

ADDICTIONS

A Banquet
in the Grave

Finding Hope
in the Power of
the Gospel

EDWARD T. WELCH



P U B L I S H I N G

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When you spend time with people who have struggled with addictions, they all change you in some way. The men and women I have known have often caused me to grieve, but they have also reminded me that the triune God loves addicts and delights in setting them free. I have valued my time with them immensely.

My wife, Sharon, has a hand in everything I do. This project is no exception.

Preface

There is an accepted tradition among those who struggle with addictions that goes something like this: helping yourself will help others, and helping others will help yourself. If an alcoholic learns to “take his soul to task,” it will bless family, friends, co-workers, and probably many others. If that same alcoholic looks out for the needs of others, and goes out of his or her way to serve another drinker, then that person will most certainly be blessed in some way. With this in mind, the material that follows will examine both ourselves and those we want to help. It might seem awkward to think about our own struggles in one paragraph and then focus on other people in the next, but in a book that considers the human heart and the Christ of Scripture, there can be no other way. Preachers must preach to themselves before they preach to others. Counselors are always counselees.

You will probably come to this book with a particular role in mind. For example, I came with the idea of helping others. But as I dug into Scripture’s teaching on the reckless nature of the human heart and its rich teaching on self-control, it made me see that I *needed* help as well. So thinking about your own struggles is the best way to start. Be sure to look for addictions in your own heart and life. Even though the focus of this book will be primarily on drugs and alcohol—prototypic addictions—the basic ideas are relevant to all kinds of sins that

are not easily cast off. (Are there any that are?) Look for the activities or substances that entice you, leaving you wanting to come back for more, even though “more” may not be wise, godly, or legal. Look especially at the activities that provide you with a fairly rapid bodily experience. Scripture targets sex, alcohol, and food, but there are others.

What is the basic point of this book? Theology makes a difference. It is the infrastructure of our lives. Build it poorly and the building will eventually collapse in ruins. Build it well and you will be prepared for anything. The basic theology for addictions is that the root problem goes deeper than our genetic makeup. Addictions are ultimately a disorder of worship. Will we worship ourselves and our own desires or will we worship the true God? Through this lens, all Scripture comes alive for the addict. No longer are there just a few proof texts about drunkenness. Instead, since all Scripture addresses our fundamental disorder of worship, all Scripture is rich with application for the addict.

What follows will, I hope, seem radical. Rightly understood, Scripture should always seem radical, leaving us amazed and a bit off-balance. But a Christ-centered perspective on addictions should definitely be revolutionary. We are living in a culture where the theory and language of addictions are presently controlled by secular categories. Words like *disease*, *treatment*, and even *addiction* convey the idea that these problems have their ultimate cause in the body rather than the soul—a commonly accepted view that is at odds with clear biblical teaching. Given the domination of this secular perspective, careful biblical inspection will most likely reveal many layers of error in our thinking about addictions that will take years, and the insights of many people, to uncover. Thinking biblically about these difficult problems will require much more than redefining words or making Jesus the higher power. Instead, everything must be open to biblical inspection. Since we live in a culture that assumes a sub-biblical position, we must realize that it affects us more than we think.

For those who have been keeping track of cultural trends, what follows might not seem that radical. There are more and more probing and insightful voices—secular and Christian—that are questioning the legitimacy of current views on addiction. So this book is certainly not alone. I hope, however, that it can contribute wisdom and practical help to this very important area of debate and spiritual struggle.

The woman Folly is loud;
 she is undisciplined and without knowledge.
She sits at the door of her house,
 on a seat at the highest point of the city,
 calling out to those who pass by,
 who go straight on their way.
“Let all who are simple come in here!”
 she says to those who lack judgment.
“Stolen water is sweet;
 food eaten in secret is delicious!”
But little do they know that the dead are there,
 that her guests are in the depths of the grave.

PROVERBS 9:13-18

PART 1

Thinking Theologically

INTENTIONAL BLANK



1

Practical Theology

Jim had been sober for a year—an amazing feat for someone who had been drunk about half his forty-five years. It seemed like a good time to meet for lunch so we could remember and celebrate. But when he walked into the diner, I could see that something was bothering him.

