

Recollected: Addiction

Introduction:

Today we're talking about addiction. We'll look at just one way to understand it, just one way it can happen, and we'll explore what Christianity has to say about that cause. I do hope that at the end of this moment we're positioned to see ways we are or could become addicts, and we're able to see what our God calls us to instead.

Let's pray!

Prayer:

What is addiction?

Let's start by defining addiction this way: Some sort of involuntary desire for a thing that meets some sort of real or felt need. Okay? An involuntary desire for something that meets a real or felt need. We want something, badly, so that we can meet some need we think we have.

And again, I want to just emphasize one way we end up addicted, even though we could talk about all sorts of ways. And that one way is a desire to escape. A desire for escape.

Escape:

We often end up addicted because we are trying to escape something. Sometimes it's a particular thing--a

particular terror that we have found ourselves in over and over--abuse, poverty, consistent failure or repeatedly having our dreams broken. We may be trying to escape an image people have of us--not cool, not hip.

Sometimes what we are trying to escape is far more general: the sadness of the world begins to overwhelm us, general hurt in the lives of friends and family that doesn't seem to stop, joy-numbing routines. And we begin to escape these things on purpose--probably not with an eye to losing control over ourselves, but at least with an eye to getting away from the problems of the moment.

What the world says:

But we get really mixed messages when it comes to escaping stuff.

On the one hand, we hear—and we Christians applaud it—don't do drugs, don't drown your sorrows in bourbon or malt liquor, don't gamble or spend away all your cash, don't eat to hide. We hear these messages saying, basically, “Escaping into things is bad! Don't do it!”

But there are some pretty strong economic forces at work in the world, right? So on the other hand, we have ads on tv, the radio, the internet, on the roads and walls and in the mail that say, eat, buy, gamble, drink, smoke, and pill pop; romance is everything, sex

is cheap; do it, do it, do it. Escape here. So there are two voices. And frankly, the voice that's backed by a buck tends to be a louder one. And, you know...it may not be a voice saying escape into these things, but but it sure doesn't say watch that you don't.

And there are also the things that the world says we should do, we should run to, that millions of people are addicted to. Work, work, work--escape your problems at home, your problems with your kids and your spouse--or have another cup of coffee, one more, one more--and escape sleep, which just gets in the way of things, right? Eat, cheap and fast and all the time. Spend. Eating, working, spending--and you could think of others--these become ways we escape that are excused and justified.

Right now, in the middle of this pandemic, one of the scariest things for so many people is that we've lost what we've escaped in, and it's exposed so much about what we were escaping from. So let's step back for a moment.

The Escape isn't the problem:

Because the problem with addiction isn't, I think, the escape. Bear with me here, the problem with addiction isn't the escape. Wanting to escape terror and pain is pretty understandable. Wanting to be rid of hurt is a reasonable desire. What doesn't kill us doesn't always make us stronger; sometimes it leaves us barely alive, and broken and results in us becoming people who

hurt and break others.

When we first meet Jesus:

And, frankly, one of the first ways most of us meet Jesus is as escape, right? We come to Jesus because we have great need. We have great hurt, we have great troubles, and we have heard somewhere that Jesus can heal us, can save us, can free us from our pain. And so we turn to him to meet those needs.

And maybe this isn't escape...but when we're really broken, and really needy, it's a gray line between escape from our problems and just trying to have our needs met, right?

Deeper Engagement:

But our faith says, "Fine. Escape, for a time. But run well, run wisely. Run to the maker of your soul and the one who can give you peace that surpasses all understanding, run to the great physician who can heal your wounds, and set you upright."

Christianity says to those with broken hearts, who need to escape, "Go ahead. Escape away. But escape into the arms of God. And not right now, but eventually, you'll discover that what God wants from you is more than your self-forgetfulness."

Escapist Christianity:

There is a sort of Christianity, a way of understanding this life we have to lead, that basically says, you know,

this is all going to burn, let's just get together in a clump, and massage each other's shoulders, and sing songs until Jesus comes back, and do whatever we can to insulate ourselves from the pain of the world.

