

Overcoming Addictions Biblically

Addictions. More and more, our society is filled with people who are addicted to some kind of activity, substance or way of acting. It rules their life, becomes the centre of their thoughts, and very often destroys them, and those around them.

Today, many will say that such people have a 'disease.' They will counsel a person addicted to a substance, to an activity, or even to a state of mind, that they are sick, and so they need 'treatment.' Sadly, however, this counsel stands in stark contrast to what the Bible says about addiction, and seldom offers any hope to the person.

As we read through Scripture, we find that what is called addiction today, is no modern phenomenon. Thousands of years ago, Solomon described the drunkard – the man addicted to alcohol. The human heart has an almost infinite capacity to lust, and then to turn anything desirable into an irresistible addiction.

Today, people are addicted to alcohol, drugs, immoral sexual activity, pornography, food. As it was then in Solomon's day, so it is today. Some get addicted to social media, or a sporting activity, till it rules them. For others it can be online gaming or gambling, TV-watching, a hobby. Whatever it is – it becomes something so central to a person that they cannot do without it. Even bad consequences do not dissuade them from indulging in this activity, desire or state of mind.

Does the Bible treat addiction as a sickness? Does it regard someone addicted to something as a passive victim, like someone who has caught measles? No, it does not. The Bible has a theology of sickness, and when the Bible talks about people, for example, addicted to alcohol, it does not treat it like a sickness. It calls it sin.

Addiction is, Biblically speaking – bondage. It is slavery to sin. It is enslavement to the rule of something other than God. The Bible regards someone addicted to something as not being simply weak, or lacking control – but being rebellious, and self-worshipping. In Proverbs 23, we can see a descent into addiction as Solomon describes the drunkard.

Who hath woe? Who hath sorrow? Who hath contentions? Who hath babbling? Who hath wounds without cause? Who hath redness of eyes? They that tarry long at the wine; they that go to seek mixed wine. Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright. At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder. Thine eyes shall behold strange women, and thine heart shall utter perverse things. Yea, thou shalt be as he that lieth down in the midst of the sea, or as he that lieth upon the top of a mast. They have stricken me, shalt thou say, and I was not sick; they have beaten me, and I felt it not: when shall I awake? I will seek it yet again.

Proverbs 23:29-35

First, we have the appeal of sin – the way the substance or activity grabs you. But as the desire is indulged, we see a person becoming irrational. They disregard the negative consequences this thing brings, and continue to pursue it. Then emerges the familiar pattern of someone living only for the buzz, the relief of the activity, to the exclusion of all other reality. Finally, we see the devastating consequences of the sin.

That is how the Bible regards addiction. The original activity may have been harmless, or relatively so. However, the human heart craves pleasure. Pretty soon, the heart's ability to lust for its own pleasure takes over, and the thing is pursued in an ever stronger way. That thing becomes an idol. Sin's temptation soon begins to control and overtake you.

Jesus' words in **John 8:34** are ever true: *"Jesus answered them, 'Verily, verily, I say unto you, whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin.'" Sin captures you, overtakes you, and eventually controls you. What began as the enjoyment of some pleasure has become a need, something that causes pain if denied. Is there any hope?*

To the believer, there is a 100% chance of victory over an addiction. To the unbeliever, there is hardly any way of being sure. That is because an unbeliever has only their flesh. The only chance for victory over an addiction in an unbeliever, is if their desire to stop consistently overwhelms their desire to continue. And since the heart is deceitful, this does not usually happen. Flesh battles to conquer the flesh, nor will it honestly wage war against itself.

However, the believer has more than that. The believer has the Spirit working in them, both to will and to do of God's good pleasure. God gives us desires that are right, and gives us the power to overcome sin and perform those desires. We have His Spirit giving us the power to overcome the flesh.

Sadly, some unbiblical ideas have entered the church regarding addiction. These ideas don't offer hope, but rather, bring more confusion into the church. The one is to blame all addictions on demons. A person addicted to drugs is said to have a demon spirit of drugs – or of alcohol, or of smoking. The remedy then is to supposedly cast these demons out, or bind them, or something like that.

But there is nothing in Scripture to indicate a cause and effect between demons and slavery to sin. If demons were the true cause of addictions, then humans would not be responsible for their sin, and would be without ability to change. They would be without hope. The Bible's methods for overcoming the slavery of sin have to do with sanctification, which we will look at, not the casting out of demons.

However, it is safe to say that demons and Satan do use the tactics of deceit and temptation to encourage the slavery of addictions. People in bondage to sin is certainly what Satan wants. Most noticeably, they will fuel the addict's idea that they have no choice, and must obey their body's cravings.