“I am getting angry at God for giving me this problem with alcohol,” he said as he slid into the booth. “Most people in the world don’t have to struggle to stay away from the next drink every day of their lives. But I do. It’s just not fair.”

He went on to say that he was losing interest in his church because it just wasn’t speaking to his needs. He was finding his help and companionship in his daily AA meetings.

I had known that my friend’s thinking about his alcohol abuse was not always shaped by Scripture. Instead, it had been informed by an eclectic combination of AA, Scripture, and the chip he had carried on his shoulder for years. But why quibble about fine points of doctrine when the important thing was his sobriety?

Scripture, however, says with good reason, “Watch your life and doctrine closely” (1 Tim. 4:16). At the moment Jim said that he was angry with God, I realized that doctrine, or theology, makes a difference.*

*Theology has a narrow and a broad sense. Narrowly, it is the study of what Scripture says about the triune God. Broadly, it is the study of what Scrip-

- The only way he could have been angry with God was if he believed that his genetic constitution was more to blame for his history of lies and alcohol abuse than he was himself. Cravings, in particular, were assumed to be outside his control.
- Added to this was a theology that allowed him to think that spiritually he was a pretty good guy. As a result, God owed him.
- Why had he become less involved in his church? Is it possible that his eclectic theology defined him more as an alcoholic than as a Christian, and therefore his real family was the family of recovering alcoholics?
- Shouldn't Jim have realized that growing in godliness is not an overnight process? His theology must be telling him that the Christian life should be easy and change should be quick. The doctrine of progressive sanctification, however, cautions us that spiritual growth is going to emerge gradually, with some bumps and bruises along the way.

What was odd about Jim's thinking was that he knew good biblical theology. He was a seminary graduate who was well educated in the Scriptures. He had studied some of the great church documents, creeds, and confessions of faith, and he agreed with them. In fact, he taught theology in his church. How, then, could he believe correct theology and at the same time not believe it? How could his everyday theology—his actual or practical theology[†]—be so contrary to what he recited in church on Sunday?

ture as a whole, rather than one or two specific passages, reveals about a broad array of topics, addictions being one of them.

[†]Practical theology is simply theology in action. It is the application of the-ological teaching to life. It is asking "So what?" of our theological propo-sitions. What difference does it make that I am united with Christ? What

WE DON'T KNOW WHAT TO BELIEVE

One reason Jim operates out of two contrary systems is that he doesn't know what to believe. He *has* no practical theology. Yes, he knows basic theological principles that are true. He knows that we are sinners. He knows that Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead. But these truths are silent when he struggles with temptations. They do not seem very relevant or practical to him. His theology tells him that there is a heaven, and he is hoping to get there, but it doesn't tell him how to live. He sees no present benefits to the cross of Christ. Without Scripture to guide him in the details of his life, other beliefs will.

We tend to look to Scripture for the life to come, but, since the psychotherapeutic revolution of the 1960s, the Christian community has tended to look to secular psychotherapies for guidelines on how to live successfully *now*. For example, biblically unsupervised principles about self-esteem, individual rights, and the alleged centrality of personal success and significance quietly exert their influence on our thinking, casting shadows on the truth.

In the realm of addictions AA controls the discussion, even within the church. This might sound like good news to many Christians, since AA is certainly founded on moral principles, has years of experience, and seems to be a good steward of practical wisdom. Its material, however, is not Scripture, and AA doesn't claim to be Christian. Although it has roots in what was called the Oxford Movement, and there were some fine Christian participants in that group, Bill Wilson wanted a system that would be available to everyone. To do

does it mean that people are idolaters? What difference does it make that I am created in God's image? All theology is practical theology, but some theological statements are still waiting to have many of their applications unpacked.

that he and his colleagues developed principles that could be comfortable anywhere. (However, I don't think that even Bill Wilson could have foreseen that his material would eventually be amenable to atheists.)

The result is that what really guides the thinking of many people who struggle with drugs or alcohol is a syncretistic set of beliefs that combines AA, pop psychology, pieces of Scripture, and miscellaneous features of American culture. These beliefs are not all bad, but they certainly need to be examined. Like every humanly designed program, it should be examined, revised, and improved to bring it closer and closer to the truth of God's Word. But, even more importantly, we need to go back to basic biblical teachings—teachings that are generally accepted by the majority of evangelical churches—and make them practical. When Scripture talks about the slavery of sin, what does that mean for us today? What about idolatry and lust? How are they relevant to addictions? What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit rather than an intoxicating substance (Eph. 5:18)? When we encounter clear biblical teaching, we must say, “So what?” “What does this mean for how I live and how I fight insatiable cravings?” That is how we do practical theology.