But, look: Christianity is not escapist. It is not escapist. That sort of understanding of our life of faith is the same sort that breeds in us a dissatisfaction if the music isn't great or the zoom service gets wonky, breeds an anger if our feathers get ruffled or plucked, breeds a belief that the church should be only a happy, conflict-free, easy place. Christianity is not escapist; and when we let it become so, we really slander what Jesus is about.

Because God asks much of us:

Because while Christianity may begin for many people in having their needs met, may promise all kinds of freedom and wonderful new beginnings--all of which are true--it quickly calls us to understand that following Jesus is incredibly difficult work.

We discover that if we are to become like Jesus, we have to be ready to die, to give ourselves up as voluntary slaves, on behalf of others. We learn that Jesus does give us amazing resources in healing, that miracles do happen, that the Spirit, and the Church, and Scripture can meet more needs than we ever could have imagined. But we learn, if we are well taught, that God asks us to be partners in our healing, partners in our restoration, and that work is required

of us.

Addiction is Absence:

And while the escape that drives addiction may cost us money, may steal our time and our relationships and our health and our souls...it doesn't do it with hard work. It does it with ease. That's why we talk about a slide into oblivion, not a hard climb into it.

Addiction's Real Problem:

Follow me closely, here, but I don't think that the problem with addiction is the escape of it all. I think that the problem with addiction is that it replaces the need we have to escape our present pain, our present situation--that need for escape--with a thing--beer, faith, romance, whiskey, work, exercise, food, pills, pot, sex or substitutes for it--and eventually, that thing--possibly good thing, right? Who doesn't need to eat?--but that thing swallows up everything else.

The goal of escape becomes confused with the means we use to escape, until we forget the goal entirely, and all we have is a drink in front of us, or another project on our desk we want to get to. We forget that escape, while understandable, should always lead us to somewhere other than oblivion. We forget that the means we use to block away life can never ever become our life. Except, maybe, in one case.

Luke 10:38-42:

We see this sort of thing happen with Martha & Mary,

which is why I wanted us to hear that passage. Remember that passage?

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38-42 tniv)

Now, Martha is probably not addicted to work--like some of us--but she at least in this passage cares more about the doing, than the goal of the doing--which is welcoming Jesus, creating a space for him. She cares more about the preparation-work-than the reason for the work, the one she was preparing things for.

Addiction tricks us into caring more about a thing than the reason we went for the thing in the first place. Addiction tricks us into confusing a means for an end. We forget that there was a reason, a purpose that we first started staying in the office instead of going home, first started having a whiskey and coke as soon as we got home, first started with the drugs, the painkillers, the porn.

But Jesus wants to meet us right at that moment when we first turn to some *thing* or some *one* and how they

make us feel. It is right then, *at that moment when we find ourselves wanting or needing something outside us so that we can hide from life around us*, that we are called to turn to Jesus and begin the climb into freedom.

When Jesus tells Martha that Mary has chosen a better way, he's clearly pointing out that being with him is better than preparing for him; that creating a space for him isn't bad, but it's not as good as actually being with him in that space.

But there is also the reminder, implicit here, that we cannot confuse ends and means; we can't confuse goals and the way we meet those goals.

And we can't confuse the pursuit of escape, which is understandable and reasonable in light of the pain that life often holds, with the goal of finding peace, finding answers, finding meaning and solving problems and living again in the world.

Escape cannot become a goal; it cannot become a lifestyle, "escapism." It can only be temporary; a small landing-place, a tiny step--small and brief--that we take in order that we might end up living well, healthier.

Escape is an understandable route we take, but a route that should lead to healing, not to Hotel California, not to a never-ending "means" that we trot

on like a hamster-wheel until we more or less disappear.

Into this:

And Christianity, if it does anything, it reminds us that life is worth living. That we are not at all meant to disappear. That we are important to God; the things we can do with ourselves no other person could do as we would do them. We are unique and we are inimitable; you know inimitable--memorize it, it's a great word, it means "matchless," without match. We are inimitable.

You: Sitting there! You are needed; and if you haven't discovered why, yet, let's walk together and let me share your joy when you do. But this world and this church will not be as complete as it could be if we inimitable people hide from life in an office, a bottle, a daydream, or an emotional high.