There is the biblical solution, though. The Bible has a prescription for the believer trapped in a sin. Let us go to the Word and see the Bible's method for consistently winning over an addiction.

1. Honesty

An addict's primary problem lies in self-deception, and their primary solution in embracing honesty. See, everyone except an addict can see their world crumbling around them. The financial ruin, the ruined relationships, the ruined reputation. Family and friends are urging them to change – why can't they see it? Self-deception. The addict has told themselves lies until they believe them.

They believe the thing they are doing is harmless. 'A bit of pornography won't do any harm – besides, I'm not hurting anyone else.' To them, their particular idol won't hurt anyone, including themselves. See, an addict may admit alcoholism will kill a person, but not this particular drink. No, not this drink – so what's one more? What's one more spin on a sports betting app, one more hour spent doom-scrolling, one more hit? This one won't kill me.

That's the addict's self-deception. They can never see that every time they do it – it makes up a link in the chain of their addiction. No, they see it as an isolated experience. They can never see that the links all add up to a life enslaved to this activity. That is why they will frequently say, 'I can stop anytime I want!' – because they see each indulgence separately, as if it's their first time.

Each time is harmless in itself, as far as they are concerned, and the warnings about consequences only apply to others. They can never believe the consequences of sin apply to what they are doing now and that they will catch up with him – they are always for someone else who is 'further down the road' or 'worse than I am.'

The self-deception is further seen in rationalising the consequences. Sometimes the person can see the ruin it has brought to the home, or to their reputation, but their mentality is still, 'I am a good person who does bad things occasionally' or 'I'm just very weak in this area' or even 'I'm sick; this is a disease I have.' Thus, they rationalise, justify or even blame their addiction and its consequences on others.

They may blame their family, or even their genetic make-up, claiming it's hereditary. They do not embrace the truth that we are addicts because we are covetous. **James 1:14-15** says, *"But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death."*

We make idols of things, because we desire what is not our own, or not for us, so strongly till it rules us. We want – we desire – that is the root of addiction. And the addict's greatest self-deception comes in believing that they deserve this illicit pleasure, that they are justified in doing it.

Deep in their heart, they believe God is not good – God’s plan will not hold ultimate joy and fulfilment, so they launch out for pleasure on their own terms. They feel their hard slog at work ought to be rewarded with a bit of pornography, or the abuse of a substance, or the slavery of some entertainment.

Perhaps they believe their difficult past earns them the right to be habitually seeking this thing. They are believing the serpent’s lie of Genesis 3 – ‘God is holding out on you; God is keeping the best stuff for Himself; God doesn’t want you to know about the real world of fun on the other side.’ The addict believes, as seen in their actions – that God is not good. This sin is good.

On the other hand, faith believes that God is, and is a rewarder of them who diligently seek Him – an addict believes sin is, and sin is a rewarder of them who diligently seek it.

Of course, self-deception spills over into general deception. One addicted to a sin will be prone to hiding things, misleading people, being silent, avoiding the topic, changing the subject, making promises and not keeping them, manipulating – in general, being sneaky and crafty. That’s because the deceitful heart of ours can be all at once out of control and very calculating, being a victim to sin, yet being a responsible sinner.

This is why the first step towards overcoming an addiction is truth. A person addicted to something has believed a number of lies. They begin the road to recovery by admitting the truth as God’s Word puts it to them. They must not only cast off deceitful living; they must embrace a lifestyle of honesty.

Ephesians 4:25 says, *“Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another.”* So the first step is for an addict to embrace the truth. The truth about their activity, their enslavement to it, its consequences, and God’s better alternative.

Just before talking about the bondage of sin in **John 8:34**, here’s what Jesus says in verse **32**: *“And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”* The truth frees – honesty frees one from bondage. Jesus did not say the truth will make you happy, or even, the truth will make you comfortable. He said, it will make you free. Why?

Because when an addict embraces the painful truth about their sin and what it is doing, they see the same things that keep others from living the same life they are living. They get shaken into reality. It is their self-deception that keeps them in bondage. No human being naturally works towards their own destruction. **Ephesians 5:25** says, *“For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church.”* It is only by self-deception that this occurs.

When the scales fall off our eyes, and we see the horrid reality of what we are doing, what we have become, it is the thing that will cause us to want to come away from the sin. But is the very fear of facing that reality that keeps so many in the cycle of self-deception. Nevertheless, that is why addicts need to have the truth spoken to them in love.

When has an addict embraced the truth?

