

CAN THE GOSPEL CURE OUR

ADDICTIONS?¹

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There's a word for slavery in sin. It's called addiction. We have a lot of compulsive disorders with labels for all kinds of victims. We have alcoholics, workaholics, compulsive gamers, control addicts, shoplifters, domestic abusers, plus drug addicts.

There is a common denominator that all addiction-victims share—helpless slavery to self-destructive acts and compulsive negative thinking. These “isms” are labeled “diseases” that render their victims unable to say “No” to some compelling indulgence. All confess the same tension of love and hate. These “holics” hate themselves for giving in to binges; drug addicts live in a torment of hell when they are not stoned; gamblers are driven by a demonic urge to spend the family's last dollar in gaming meccas; workaholics sacrifice family and love for a pathological restlessness. All wonder why they can't control those urges.

The idea of self-control went out of fashion when the American Medical Association declared addictions to be a “disease.” Almost overnight addictions attained respectability. They were no longer moral failures; now they were no-fault “diseases.” But this popular philosophy is being seriously challenged today.

¹ Titus 2:11-14. 206, 516.

Some hold that “people are using addictions as an excuse for wife abuse, vehicular homicide, embezzlement, every crime you can think of.” Addicts are “deficient in certain values,” he says, so that addiction is the result of a wrong “moral choice.”

Advocates of the “disease” theory, search for the root cause in a hidden biological or hormonal deficiency in body chemistry. They hope that drugs will cure addictions without a moral change of character. But medical opinion is sharply divided about the lasting effectiveness of such drugs. Bypassing the addict's exercise of moral choices is obviously unrealistic.

Where can we find long-term recovery from addictions? It is generally recognized to lie in the area of psychology rather than through manipulating body chemistry. What cannot as yet be proven is the chicken-egg syndrome—which comes first? Do wrong mental attitudes precede the addiction? Or does some elusive chemical imbalance or hormonal problem cause the addiction?

Mind/body medicine has provided evidence that wrong mental attitudes can precede and thus actually cause or predispose to physical disease. Can wrong mental attitudes likewise precede the slavery of addiction? If so, their correction is the only lasting solution to the problem. And here is where Christ's gospel may find a place in the picture. But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

There may be some compulsive disorders that stem from organic or physical causes not related to

depression. Scientific studies suggest that depressed people suffer from a lack of certain chemicals that retard the activity of neurotransmitters. But in most cases addictions follow long-cherished wrong habits of thinking. For sure, whatever the chicken-egg cause of the depression, the great majority of addicts have a history of it.

The hell of depression need not be endless: There is knowledge enough to let some cheering daylight flood across minds that live needlessly in darkness. Some believe that instead of having bars every few blocks, we should have little therapy centers where you can pull your car over and have a chance to talk to somebody. But where can we find the source of some “cheering daylight”?

The answer is in something called the Gospel, a message of Good News.

A therapist will charge you for professional services. What will he try to communicate to you?

(a) You have no reason to think that you are inadequate, unworthy, useless, ugly, or deprived of the abilities you need in order to cope.

(b) You must become aware of the positive factors you have already going for you.

(c) Other people will not despise you unless you despise yourself.

(d) However discouraging your situation appears to be, you need not let it force you into failure and despair. You can believe good news instead of bad news.

Getting these ideas through your head and firmly into your heart may take weeks or months of

professional therapy and a lot of money. But there is a way of achieving results in a much shorter time and at little or no monetary expense.

If Christ had given the world no gospel, these specialists would be our only hope. But here's where the Bible steps on stage: “Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat, ... without money and without price. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen diligently to Me, ... and your soul shall live, and I will make an everlasting covenant with you—the sure mercies of David” (Isa. 55:1-3).

What is that “covenant”? It's a promise your personal Heavenly Father makes to you. He notices when even a sparrow falls to the ground. All of God's special care manifested to David is promised to you personally because you are now Christ's. He is the “son of David” in whom all the promises are fulfilled. Thus David's psalms become your new birthright legacy. Every psalm that begins with despair ends with hope and confidence in God.

Scientists tell us that there are vast untapped resources of energy in ocean water, enough to meet mankind's needs for power for generations to come. There are also vast untapped resources of spiritual energy in the cross that Paul tells us about so enthusiastically. Most of us make our faith into a toilsome and agonizing ordeal. We are simply ignorant of the gospel's largely untapped capacity for changing people—a power that Paul plugged into.

