

Addiction

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[0 : 00] Well, I wonder if you know that for every 100 rand in circulation in South Africa, it is estimated that 25 rand of it has been used at some time to buy drugs.

That's every 100 rand note in your wallet. It's a shocking statistic, isn't it? 25% of the cash in circulation has at one time been used in illegal drug deals.

But the fact is that South Africa is indeed one of the top 10 substance abuse countries in the world. We have that very notorious statistic as a country.

And not just, when I say substance abuse, not just illegal drugs, also legal drugs like alcohol, which Penny just shared with us. Alcohol and drug addiction is a huge problem in our society.

Here's another statistic. Almost one out of every five people in our country is addicted to something, some form of substance, either drugs or alcohol. One in every five, almost. And it's getting worse.

[1 : 05] But it's not just out there somewhere else in our country. It's right on our doorstep, isn't it? In Plumstead, in Southfield, drug and alcohol addiction is everywhere.

Even if you don't see it, it's there. Some people hide it very well. Some people, respectable looking people who come to church every Sunday, have addiction that they hide from us.

But even when we don't see the addiction to drugs and alcohol, what we do see is the damage it does, don't we? The damage to families, the damage to relationships, emotional damage, physical damage, financial damage that it causes.

All kinds of damage. And I know for a fact that there are many people sitting here, other than Penny, who have experienced the destruction that addiction causes.

But now the problem of addiction doesn't even stop there. It's actually much bigger than just drugs and alcohol. Addiction itself can range from various things we can be addicted to.

[2 : 11] It's a very common problem. And here are some of the more common addictions that people struggle with in our society. Food addiction, sex addiction, video game addiction, gambling addiction.

Even shopping addiction. Yes, in some countries this is classified now as a clinical condition. Addiction to shopping. And of course increasingly in our age there is certified addiction in social media and the internet.

It's becoming a medical problem. Recognized medically. Addiction to social media. See, people in our world are addicted and becoming more and more addicted to a range of destructive patterns of behavior.

And it causes us to ask why. Why are we so easily addicted as human beings? Why is addiction so rampant in our world? And everywhere we look we find people who are slaves to addiction.

It's a very important question. And it's a question that I want us to think about deeply this morning. Why does addiction happen? What is the cause of addiction? Because if we truly understand the cause of what causes people to become addicted to things.

[3 : 24] We would then be in a much better position to do something to help those people who are struggling with it. And that's what I want to do this morning. I want to look at the root cause of addiction.

And it turns out after some research. That it's not quite what we might think it is. The cause of addiction. You see, what we've assumed for decades and what for a long time medical people assumed was that addiction is a chemical process.

Purely a chemical process. So once you take enough drugs or you have enough alcohol, your body will physically crave what's in those things. So that you'll have mass withdrawals if you don't have those things.

Because of the chemical hook that it has on our bodies. And this was supposedly confirmed through rat experiments that took place in the 1960s.

So what happened was doctors put a rat alone in a cage with nothing but two water containers. One was just normal water and the other one was water laced with a drug like heroin or cocaine.

[4 : 27] And what happened as expected was that the rat became increasingly obsessed with the drugged water. Kept on going back to the drugged water until it eventually killed itself. It just couldn't get enough of it.

And this was seen, these experiments that took place were seen as proof that the drugs themselves are what cause the addiction. The findings were pretty obvious for a number of years until 1978.

When a Canadian psychologist called Dr. Bruce Alexander, who wasn't quite convinced by these experiments, he conducted a modified experiment, again with rats drinking from bottles.

But the difference was they weren't just in a cage by themselves in this new experiment. They were actually in a specially designed rat park. They called it a rat park, complete with wheels and balls to play with and other rats to run around with and nice places for the rats to sleep.

But then what Dr. Alexander did, he conducted exactly the same experiment. He took the two water containers, laced one with cocaine or heroin, and what he found was startling.

[5 : 33] And it's changed the way that we think about addiction. It turned out that the rats, with the good environment, who weren't alone, didn't actually like the drugged water at all.