- **When they have called what they are doing sin.** Even if the activity they are doing is neutral – idolatry is sin. Making something the centre of your life, making it something you need, means it is your god. That's idolatry, and embracing the truth means admitting it is a sin to make an idol out of anything.
- **When they have admitted their slavery.** Painfully, a person must confess that their heart has become a slave to this thing. Grace comes to the humble, but God resists the proud. No one in jail ever freed themselves by loudly proclaiming that they are not actually in prison. A man or woman needs to see and admit their state to truly want to change.
- **When they see the consequences of the sin clearly, and believe it is coming to them personally.** They must see the very next time they indulge in the addictive action as the sin that will potentially cause the dam to burst, and bring all the consequences upon them. They must not see the consequences as some event 10 years down the line, but as a threatening reality today.
- **When they embrace God's righteousness as a better alternative.** They must believe that God's commands are for our good. He is not withholding good – Scripture says the very opposite: no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly. An addict must see their pleasure-seeking is illegitimate. God promises them pleasure – but within His laws and commands – which are there to protect them from destruction.

2. Humility

The second thing we need in the battle against slavery to sin is humility. When it comes to sin, the only antidote is grace. The grace of God here comes in two forms – the grace that forgives us when we sin, and the grace that empowers us to say no to sin, and yes to God. We need grace. Humility is the state we must be in to receive grace.

Someone still battling in their own willpower is proudly refusing to claim that they are a sinner who has been mastered by sin. They want to pretend they have enough power in themselves to overcome sin. But while they may win a battle here and there, they are overwhelmingly losing the war. Why? Because they don't understand that sin has troops behind their own lines. Sin is inside them – they have a sinful nature, a disposition to sin, and it will always sell them out when push comes to shove.

That is why no one can overcome slavery to sin by trying to moralise their life. No one can overcome sin by making stronger New Year's Resolutions. Sin is overcome by the grace of God. We need redemption for salvation, and we need redemption in sanctification. We need the humble heart of the penitent sinner, looking for God both to will, and to do, in us.

With such a heart, we will also have the heart to continue when we fail. Grace will be magnified and increased as we fail. We can get up, because we know there is forgiveness. **Psalm 37:23-24** says, *"The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD: and he delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholdeth him with His hand."*

That does not mean we abuse grace, but it means we have the heart to keep fighting when we fall – we know this is not about our willpower, but about submitting to the grace of God. On the

other hand, when we rely on the flesh, or simply try to moralise, failure is heartbreaking, disastrous and devastating. All too many people have tried to defeat a habit, and eventually thrown up their hands in despair, and now simply live guiltily with the habit.

The fact is – despair is a loss of hope – and what were they hoping in? Their own power to overcome the sin – which ought to cause anyone to despair. A fixed hope in the sanctifying grace of God means we keep plodding on till obedience is the norm, and the sin the exception. We may quickly add that humility will often manifest itself in the desire for accountability from another believer. Enslaving addictions often need the oversight and care of another, who you can call on when tempted or failing.

3. Restraining of the flesh

The third aspect of overcoming slavery to a sin is restraining the flesh – or self-denial. Biblically, self-denial is to refuse to indulge a particular desire in order to pursue something better. Christ said, if man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. Jesus did not end with ‘deny himself’ no, the denying is necessary to follow Him. Self-denial is not an end in itself.

Rather, it is the necessary starvation of desires that are crowding out the knowledge of God. It is weeding the garden of our heart, to allow the fruit of the Spirit to grow. Self-denial is to say no to a desire, legitimate or illegitimate, for the sake of perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord.

Now, we do not need to say too much about what self-denial looks like. It is simply saying no to the addiction in question. What we must emphasise is the power a Christian has to say no.

Romans 6 tells us our identification on the cross with Christ gives us the *very same power* to say no to sin. We can count ourselves as alive to sin as a corpse would be to tickling its feet. As we by faith count this to be true, we can say no to sin with the power of Calvary.

Please remember that Jesus likened overcoming sin to amputating a hand. You cut sin off – with a short, sharp refusal – not a lingering, half-hearted debate. People who debate with sin are always persuaded in the end. Self-denial is the necessary pain to rid ourselves of the ongoing pain of being enslaved to a sin.

See, the deceptiveness of sin is this – the one trapped in an addiction has created physical urges and patterns in their body and mind that regard that activity or substance as a need. It is painfully attractive. They feel that by indulging, the pain of the craving will go away. So they indulge, and is proven somewhat right. The craving does go – temporarily. But sadly, they have fed their flesh, strengthened the habit, and it is only a matter of time till that craving returns.