Here is the question: Do you have a good grasp on the wealth of biblical material that speaks precisely to the modern problem of addictions? Can you go through any book in Scripture, even if it doesn't mention alcohol, food, or sex, and see how it speaks to addictions? Think about it. If addictions are really as prevalent as they seem, we would think that Scripture would be preoccupied with this struggle. And it is.

WE DON'T BELIEVE WHAT WE BELIEVE

When it comes to addictions, Jim does not have a day-to-day, practical theology. Scripture does not come alive for him when he tries to apply it to his daily battles. Instead, his strug-

gle with alcohol is disconnected from his knowledge of Scripture. He does not persevere in asking, “What does this passage (sermon, hymn) have to do with my desire to drink?” But there is another reason why Jim’s theology doesn’t always impact the way he lives. Sometimes it is not so much that we are poorly taught or are unaware of what Scripture says, but it is that we don’t want to believe the truth we already have. Even when we know the truth, we don’t always want it to guide our lives.

Consider, for example, the most fundamental theological statement in Scripture: Jesus is Lord. Jim has sung this, said it, and taught it. Maybe he even ventured an “Amen” on occasion when this truth was preached. But when it came to the things he desired, like alcohol, “Jesus is Lord” was not his practical theology.

When our desires conflict with Scripture, human beings do not always live according to what we say we believe. We can say we believe one thing, but our lives betray other allegiances. A husband can say that he loves his wife, but his actions reveal that he loves his pornographic habits or flirtatious work relationships. A single woman may be an avowed follower of Jesus, but when she feels alone, she pursues sexual relationships to satisfy her sense of emptiness. Her life reveals that, at the core, she is a follower of her desires. Jim may sing “Jesus shall reign,” but his drinking indicates that he wants Jesus to reign only when his desires and God’s commands do not conflict.

Is there anyone who has not experienced this battle within? It is as though we have partitions in our minds where contradictory beliefs and behaviors live in separate compartments and never meet. It is the Sunday Christian phenomenon. On Sundays a person might be a vigorous worshipper of the true God, but every other day of the week he or she lives a spiritually reckless life, seemingly without pangs of conscience, as though the triune God does not exist. Such partitions often

take years to build as we work diligently to keep the truth at bay, but, once erected, they can be very effective.

All this is aptly described in Scripture. In Romans 1, the apostle Paul says that we all know many things about God and his law, but we suppress those truths when they interfere with our wants and desires. As a result, it is as if we practice two different religions. We believe one thing, but *really* believe another. One set of beliefs says that Jesus is the Son of God who has risen from the dead. He is Lord, and he deserves our devotion and obedience. The other says that we prefer a certain degree of independence in our lives. *We* can make the laws we live by, not God. In fact, we can develop a religion that frees us from walking humbly and gratefully before God and instead authorizes us to demand certain rights from God—if, in fact, God is even part of our religious system.

How can you detect these false beliefs? Start by looking at the things you do in private. Do you live very differently in private than you do in public? Do you permit your imagination to indulge itself in ungodly fantasies? If so, even though you know that God sees everything, you are experimenting with an alternative theology that says that there are some places where God can't find you.

Jim's two sets of belief were clearly in conflict. When he slipped into the booth for lunch, he might have been able to give an orthodox statement of his theology, but his behavior and speech indicated that he was a devoted member of Jimism, a religion that justified his anger and judgment of God.

Yet Jim didn't see that all these things were going on just beneath the surface of his conscious awareness. He could still, in good conscience, sign his name to the most orthodox of theological statements. His real beliefs—the ones that were the actual moral rudder of his life—preferred to stay hidden below the surface. There they could deceive him and avoid being confronted by the truth.

Here is one way to ask the question: Are you willing to truly

consider what it means, especially in reference to addictions, when you read, “You are not your own; you were bought at a price” (1 Cor. 6:19–20)?