They were deterred by it. They avoided it eventually. They had some at the beginning because they didn't know the difference. But in the end, they ended up drinking less than a quarter of the drugs that the caged rats did.

And none of the rats in the nice happy rat park became heavy users or died from the drugs, while all of the rats in the cages died from the drugs.

And this was a breakthrough in the study of addiction, because it proved that addiction wasn't just a chemical process like people had always assumed. It was a psychological process, and it was influenced hugely by the subject's environment.

But it gets even more interesting, because while Dr. Alexander was performing these experiments, there was another big human equivalent of this experiment going on called the Vietnam War.

[6 : 42] Now, if you know anything about the Vietnam War that America was involved in, it was a horrible war. It was terrible, and it was traumatic for the soldiers on both sides.

And it was so bad that 20%, probably more, but officially 20% of the U.S. soldiers became addicted to heroin while they were there in Vietnam, just to escape the reality that they were in.

But here's the amazing thing. When the war ended, and all of those soldiers came back home, back to their families, 95% of the addicted soldiers came off the drug instantly and didn't need to go to rehab, just because of a change in their environment.

There was no chemical addiction. Even though they were hooked on crack cocaine in Vietnam, they came home, the environment changed completely, and they didn't need it anymore.

And this proved Dr. Alexander's findings with the rats. It proved that addiction wasn't the result of chemical hooks at all. I mean, you think, after all, of the non-chemical addictions, like gambling, that people go through.

[7 : 51] You know, you don't inject a pack of cards into your veins. Gambling doesn't have any chemistry in it, but it's just as addictive as something like cocaine or heroin.

And the reason is largely psychological. It turns out that addiction is mostly a result of a person's environment and relationships, or their lack thereof.

One expert in addiction explains it this way, and I quote, Humans, human beings, have a deep need to bond and form connections.

It's how we get our satisfaction. If we can't connect with each other, we will connect with anything we can find, the whirl of a roulette wheel or the prick of a syringe. We should stop talking about addiction altogether, and instead call it bonding.

A heroin addict has bonded with heroin because she couldn't bond as fully with anything else. And so, if the problem of addiction is actually rooted in a lack of connection, which these scientists claim and have proven through experiments, then the solution, or at least a main part of the solution for addiction, is to reconnect, isn't it?

[9 : 05] And that's why you'll find, for example, Alcoholics Anonymous groups or Narcotics Anonymous groups meet in groups, because we found that a big part of rehabilitation is connection

with other human beings.

Now this, as I said, has been a recent discovery. It was really only in the late 70s that doctors and psychologists came to realize this about addiction.

The funny thing is, this is exactly what the Bible has been saying for thousands of years already. You see, the Bible also teaches that one lasting solution to the destructive habits in our lives is connection.

We see this, for example, in what I think is the most helpful passage on the subject of addiction, which I would like you to turn to. It will also be on the screen behind me. It's Ephesians chapter 5, verse 18 to 20.

And I want us to examine this passage because it teaches us some very important things about battling addiction in our lives. Ephesians 5, from verse 18, it says this, Okay, so Paul, the apostle who's writing this to the Ephesians with God's authority, and thus writing it to us as well with God's authority, he begins this passage with a command, Do not get drunk on wine.

[10:49] Now, in a similar command, in Titus 2, he says, the phrase he uses, we shouldn't become slaves to wine. So he's talking about addiction here. He's talking primarily alcohol addiction, but the principle of what he says in this passage can apply to any kind of addiction.

It just so happened that alcohol and wine addiction was the addiction of the day in ancient Israel, where wine was plentiful. In fact, more plentiful than water. So people got very easily hooked to that.

That was the addiction they faced. They didn't have things like cocaine and heroin and social media. But you see, the principles of addiction that we read in this verse can apply to any kind of addiction. And notice what Paul says.

Now, this is very important. He doesn't say, he doesn't just say, stop. He doesn't just say, stop your addiction. You can't, and he knows, you can't tell an alcoholic just to stop overnight.

Or you can't tell a drug user just to stop taking drugs. But all of a sudden, it's not that easy, as anybody who's been addicted knows. And Paul knows that too.