On the other hand, refusing to indulge actually strengthens your ability to refuse the next time, and the next, and the next. A desire refused weakens in strength, a desire indulged strengthens. Once again, self-deception is at work. The one believing that, by repeating the action, they are making it easier in themselves, is deceived. The better route is to struggle

through the temptation today with the grace of God, and allow the power to say no to grow stronger, till saying no is easier, rather than strengthening the habit of saying yes to that sin.

The encouraging thing is it is the Holy Spirit who empowers us in this battle. **Romans 8:13** says: *"For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live."* **Galatians 5** tells us if we walk in the Spirit – we will not fulfil the lust of the flesh. We can say no, with the power of God.

Remember, in some cases, people had to train their bodies to accept this habit. A lot of substances people get addicted to are truly vile to the taste or the senses, and the body actually rebels against them at first. But we force our bodies to accept them, till we have trained a biological response to want it, even need it. In the same way, the body needs to be re-trained, through vigorous self-discipline to refuse that habit.

However, self-denial is never alone. Accompanying it are the fourth and fifth elements of overcoming addiction.

4. The renewing of the mind

Here we return to the theme of honesty. The person must now meditate on God's Word regarding the sin or activity they are addicted to. Especially during temptation, the person must know what God says.

The person tempted to look at porn or indulge in sinful fantasies must meditate on the fact that God the Spirit is inside their body, and is present right now. The one tempted to take a substance must meditate on the fact that their body is a holy shrine, one that Christ died for, and if any defile the temple of God – them, will God destroy. One addicted to a harmless activity must meditate on how idolatry offends God – how one with no rule over their spirit is like a city broken down and without walls.

What we are talking about here is strengthening a person's belief system. You always behave your beliefs. One who practises self-denial, but quickly returns to the sin, reveals they only changed their outward behaviour for a period, but their inner heart beliefs remained unchanged. They did not yet regard the behaviour as sin, as something with consequences, or believe one more act could bring those consequences on them.

Such a person did not believe they are enslaved to the sin, and that doing it God's way would be better – for we always choose the path we believe will be better for us. The person addicted to alcohol must have some of Scripture's many warnings against drunkenness memorised. The one addicted gambling must have Scripture on stewardship and money from Proverbs memorised. The one addicted to sexual sin must have verses on immorality and adultery memorised.

We need to have our belief systems changed. The external acts of self-denial and obedience will only find their root and fruit in a renewed mind – a belief system based upon God's Word

that sees this sin as God sees it, and treats it as such. That is why we need to be saturated with the Word on the issue we are struggling with. Finally, and very importantly, there needs to be replacement.

5. Replacement

It is not enough for one addicted to something to stop doing it. They need to start something in its place. This is the Biblical principle of put off, and then put on, as described in **Ephesians 4:22-24**. Notice Paul's examples in that chapter. A man is not only to stop stealing – he is to replace his stealing with honest work that will enable him to give to others. Talk about going all the way to the other side – from taking others' goods to meeting the needs of others!

The one speaking corruptly must not only stop that – he is to speak words that will build others up. Too many people fail when trying to overcome an addiction because they focus entirely on how long they have not gone back to that sin. They keep score, and so fall into the devil's trap of pride. They focus on the negative – how long has it been since I did that sin? Instead, we ought to replace that behaviour with righteous living.

One formerly harming their body might instead spend the time doing something healthy. One formerly corrupting their mind with pornography might fill their mind with wholesome reading and studying. One addicted to a sport or TV may give themselves to fellowship with Christians or simply time with their family or spouse. The point is that we are not meant to create vacuums with our self-denial. We are to deny ourselves the sin – to replace it with good, righteous activity.

Our aim is not merely to keep busy to try and forget about the addiction – that never works. Try telling your mind not to think about something, and it will craftily bounce back – what exactly must I not think about? No, the putting on, the obedience, the righteous behaviour, is the very thing that denying ourselves has enabled. Freeing ourselves from bondage to that thing gives us the opportunity to do the things that we now believe really count, things that really matter.

We are not trying to forget our addiction, we are trying to live lives that count for Christ – so we see the addiction as one of the weights that beset us, and the replacement as the graceful stride we were meant to have.

You see, the Bible is quite straightforward in its treatment of addiction. It starts with honesty. It needs continual humility. There needs to be a restraining of the flesh, a renewing of the mind, and a replacement with obedience.

God is a compassionate God – He knows your individual situation. He knows if you are being rebellious, or if you are weak and truly trying to change. He knows if you are disorderly, or if you are fainthearted. He gives grace to those truly trying to change His strength. As believers, we are to walk free in Christ. May God use His Word in your life to free you to run the race without the sins that so easily beset us.