OTHER PEOPLE CAN HELP

The idea of sin being able to deceive us, suppressing truth so that we believe a lie, should send shivers down our spines. It is one thing to deceive other people. That is scary enough. It is even more frightening when we realize that each lie we tell leaves *us* more self-deceived. All practiced sin teaches us to believe lies. We don’t often consider the boomerang effect of our deception. In the end it will get us.

The good news, however, if we are willing to receive it, is that God uses other people to help us see. As we have undoubtedly witnessed in others or ourselves, we might be blind to our own hearts, but other people can often see our problems very clearly. Other people can sometimes spot our self-deceptions and *real* beliefs better than we can ourselves. This is true for everyone, but it tends to be especially obvious with drug or alcohol addiction. The addict’s enslavement may be painfully clear, but the addict has an alternative system that preaches, “I can stop any time I want”; “I am in control”; “They are wrong, I am right.” This is one reason why it is so critical for each one of us to be accountable to others, and to have people in our lives who are willing to say hard things to us. We need people who know us and speak the truth to us in love, like the prophet Nathan did to King David (2 Sam. 12:1–14).

How would this apply to Jim? In his situation, speaking the truth in love to him would *not* mean confronting his alcohol use *per se*. After all, Jim had been sober for a year. Instead it would mean confronting his false religion, which exalted his own comfort and desires. Jim fits the AA description of the dry drunk, who is no longer drinking but hasn’t really changed. Jim’s actual use of alcohol had changed but all the beliefs that

motivated his drinking persisted. True change was going to have to go deeper than sobriety.

GOD HAS TOLD US ALL WE NEED TO KNOW

This is where theology comes in. Practical theology protects us from the deceptions in our hearts and the competing “isms” of the world. It sets the boundaries for our lives. Better yet, accurate theology is a kind of treasure map: it guides us and compels us to relentlessly search Scripture for more and more relevant, penetrating, enlightening, life-changing truth. Scripture, after all, makes bold claims. It says that it provides “everything we need for life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3).

At first glance, it doesn’t seem as though Scripture has all the answers for our out-of-control appetites. As a result, we turn to the sometimes shaky observations of “experts” in the mental health communities. But if 2 Peter 1:3 is true, there are probably many new insights and principles of human life and liberation still available to us in Scripture. Scripture is crammed with truth and meaning. In the same way that people can read Scripture repeatedly and still find something new, so it is likely that an ongoing examination of Scripture *as it is applied to addictions* will yield more and more relevant teaching. Our God is certainly not stingy in revealing himself and his truth.

Don’t expect, however, to find this revelation in the form of a theology textbook. Instead, expect it to be in the form of an autobiography. Yes, there will be principles and mottoes, but we shouldn’t expect anything that ends up looking like the Twelve Steps. Instead, Scripture points us to Jesus Christ. It is his story. Our liberation comes through a person, not a system of ideas and principles. “Everything we need for life and godliness” ultimately comes “through our knowledge of him [Jesus Christ]” (2 Peter 1:3). The principles that follow reveal the character of Christ. They are enacted in our lives by way of the Spirit of Christ, and the reason we pursue

them is for the glory of Christ. Anything else would not be truly Christian.

A WORD ABOUT ADDICTIONS

As we begin, remember that we are moving into a realm in which people can easily talk past each other. Sin, disease, spirituality, God, and many other seemingly common words can have many different definitions, making dialogue especially difficult. This means that definitions and clarity with language are essential. The first word to consider is the word *addiction* itself.

In popular use, *addiction* has become a very elastic and ambiguous category that contains everything from the frivolous (addicted to the six o'clock news) to the grave (addicted to alcohol). It also includes the unequally yoked categories of disease and sin. Given its ambiguities, there is growing sentiment that we need a different word. Yet since there is no agreement on new terms, I will continue to use the term *addiction*, though carefully.

As used in this book, *addiction* will be used to *describe* certain experiences and behaviors. At least initially, I will try to distinguish *descriptions* of behavior from *explanations* for behavior. We can all agree on the actual description of addictions, but we tend to have differences about actual explanations. In common use, the word *addictions* tends to be one in which the description is quietly attached to a biological explanation. As the chapters of this book unfold, a biblical view of addictions will also begin to carry an explanation with it, but it will differ from its secular counterpart.