[11:57] He knows that people find such strong connections with these addictions that they can't just decide to break out of them. I mean, Penny, you shared with us that you wanted to break out, but you couldn't, could you?

And it's the same with any addiction. And so Paul knows that they've got these strong connections with what they're addicted to. And that's why he doesn't just say, stop it. Without providing an alternative connection to overpower the connection of addiction.

That is what is so enlightening about this verse. Paul here provides, for those who are connected to this addiction of wine here, but as I said, it could be anything.

He provides an alternate connection that he knows will overpower those connections of addiction.

Something he calls being filled with the Spirit. That is the alternative connection that Paul offers.

Verse 18, Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Do you see it's either or? You're either connected to your addiction, or you're filled with the Spirit.

[13:04] Now, when the Bible talks about the Spirit, it's talking about a person. The third person of the Trinity, who Jesus sent to his people on earth after he ascended to heaven, which we remembered this Thursday, in fact.

He sent the Spirit to replace him, to carry on his work on earth, and as a way for us to connect to God, even though Jesus, who came to connect people to God, is not physically with us.

He left his Spirit so that we can still, even today, connect directly with God through the Holy Spirit.

Because, look at what being filled with the Spirit leads to, from the end of verse 19 of Ephesians 5. When a person is filled with the Spirit, what results? Well, singing and making music in our hearts to the Lord. And verse 20, Giving thanks to God the Father for everything.

You see, the point is, having the Spirit active in your life, opens up a joyful relationship with God. A daily relationship of genuine worship and thanks, where worship and thanks and relationship with God just oozes out of us.

[14:16] That's what happens when you have the Holy Spirit living in you. But that's not all the Spirit does. Notice, in the beginning of verse 19, He also causes us to speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit.

And then, from verse 21 onwards, which is the next bit of the passage, Ephesians 5, Paul starts to describe a whole lot of new types of relationships that we have with one another when we're filled

with the Spirit.

So you can read those. It talks about marriage. It talks about employee-employer relationships. It talks about how all our relationships with one another as human beings change when we have the Spirit of God inside us.

And so what this is saying, just like Dr. Alexander discovered with his rat tests, it's saying that the solution to destructive addiction is connection.

But, Paul's saying, not only connection with other human beings, but connection with God Himself through His Spirit, which is the real connection that our souls crave.

[15 : 26] Whether you know it or not, whether you have any awareness of it or not, whether you believe in God or not, your soul craves connection with your Creator.

That is the connection we were made for. That is the connection that if we don't have, we will try to replace with all kinds of other connections to satisfy us, but they never do.

And so we keep going back, and we want more and more, and that's why we get addicted to all kinds of things. Because we're looking to them for what we should be finding in connection with God.

For what we can only find in connection with God. And so that is the root cause of addiction, according to Scripture, but also confirmed by human experiments.

Disconnection is the root cause of addiction, but the Bible shows us clearly it's disconnection with God that is the cause of addiction. And the Bible says the solution, therefore, is to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

[16 : 32] Now I hope, I hope that if you don't know how to be filled with the Holy Spirit, at this point you are asking, okay, how?

You know, if that is the cause to all these destructive habits in my life, that I know about, but I haven't told anyone else about, but I've desperately wanted to break out of, if the solution is to be filled with the Holy Spirit, how do I do that?

How do I get that Holy Spirit? Well, this is why we have the whole Bible, see? Paul doesn't explain here how to be filled with the Spirit. He just says, be filled with the Spirit. But he does explain elsewhere how one is filled with the Spirit.

Like in the letter to the Colossians. In Colossians 3.16, for example, he's telling the Colossian Christians, the same kind of things as he does in Ephesians.

It's a parallel passage. You'll see a lot of commonalities between the two passages. But there's a difference. Look at what he says here from verse 16, Colossians 3. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

[17 : 42] And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of our Lord Jesus, is giving thanks to God the Father through him. And then he goes on, just like he did in Ephesians, if you read on in Colossians, to describe all of these different transformed relationships that we have.