His very conversion came as the result of a vision of Christ as the *crucified* One. He had been deeply immersed in hateful prejudice, but in one brief hour he saw that the cross where Jesus died proved His claims to be the long-awaited Messiah. That flash of insight on his way to Damascus invested the cross with an irresistible charm that never dimmed for him. Henceforth the cross was the sun shining in his sky, the gem itself of gospel truth—not a mere facet of it. It was the center and heart of Paul’s message from then on.

Our modern world knows little or nothing about that cross. To the ancient world it was a focal point of attention, “foolishness” to many, or a “stumbling block,” and always an “offense” (1 Cor. 1:23; Gal. 5:11). But to the world today it is blah, a boring puzzle. “The offense of the cross” has not ceased, but the cross cannot be an offense if it is not understood.

It’s no wonder that the world today is apathetic toward the cross. Rather than fighting it as Paul’s world did, the modern world is steeped in lifeless ignorance of it. Yet one sees crosses almost everywhere—on churches, around people’s necks, in stained glass windows. Why such ignorance of its meaning?

It’s impossible to be depressed if we will believe such Good News. And no one can long remain an addict unless somehow he or she continues to cherish Bad News. Bible principles are not a program of do’s and don’ts you don’t know how to perform; the key idea is believing Good News:

Take the problem of self-worth. It is defined by the great event of the cross where the Son of God gave Himself for you: “God so loved ... [you] that He gave His only begotten Son [for you].” He does the loving and the giving; your job is to recognize and to appreciate those two truths.

But such believing is not a cold mental assent like believing that $2 + 2 = 4$. It is a heart appreciation of how expensive was that loving and giving, what it cost the Lord. The New Testament idea is that such “faith works by love”—totally efficient in saving people from evil habits.

Yes, you are only one out of five billion-plus people; but His attention is infinite. It is so personal that He could not be more concerned about you if you were the only person on earth. Faith grasps this truth. It takes it for all that it is worth, receives it, assimilates it, and appreciates it.

Perhaps you have steeped yourself for decades in dark shadows of unbelief: “He can’t love me, for if He did, I wouldn’t be in the mess I am in now.”

Let us meet the true issue head-on. Your job is (a) to believe the truth that John 3:16 applies to you personally, and (b) to reject the lie that God is somehow your enemy. Our fallen human condition is “enmity against God.” The solution? To be “reconciled to God” by realizing how Christ was “made ... to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.”

If you doubt His personal, individual love for you, the reason is that you don’t yet see what His loving or giving of Himself entails. The Father did not simply lend His Son; He gave Him. No taking Him

back again. He gave Him to us completely and forever. The death Christ died on His cross was the soul anguish of hell, the equivalent of the “second death” of Revelation 2:11 and 20:14. Christ went through the experience of feeling hopeless despair, facing the prospect that everything was against Him, that even God had turned away from Him. That is why He cried out, “My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

All through His life on earth Christ had lived in the bright sunshine of His Father’s acceptance; now it was different. In deep reverence we must say that on His cross Christ experienced the most subterranean roots of our human depression.

It was as though every cell of His being was on fire with that tortured sense of horrible failure, with not even a tiny flicker of light at the end of His tunnel. That’s when He was “made to be sin for us, who knew no sin.” With all of your heartaches and troubles, you have not known a millionth fraction of the agony the divine Son of God felt in giving Himself.

Get on your knees with John 3:16 open before you and tell the Lord, “I don’t know how to, but I choose to believe it! I’m not going to wait until I feel it, but I choose now to trust that He loves me personally like I am and that He died for me like I am, and that He will heal me.”

When you make this choice, you confess that you cannot solve your problem yourself, that you need a Saviour. Don’t try to make any vain promises to Him; what He asks is that you believe His promises to you.

Your truest self-respect is rooted in that choice to believe Good News. If you pay a store \$300 for a new coat, you do so because you believe that the coat is worth \$300. If the Son of God gave Himself for you, then what is your true worth?

This is not a single-event transaction. You have something continually going for you—the constant ministry of Christ as your divine Psychiatrist. “Seeing then that we have a great High Priest [divine Psychiatrist] ... , Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:14-16).

A full-time private therapist? Yes! He is on duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year including holidays. Personally, I freely confess that I would come unglued if it were not for that “divine Psychiatrist.” The apostle Paul felt the same way, for he said, “To me, to live is Christ.” There is the “high,” the sense of peaceful well-being, that addicts seek for vainly in their compulsions.

He is near to every one of us through His Vicar, the Holy Spirit. Even though He has five billion “patients” on earth, each one gets His full attention as if he or she were the only person on earth. That’s the reason for the “therefore” in the text that says “come boldly.”