Unforced Rhythms of Grace:

Sure, escape to Christianity from the sadnesses of the world. Hear Jesus when he says "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (matt 11:28-30 tniv)." Hear him! A paraphrase of part of this passage reads, "Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn my unforced rhythms of grace."

It is completely true that for those of us who have come to Jesus with great need, we have often found great peace, peace that does go beyond all understanding. We have found rest, and our lives have borne great fruit simply because we have entered into the rest Jesus offers. We have escaped to him, and found sanctuary

But know that if you are willing, it is God's desire to put you back into the world, not keep you far away from it forever. Christians are called to go outside the gates, and die on behalf of the world, "bear the abuse [Jesus] endured" in the same way Jesus went outside the gates and died on our behalf, and bore our abuse.

We are healing agents:

We are the ones who are supposed to be agents of God, drawing people to the healing we have experienced. We are the ones who need to communicate to people right at the moment when their need becomes greatest, that there is a great physician, that someone does care about them, that someone does know what it's like, and that he died so that they may not be lost to sadness forever. We need to be there before addiction begins, and ask, as Jesus asked the man at the well, "Do you want to be well?"

And we also need to be there in the midst of addiction, to call a person by name, known, before they slide away into oblivion. To hang onto them, and speak

truth to them with love, and bear their burdens for a time, until they are able to bear their own. We are called to remind people of what Jesus calls them to, and, lovingly--with compassion at the proper time--remind them of their own responsibility to reject the call of their addiction. In this way we both bear one another's burdens but remember that we each must also bear our own load.

And, finally, we need to be people who have the courage to confess our own addictions, and find in each other, and the Spirit, and Scripture hope and wisdom and support to take the hard path away from them. If I were a little more fire & brimstone, I'd try and scare us into turning to God and away from escape for its own sake, and life-stealing addiction. I'm not, and can only ask you to live up to what you have already obtained; the knowledge of God's love for you, and the fact that we can only escape so long before we lose ourselves.

When David wrote the psalm that was read to us, reminding himself of God's promises at the same time as he prayed desperately to God, he modeled for us the courage and honesty that we--God's people, Spirit-filled--should at least hear and remind ourselves of, if not pursue with all our heart:

***My eyes are ever on the LORD,
for only he will release my feet from the snare.
Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.
Relieve the troubles of my heart***

*and free me from my anguish.
Look on my affliction and my distress
and take away all my sins.
See how numerous are my enemies
and how fiercely they hate me!
Guard my life and rescue me;
do not let me be put to shame,
for I take refuge in you.
May integrity and uprightness protect me,
because my hope, LORD, is in you. (psalm 25:15-21, tniv)*

David's enemies likely weren't food and sex and work. But if we pursue these as an end, escape into these things, they will kill us just as dead as armed enemies would; they'll just do it slower and take down our family and friends with us.

We need God's strength, and God's courage, and we must become people who reject the escapism and addiction that life can deliberately and doggedly put before us. We do need integrity and uprightness, and we need to practice owning our needs, our inabilities, our desperation, along with all the other things we do that guide us to become people of integrity. And we need to be people who hope in the Lord instead of people who hope that things will take away our distress.

Conclusion:

Life can be hard. Terrible things do happen. The world gives us mixed messages about the things we turn to in our attempts to escape from the hurts of life.

But Christianity gives us a very clear call; run to Jesus,

run to him. Find rest in him, find peace in him; receive the power of the Spirit to comfort and counsel you, receive the church to carry your burdens. But prepare your heart to go back out into the world, among the people all around you, and offer them the same way of peace that you have found.

Addiction results in some “thing” becoming everything; but Jesus asks of his followers that he become everything, not so that they can lose themselves, can hole up inside him like people hole up in a bar, but so that they can find peace and rest and begin to live life fully alive and on behalf of those around them. Jesus desires us to find ourselves in him.

And Jesus asks us to have the courage and hope that, really, only his people can have. If you are working hard to escape life, know that what you are trying to escape to will likely devour you. If our means of escape become our ends, we lose ourselves. God does not want this for us. We can become healers who have been and are being healed, instead of escapists who have lost themselves. God offers this to everyone; I pray we at least can receive the offer.