DESCRIBING ADDICTIONS

What is a description of addictions? How do addicts feel? Addicts feel as if they are trapped and out of control. They feel like abject worshippers, devoted to something that can be

very dangerous. They feel desperate hunger and thirst for something. They feel like they can't let go, clinging even when the addictive behavior yields very few pleasures and a great deal of pain. They feel like they are in bondage. Addicts feel out of control, enslaved, stuck, and without hope for freedom or escape. Something or someone other than the living God controls them, and the controlling object tells them how to live, think, and feel.

For example, alcohol tells you to place your own desires above the interests of your family. Pornography and other forms of adultery tell you that the immediate pleasures are worth it, and you probably won't get caught anyway. Gambling tells you that you might hit it big on the next spin of the wheel, even though there is also a chance that you will be broke for the rest of the month. Food says, "One more serving; you can always purge."

Since we live in a culture that encourages self-indulgence, it should be no surprise that addictions are everywhere. Scripture emphasizes sex, food, and alcohol (a category which would include modern mind-altering drugs) as the most common addictions, and these appetites remain the most prevalent. Yet the list of potential taskmasters is always growing. Addiction was once a term used for the chronic heavy drinker, but over the past two decades its turf has expanded dramatically. Now the list of addictive substances and desires is limited only by our own imagination, as we see here.

alcohol	exercise	sex
anger	gambling	caffeine
love	nose drops	shoplifting
weightlifting	cocaine	lying
sleep	work	chocolate
nicotine	sports	risk
pain	sugar	success/winning
TV	people	pornography

What unites these and most other activities or substances described as addictions is that they deliver a bodily experience. With them we feel more alert, more calm, less shy, or more powerful. Furthermore, most addictions change our physical experience and they do it quickly, working within seconds or minutes rather than days or weeks. As a result, people are rarely addicted to vitamins, which take months of steady use to produce measurable changes, but they will be addicted to the rapid-onset bodily feeling associated with Valium, alcohol, sex, or even pain.

Some criticize the widening scope of addictions, claiming that when a category expands too much it loses its meaning. But God's Word anticipates the way the term is being applied to more and more behaviors. The thing that drives addictions can be found in every human heart. For example, we all have had experience with unruly desires that don't take no for an answer. If we are afraid to admit it, we can take our cue from the apostle Paul who said, "I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do" (Rom. 7:18–19). Indeed, "the addiction experience is the human experience."¹

This broader view of addictions is important because it challenges us to examine what drives addictions instead of focusing on the particular drug of choice. What is it about our humanness that leaves us susceptible to being overtaken by certain desires? Why do alcoholics, drug addicts, compulsive shoppers, and secret indulgers in pornography crave things that are wrong or unwise? Why do we inordinately desire things that, in themselves, might be legitimate (money, approval from others, comfort) but then become too important to us? Why do we have a hard time saying no to our desires? Since the answers to these questions strike at the core of our humanness, the biblical teachings are relevant to us all.

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

At the end of each chapter, you will have the opportunity to hone your practical theology skills. Ask yourself, *What other biblical teaching could be added to this? Ask So what?* of every doctrine: *So, what does this have to do with life?* If Scripture is applied in the chapter, think of twenty other applications. Our goals are to make Scripture come alive and to be changed by the ways the Holy Spirit applies it to our lives.

As You Face Your Own Addiction

1. Scripture always stretches categories so that they include us all. For example, the Sermon on the Mount indicates that we are all murderers. The only difference is that some people use guns while others use their tongues (Matt. 5:21–22). What can own you besides Christ? When do your own appetites for food, sex, or drugs grow to the point where they can control you?

2. What illustrations do you have from your own life where your attempts at deceiving others went hand in hand with self-deception?

3. Consider the place of Scripture in your own thinking. Does it provide oversight for everything? When talking about addictions, Scripture is too often put next to AA rather than over it. Let's do with AA and addictions research what we do with work, leisure, marriage, singleness, and the rest of life: allow them to be interpreted by Scripture.

As You Help Someone Else

1. Having seen our own tendency to be ruled by certain desires, it is easier to be patient with people whose struggles are even more apparent than our own. Do you need to confess your own impatience or lack of love to someone who struggles with addictions?

2. There are already hints that addiction is slavery. Since it takes spiritual power to be released from slavery, do you see how prayer is central when we offer aid to an addict? Are you praying? How?

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