What practical help does the Holy Spirit give to the addict? Here is how He goes to work on a practical, effective level: “The flesh lusteth [strives] against

the Spirit, and the Spirit [strives] against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would" (Gal. 5:17). Don't read this backwards, assuming that "the flesh" is so strong with its evil compulsions that you "cannot do the [good] things" you would like to do. That's not what it says!

The apostle's point becomes clear in verse 16. Go for a walk with the Holy Spirit, letting Him hold you by the hand, and then the apostle guarantees that you will "not fulfill the lust of the flesh." Yes, "the flesh" will continue to "strive," to motivate you to give in to that selfish indulgence, whatever it may be, from alcoholism to shopaholic-ism. But the Holy Spirit's striving will be stronger than that of the flesh. And thus you will gain the complete victory!

The truth of justification by faith is not abstract theology to argue about in Sabbath School classes. It is practical godliness, vitally involved in all victories, even over that of breaking the seventh commandment.

Christ endured the bitter hell that adultery entails, and endured it "for every man" (Heb. 2:9). Thus the sin of every one's adultery is laid upon Him, for He was "made to be sin for us" (Rom. 3:23; 2 Cor. 5:21). Thus forgiveness is already a fact, and justification by faith is the heart appreciation of that blessed fact. This changes the heart and teaches us to hate sin and henceforth to say "No" to it.

Justification is never the result of our initiative; to think so is discouragement, for we are never sure our initiative is good enough. It is due entirely to God's initiative. He has already accepted us, even

"every man" for whom He "tasted" that second death.

Our part? Appreciate His initiative—the cost of our redemption. That is faith. *Then faith "works by love."*

When "I am crucified with Christ," the self-loving "I" finally realizes the price that had to be paid for its "affair." So deep is the heart-wrenching agony the penitent feels that addiction now becomes eternally abhorrent. This is how true justification by faith "is made manifest in obedience to all the commandments of God."

Included in genuine justification by faith is the recovery of a solid-rock experience of unshakeable self-respect. This makes temptation to adultery lose its charm. The ten commandments become ten promises to the one who believes that the Lord has brought him out of Egypt, "out of the house of bondage" (Ex. 20:2).

While we are never to think of ourselves "more highly than [we] ought to think," still we are "to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith" (Rom. 12:3). Such "sober" self-respect is calm, collected, assured, for it rests on the foundation of the cross. You *believe* that Christ "gave Himself" for you, bought you with the price of His blood. You at last know who you are—a child of God; and you know where you are going—to sit with Christ on His throne. Not a trace of pride or vanity can exist in this "sober" self-realization, but nonetheless you find it impossible "henceforth" to yield to alluring temptation.

Motivation is the key. Lurking fear constantly overshadows false self-esteem that nurtures pride.

It is a jamming of Heaven's broadcast frequencies. Fear of losing family, breaking up of the marriage, alienation of once-beloved children, even fear of AIDS, is powerless to hold an infatuated person from giving in to sexual temptation.

"It is not the fear of punishment, or the hope of everlasting reward, that leads the disciples of Christ to follow Him. They behold the Saviour's matchless love, revealed throughout His pilgrimage on earth, from the manger of Bethlehem to Calvary's cross, and the sight of Him attracts, it softens and subdues the soul."²

A spin-off of Calvinism is the idea that it's impossible for a sinful human being to overcome sin itself. It says that sin lies deeper than a conscious, or even an unconscious, choice; therefore everything you do, say, or even think, is already sin. This comes across in practical living as a no-win situation. A sexual fantasy flits across the mind. Says this theology: "You've already done it!"

Human reasoning then steps in and adds, "Okay, I've already broken the seventh commandment—in thought. Since I must depend on Christ's obedience to substitute for me in the Judgment, I might as well ask forgiveness for two sins as well as one—and do the deed too."

This is a cruel deception. Jesus never said that temptation itself is sin. A passing thought is not adultery unless we *cherish it*. You have to invite birds to make a nest in your hair. What Jesus condemned is looking on a woman (or man) *in lust*,

which is *to cherish* and *formulate the purpose*, awaiting only "the opportunity" for consummating it. An evil thought resisted and denied does not develop into sin.

"An impure thought *tolerated*, an unholy desire *cherished*, and the soul is contaminated, its integrity compromised. . . . Every unholy thought must be instantly *repelled*. To your closet, followers of Christ. . . . No man can be forced to transgress. His own *consent* must be first gained; the soul must *purpose* the sinful act, before passion can dominate over reason, or iniquity triumph over conscience. Temptation, however strong, is never an excuse for sin"³

"What's so wrong with sin? Can't one be forgiven?" Yes, but the real issue is the shame and disgrace we bring upon our Saviour. And if we "crucify to [ourselves] the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame" (Hebrews 6:6), there comes a very real danger. We may at last feel shut out of heaven not by any arbitrary decree on the part of God, but by our own conviction of unfitness for its companionship. It's serious.