Marriage and employee-employer relationships, brothers and sisters, things like that. How our relationships are transformed through this real connection with God. But look at how he...

Did you notice the difference between the two passages? Look at how he describes the way to have that connection in verse 16. Whereas in Ephesians, he said, Be filled with the Spirit. In Colossians, he says, Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly.

And so you see, to him, those two things are one in the same. To him, this is the way we have access to the Spirit of God. This is how we be filled with the Spirit of God, through the Word of God. More specifically, through the message of Christ. In other words, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is how we find connection with God and how we open up our lives to the influence of the Holy Spirit.

[18 : 51] And the reason is simple. The reason that the Word of Christ, the message about Jesus Christ, is so vital to having connection with God is that if you don't know and believe the message of Christ and how you can have your sins forgiven through what Christ did for you, if you don't believe that, then you can't have any kind of connection with the Holy God because you and I are sinners.

And our sins cut us off from our Holy God. He's holy. He's perfect. He does not tolerate sin in His presence. And so the only way you can receive His Holy Spirit is through having your sins forgiven, having your sins washed away.

And that happens when you believe and trust the message of Christ in the Gospel. Because when you do that, when you come to Jesus in true repentance of your sins and you have faith in His

death on your behalf to wash your sins away, not by anything that you've done, but all because of what Jesus did in your place, when you truly rely on that and trust that and come to Jesus, it's then that God takes up residence in your life by His Holy Spirit and so gives you the power to overcome all the destructive forces of addiction and sin in your life.

And that is the Bible's solution to the problem of addiction. But what does it all mean practically for you and me? What must we do now?

Well, firstly, I want to talk to you if you are currently struggling with an addiction. As I said, maybe it's a secret addiction. Maybe you haven't told anyone about it or only the closest people to you.

[20 : 42] Maybe you haven't even told yourself. Maybe you haven't even admitted to yourself that it's a problem, but deep down in your heart you know it is. You know that this is something you're trapped in, you're a slave to, and you can't break out of it.

Well, the first step, as always, is to admit that you have the problem. That's the first thing that Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous or whatever will always say to you. The first step is admission.

If you don't admit that you have the problem, you can't go any further. And so, be honest with yourself. Honesty is vital when you're facing addiction. Be honest with yourself.

Be honest with your friends. Don't be ashamed because more than likely they are struggling with some kind of bad habits or destructive habits in their lives. Don't think that you're the only one.

And be honest with God. Don't think that He doesn't see or He doesn't know. God sees and knows you more than you know yourself.

[21 : 41] Be honest with Him. And then seek help. Be honest and then seek help. Practically, find a group of people who are going through the same struggles. It's not hard to find. There are many. Join a 12-step program.

It's a very proven program that works for people with addictions. We have details of such programs that you can join. You can come find them from me. There's a Narcotics Anonymous group that meets here at St. Mark's every Monday night.

And these are important steps you must take to deal with your addiction. Admit, be honest, and then seek help. But that's not all.

there is an even more important step you must take. And that is to connect with God. That's the connection you need. That's the connection you actually crave.

That's the connection you were made for. And it's a connection that if you don't have, you will never truly be satisfied or at peace. And you get that connection through God's Word, the message of Christ.

[22 : 48] And so if you still need to do that, if you admit that you have a problem and you want connection with God, maybe you're not even addicted, you think. Maybe you're not majorly addicted to anything, but you actually, as I'm saying this, you feel, yes, that's the connection that I need and I don't have.

If that's you this morning, I want to make you an offer. One of our people here in our outreach team, whose job it is to read the Bible with other people, will visit you and read the Bible with you and help you to connect with God through His Word.

If you just put your name down on a yellow slip of paper, which you'll find in the pews, just put your name down, tick that you'd like more information about Jesus Christ, slip it in the box at the back on your way out.

And someone, no strings attached, someone will contact you and confidentially they will meet with you and just help you to connect with the God who you were made to connect with.

Don't you want that? If you don't have it, why would you not want it? There's nothing else that can satisfy you quite like relationship with God. But maybe this morning that's not relevant to you.

