

When Addictions Threaten

Hope for Those Endangered by Addictions

Charles T. Knippel, Ph.D.

To
My Grandson,
Gregory James



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Preface

Since the publication of my book *The Twelve Steps: The Church's Challenge and Opportunity*, I have envisioned a small book like this one as a companion for it.

In *The Twelve Steps*, I wrote about the origins of the Twelve-Step Spiritual Program of Recovery first formulated for Alcoholics Anonymous. I evaluated this program from a biblical perspective and offered recommendations for use of the twelve steps. In this present book about addictions I discuss various addictions for which twelve-step programs offer recovery and make recommendations for Christian care. My goal is to provide Christian perspectives on substance and behavior addictions and the care available for those endangered by addictions.

Like *The Twelve Steps*, this book is written for Christians, primarily from a biblical point of view. I have sought to make it brief but comprehensive, and both theologically and medically accurate without using technical jargon. I want this book to be helpful to professional caregivers as well as to any concerned person.

My pastoral experiences in the parish and my ministry in the areas of addictions and education convince me that addictions threaten to overtake all of us and even

now enslave the lives of millions. They damage the lives of both addicted people and those others who are affected by their addictions. Many of these people are close to us and we care deeply about them. We very much want to give them good care and to take good care of ourselves. I hope this book will be helpful in carrying out this commitment.

As we consider addictions and how to care for people endangered by them, we are confident that God's rich health-giving resources are available for our task. We count on the Gospel of God's love in Jesus Christ. For the sake of Jesus' death that made good for our sins, God forgives our sinfulness and sin and the sinfulness and sin of all who trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. With his forgiveness he places his Holy Spirit into our lives. The Holy Spirit empowers us to overcome the enslaving control of sin and to live in the freedom of obedience to God. We sometimes, even often, falter and fail because of sin still at work in us. We have relapses. But we turn again and again to Jesus for forgiveness and new power to live more successfully in the freedom He gives. To be sure, in Jesus, God gives us and every Christian all we need to live as people who are secure in His love and dedicated to living the new life in Christ. This new life intends to set us free from all that hurts and harms life and to motivate us to love as He loves us.

Introduction

When we talk about addictions, we often focus on dependencies on drugs such as alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine. Much has been written about chemical addictions, but today the term addiction has taken on larger meaning.

It wasn't too many years ago that the word "addiction" was used primarily, if not exclusively, to refer only to *drug* dependencies and to describe *physical* dependence on mind/mood altering drugs. Today, however, the word "addiction" has the larger meaning expressed by Anne Wilson Schaef and Diane Fassel in *The Addictive Organization*. Expanding the scope of concern, these authors view addiction as something more than physiological. They speak of addiction as having to do with processes (thoughts, attitudes, behaviors, and interactions) as well as substances. We can be addicted to

any substance or process that has taken over our lives and over which we are powerless. It may or may not be a physiological addiction. An addiction is any process or substance that begins to have control over us in such a way that we feel we must be dishonest with ourselves or others about it... The substance

addictions are ingestive: substances are taken into the body. All mood altering chemicals are addictive substances.... The concept of process addictions refers to a series of activities or interactions that “hook” a person, or on which a person becomes dependent. The common process addictions are work, sex, money, gambling, religion, relationships, and certain types of thinking. Actually, any process can be used addictively. For example, Schaef points out that even worry can be a process addiction. (pp. 57–58)

Howard Clinebell, argues for an enlarged definition of the addictions. In *Understanding and Counseling Persons with Alcohol, Drug, and Behavioral Addictions* (1998), he says:

Here, I follow the prevalent generic usage in much current writing that extends the term addiction beyond its original psychophysiological meaning to describe any obsessive-compulsive behavior in which there is some loss of voluntary control so that the victims seriously damage one or more important areas of their lives. (p. 24)

The broader use of the word “addiction” underscores the seriousness not only of substance addictions but also of a myriad of addictive behaviors that might otherwise be viewed as less serious than they actually are. This larger definition urges us to avoid tunnel vision and to give Christian attention to a vast array of both substance and process (or behavioral) addictions.

With a view to new understandings about addictions, how, then, can we define addiction? In his book *Addiction and Grace*, Gerald May gives this definition: “To define it directly, addiction is a state of compulsion, obsession, or preoccupation that enslaves a person’s will and desire” (p. 14). An addicted person is one who has lost control of some aspect of living with the result that his entire life is out of control. The essence of every addiction is the addict’s experience of powerlessness over a compulsive behavior that results in his life becoming unmanageable.

Many millions of people suffer because of their own addictions and/or those of others. The suffering concerns us because as Christians we share Jesus’ interest in the quality of people’s lives. He came to bring life in all its fullness, and by virtue of our baptism we participate in that commitment. Thus, it is important for us to be increasingly proficient in understanding and dealing with addictions that threaten to erode a vast number of human lives and threaten our own lives.

To enhance our ability to deal with addictions, I propose that we consider: 1) the addictive nature of the sinful human condition, 2) the addictions that sin generates, 3) the addiction of codependence, 4) Christian self-care in the world of addictions, and 5) Christian care for people addicted and disposed to addictions.

The Addictive Nature of Sin

Why do people suffer from addictions? Is there something in the human condition that makes us prone to addictions? The Bible has an answer for these questions, and contemporary writers reflect the biblical response.

In *Codependence: Misunderstood—Mistreated and When Society Becomes an Addict*, Anne Wilson Schaef argues that a *generic addictive process* underlies all the various addictions and that it surrounds and influences all of us.

Keith Miller, in *Sin: Overcoming the Ultimate Deadly Addiction*, likewise discusses the addictive process, speaking of it explicitly in terms of sin. He shows that this blinding self-absorption

called Sin—however well it may be disguised by our civilized exteriors—is the same elusive underlying dynamic as that in the life of the traditional chemical addict. Sin is the dynamic that leads addicts to fasten upon an addictive chemical or behavior that promises to fulfill their self-centered and often grandiose

dreams and to blot out the feelings that threaten to overwhelm them. (p. 52)

For Miller the underlying addictive process of which Schaef and Fassel speak is simply *sin* in human lives. Sin is our condition of separation from God (our inherited sinfulness) and our consequent acts of disobedience to God (our actual sins). Sin by its very nature moves us toward addictions; sin is addictive. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of “the sin that so easily entangles.” He writes, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Heb. 12:1ff.). Sin moves us in the direction of bondage; it enslaves us. It propels us in the direction of loss of control over many “things of life” and many behaviors. This is the nature of sin. All Christians who experience addictions can identify with St. Paul when he says, “For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (Rom. 7:15).

Jesus leads us to think about the addictiveness of sin in another way. He teaches that whoever would save his life will lose it (Matt. 16:25). Sin at work in us moves us in all the wrong directions to save our lives—to meet our deep and real needs as spiritual persons.