The sanctuary message shifts concern away from "my happiness," "my reward in heaven," to a genuine empathy with Christ in His closing work in this Day of Atonement. "How can I do this great wickedness, and sin *against God?*" is the cry of the heart when temptation comes. Joseph saw the cross, and made a choice. Come what may, he

² *The Desire of Ages*, p. 480.

³ *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 5, p. 177.

would not drive those nails through the hands of the Saviour (Gen. 39:7-12).

Have you battled with compulsive temptations? Then you know that we need Someone to teach us how to say that word “No,” not only with the lips but with the heart. Fear of the consequences of our addiction is not the motivation that works. That all-important motivation has to be a sense of “the grace of God” manifested in the One “who gave Himself for us to redeem us.”

When you believe yourself to be purchased and redeemed by Christ’s sacrifice, what is the sure result? Not arrogant pride, but a healthy, realistic self-respect. The One who redeemed you also created you, and He did a good job. He has equipped you with the capabilities you need in order to realize your dreams.

You put yourself in David’s psalm that exults, “I waited patiently for the Lord’s help; then he listened to me and heard my cry. He pulled me out of a dangerous pit, out of the deadly quicksand. He set me safely on a rock and made me secure. He taught me to sing a new song, a song of praise to our God.”

You cannot remain a helpless victim to addiction if you will believe this promise of the Lord: “For I, the Lord your God, will hold your right hand, saying to you, ‘Fear not, I will help you’” (Isa. 41:13). It’s “not I, but Christ,” who confronts the problems. You become His representative, His ambassador or envoy. You act in His stead to demonstrate His victory “against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age,

against spiritual hosts of wickedness” (Eph. 6:12). These are the spiritual agencies behind all evil addictions, the “rulers” behind the drug lords and liquor barons.

Our Saviour has not promised always to get us out of prison or to heal us of sickness. His beloved John the Baptist died in prison, and Paul was beheaded in Rome. Your trials and sufferings cannot be in vain, for others are watching you and will be encouraged by your victory. An ambassador from a great nation cannot lose his cool in a foreign crisis if he remembers the dignity and honor of his nation and its confidence in him. To all whom the Lord pulls out of that “deadly quicksand” of self-destructive addiction Paul says, “We are ambassadors for Christ.”

CHRIST’S VICTORY OVER TEMPTATION

The “cheering daylight [to] flood across minds that live needlessly in darkness” is Christ’s victory. No addiction is as strong a force to enslave as was the compulsion that Christ had to resist as He knelt in Gethsemane. He whole soul cried out for deliverance from the cross-experience that awaited Him. As the addict screams for relief, or any addict feels the undertow that sweeps him off his feet, so Christ felt the tugging compulsion to turn away from His cross experience. “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me” Matt. 26:39).

Imagine the quintessential multiplication of all human horrors, and you come short of appreciating what that meant to Him. It wasn’t the mere dying that so agonized Him; death would have been sweet release. It was the cumulative, corporate load

of a world's guilt, more than the total pain of world's wars and all our other human agonies combined. A yawning chasm of darkness stretched before Him into eternity, the horror of ultimate, eternal God-forsakenness. That's how He "was made to be sin for us, who knew no sin."

But He caught Himself as He prayed in the Garden and added, "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will." He chose to say No to that compulsive temptation, even though it took sweating blood to make the choice.

Perhaps the temptation and compulsion were even worse as He hung on His cross, apparently indeed forsaken by God and reviled by human beings. At any moment He could have called for a heavenly taxi to take Him back where He came from and to leave the world to its well-deserved fate. He could have cried out, "I can't stand it any more; Father, get Me down from this cross! Let the world perish! I only want out!" Sin addict, whoever you are —look, watch, and wonder.

And then came that offer from the well-meaning Roman soldiers (perhaps prompted by compassionate Jewish women). "Here's a drug to deaden Your consciousness, to let You drift off into the relief of oblivion." No addict ever felt a greater compulsion! "But when He had tasted it, He would not drink" (Matt. 27:34).

There were two thieves crucified with Him. One died in a swirl of bitter, hateful cursing. The other died as the most happy man who ever lived, for he had heard the Saviour promise him, "Assuredly I

say to you today, You will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).

That believing thief has something to tell us: our addictions are cured when we are crucified with Christ.