, sex, porn, gambling... that addiction does not define who you are. You are made in the image of God. That's far more important than any addiction we struggle with. And if you know Jesus as your Savior, then you are also a child of God, loved and forgiven by God and that, too, is far more important than your addiction.
- So don't let your addiction or bad habit define you. Speak truth to yourself. Even when you've fallen to that addiction for the 599th time, it is not who you are. You are still a child of God made in the image of God.
 - That's what the gospel is all about
 - Realize: God's forgiveness doesn't have a sin-limit
 - You can fall to porn 999x... but no more! Or God's done with you!
 - No! Jesus already died for EVERY sin you commit, including every single time you give in to that addiction for the rest of your life. It's already paid for.
 - All you have to do is say to God at some point in your life, Yes, God, I want that forgiveness that Jesus earned for me by dying for my sins and rising from the dead. I believe that you give me eternal life as a gift, not as something I earn through good behavior. So I say yes to that gift through faith in Jesus!
 - From that moment on you are truly and completely forgiven.
- Therefore your addictions, bad-habits, and sins no longer define who you are in the eyes of God. It's already forgiven and forgotten no matter how many times you give in because God's grace and love are infinite.