[24 : 02] Maybe you have found that connection. Maybe you do have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Maybe you are a Christian in the true sense of the word. You have the Holy Spirit in your life.

You know what? I want to tell you something if that's you. That doesn't necessarily mean that you are filled with the Spirit. You see, in Ephesians 5, when Paul says be filled with the Holy Spirit, a command, he's writing to Christians.

He's writing to people who have already received the Holy Spirit in their lives. But he tells them they must still make sure they are being filled with the Spirit constantly.

that verb in the original, filled, is a constant, ongoing command. It's not something you do once in your life. You receive the Holy Spirit once, you receive salvation once, you are justified once and for all, but you continue to be filled with the Holy Spirit and you choose to continue to be filled with the Holy Spirit as you walk the Christian life.

So it implies here, Ephesians 5 implies that there are times that even Christians are not filled with the Spirit. and it's in those times that the old habits come back, isn't it?

[25 : 14] Even as a Christian, when you're not filled with the Spirit, it's in those times that all the bad habits and all the destructive patterns of behavior that you used to be slave to come back and start influencing you again.

Even if you're not an outright addict in something, we're all, me, you, everyone is prone to seek connection and to crave things when we're sad or lonely or overwhelmed by life that aren't good for us when we actually need closer connection with God.

We are all prone to that. I am. I promise you. I've seen it in my life. And if you're a Christian, I know you have too. When you're just overwhelmed, you seek, you seek connection, you seek satisfaction in something that you know is probably not the best thing for you right now.

And where you don't seek it is in your relationship with God, which is the only place you will find it. And so we all need to choose every day to be filled with God's Spirit afresh through His Word, speaking daily into our lives, not just on a Sunday at church, through praying in the Spirit on all occasions, knowing God's presence minute to minute in our day, speaking to Him because He is right here with us.

We have, as Christians, that amazing privilege of being able to speak to God as we go on in our daily lives, have Him present right here in our life and with no barrier because Jesus Christ has taken that away by His blood.

[26 : 54] Do you do that? Do you take advantage of the fact that you can speak to God daily, hour by hour, minute by minute? And then we are filled with God's Spirit, not just through His Word, not just through praying on all occasions, but also through fellowship with other Christians, connections with God's family because while we were ultimately made for connection with God, we were also made for connection with people.

and God's family is given to us all as the way to have the connections that we seek where we can uplift and encourage and look out for each other as we walk the road of life together.

What an amazing privilege. Do you take advantage of that? Do you seek and build the relationships that you have with other Christians, this family at St. Mark's, people that you wouldn't choose to have relationships with and yet God in His sovereignty has put you here with them because He wants them to be your family.

And as a body, as a family, we are to be here for each other and help each other as we walk through this broken world to our eternal hope. And so the solution, as I close, for destructive habits in our lives is connection.

If nothing else, take that away this morning. The solution for addiction is connection. Connection with God and connection with one another. True connection. So, I guess I want to close by asking you, do you have connection in your life?

[28 : 28] Do you have the vital connections that I've been talking about, that Paul talks about? And if not, if you know that you are missing those connections, are you just going to go home or are you going to do something about it?

Let me pray for you as you consider that. Yes, Lord, we do thank you that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. We thank you for the reminder this morning that you have made us for connection, that you have made us to be connected to you in intimate, close, personal fellowship. Lord, I pray for everybody here, not just for those who are struggling, but for everybody because we all admit that there are times that we drift away from you, that we are not filled with your Holy Spirit, that we do not give you the place you deserve in our lives, that we seek after other things for our happiness and we never find it.

Lord, help us each to come back to you. Lord, cause us to be filled with your Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ by your word. Help us to put into our lives habits that allow the Holy Spirit to work on a constant basis in our lives.

And Lord, I especially pray for those amongst us who are addicted or those listening to this recording who are struggling with addiction and they know it. Lord, would you come to them in a very special way?

[29 : 50] Would you show them your grace and mercy in Jesus Christ? Would you cause them to believe and repent and turn to Jesus and follow him? And would you do amazing work in their life to break them out of addiction and to find true connection with you and joy forevermore?

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.