

Godly Intoxication: The Church Can Minister to Addicts



by Timothy S. Lane

"The most important contribution which the Church can make to a new social order is to be itself a new social order."¹—Lesslie Newbigin

John was a good friend. He and his wife, Suzanne, attended the church I pastored before my tenure at CCEF. John and Suzanne had been alcoholics. They met at an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting. John and Suzanne would tell you that their lives were saved by AA. They also said that this would never have happened in church. In fact, it was AA that led them back to church.

Their experience should give us pause. The church can learn lessons from it. Is the church a place that can minister to people like John and Suzanne? Can we offer acceptance and support to people who struggle with life-dominating addictions? Do the Scriptures and the grace of the gospel even speak to addictions? Do we have something better to offer than the host of secular recovery groups out there? The answer to each of these questions is YES—but we have much to learn.

For addicts the church is usually the last place they look for help. The perception is that church is for people who have attained an acceptable level of morality. It is for those who "have it all together," and those who do not fit

this mold are not welcome. As a pastor, I had many friends who struggled with addictions. Did they find help from the church? Not necessarily. Their stories are similar to John and Suzanne's: they found help in other places. They found it in secular support groups where they could be completely honest and safe, and where friendships and accountability abounded. Often these groups would even meet in church buildings, but they were not led by people from the church itself. In fact, it was as if the church modeled a "hands off" posture toward them. Thankfully, this is not true of all churches, and my hope is to interest more churches to change the way they think about people and their struggles.

If Scripture is where we take our cues for life together as brothers and sisters in Christ, addicts should feel right at home amongst God's people. The church is not filled with people who have it all together. Rather, as we know too well, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). This passage teaches us that we are all sinners. There are things we do, and do repeatedly, that are wrong. And yet... we keep doing them. Scripture tells us that we are—by nature, nurture, choice and habit—intoxicated by sin and addicted to ungodliness. And thus, every sinner saved by grace is on a journey of change and transformation. Every person, in every church, is in a form of rehab—spiritual rehab.

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All of us have more in common with addicts than we might have thought. We are not fundamentally different from each other. Any differences are a matter of degree, not of kind. The decisive difference between people is not whether one is an addict or a non-addict. It is whether a person is once-born (in sin, and suppressing the knowledge of God), or twice-born (in Christ, but still battling remnant sin). When people struggling with addiction are also new creatures, then they have a new Lord, a new nature, a new identity, a new power at work—and a new community. The battles may be long and hard, the setbacks many, and the successes

biological matter. Many factors come together that may influence people toward addiction, including genetic predisposition, family dynamics, pressures from suffering, poverty and victimization.

Truly, addicts have a complex and sometimes terrible story to tell. But something more fundamental operates at the root of life-dominating struggles. Scripture tells us that the inner person (the heart) and what it craves, treasures, wants, fears and lives for is the ultimate driver of addictive behavior. Someone may find that a chemical can be a means of getting what one longs for (comfort, confidence,

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erratic. Although a person may struggle with the same old things, something essential is different, and that makes all the difference in the long run.

This truth should shape the very way we “do church.” A church community that understands that we are all fellow strugglers on the same path should be a very welcoming place for addicts. The language of recovery, of re-ordering what we live for and even what we “worship,” should be familiar to all followers of Christ. Every church should be striving for all members to turn away from whatever intoxicates them and instead be filled with the Spirit—intoxicated with God.

To do this, we must understand more fully how Scripture sees addictions. This will, by necessity, reshape the way we think about the role of the church and addictions.

How to Think about Addictions Biblically²

The word *addiction* is not in the Bible, but the concept is everywhere. The human tendency to be completely committed to the pursuit of destructive, self-defeating behaviors is a strong theme in Scripture. It springs from the fall of mankind and our descent into depravity. In our time, however, addiction has come to mean something more narrow. It is the standard way of talking about life-dominating struggles, especially with things that are connected with bodily appetites, such as alcohol, drugs, food and sex. But, of course, it is not simply a

pleasure, success) or a means of numbing pain (disappointment, loss, rejection, failure). Ultimately, addictions are rooted in things much deeper than physiology and social surroundings.

While we want to avoid a simplistic understanding of how the inner and outer person (heart/soul and body) interface, ultimately addictions are rooted in the heart—in the inner person. In Luke 6, Jesus gives us a picture of this by using the metaphor of a fruit tree.

For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks. (Luke 6:43–45)³

Jesus is saying that whatever we live for, whatever we store up in our heart, will determine our behavior—our fruit. Our heart expresses itself in how we live. If we are committed to living for comfort, then our behavior—our fruit—will reveal that. If we are committed to living for personal glory, then our behavior—our fruit—will reveal that too. This does not rule out the significant influence of the body or life circumstances on addiction, but it does place such influences in the context of something deeper.

In the same way, James 1:13–15 echoes Jesus’ view of the heart as he writes to his church members, who are undergoing significant persecution and suffering. James first comforts them in the midst of their hardships. He then calls them to personal responsibility in the face of their suffering. He reminds them that if they sin, even in this difficult time, it is not due to God playing tricks on them, or because of their circumstances. They sin because their hearts have been captured by something other than God.

We intensely pursue what we love. It intoxicates us (whether a chemical is involved

transforms us at the core of who we are. There is a God who intervenes. He comes in grace. He loves us when we are still sinners and committed to rebellion. Christ comes to rescue us and bring comfort in the midst of our suffering, even when it is self-inflicted. He comes to live, suffer, die, be raised, ascend, and send his Spirit. He presently intercedes and has promised to come again and completely conform us into his image. Because of Christ, we will be free from the guilt, folly, power and presence of sin forever.

There is no other message that can compare to this! No other “treatment plan” can offer this kind of good news. The gospel far exceeds

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or not). And when it fades, we pursue it again. With this understanding, it is possible to view any life-dominating struggle as an “addiction.” In fact, our culture has already done so. People addicted to their jobs are called work-aholics; people addicted to shopping are shop-aholics.

A Level Playing Field: We Are More Alike than Different

Since we pursue what we love, and we tend to love something in creation more than God, we are all, in a sense, addicts. Paul describes this dynamic in Romans 1:25. We substitute something in creation for the Creator. Even for the believer this dynamic is still in play, though because of the work of the Spirit, not to the same degree. A new life has begun. Still, we are regularly tempted to take something in creation (often good things like relationships, work, food, drink, marriage, etc.) and make it what we live for. An addiction is, fundamentally, a worship disorder. It is an act of the heart. Bodily components only make an addiction more complex.

Understanding life-dominating struggles with sin as a worship disorder opens the door for the incredible good news of the gospel. The redemptive solution to our disoriented worship is God’s redeeming grace; it recaptures and

anything that you will hear in the culture. We must constantly be brought back to the utterly unique message only found in the Scriptures. This description of God is much more precise and compelling than simply talking about a “higher power”—the standard way God is referred to in programs like Alcoholics Anonymous.

This is not to say that the gospel is a quick fix for life’s problems. While there are times when God immediately rescues individuals from these life-dominating problems, usually his work in us is slow and takes time. Believing in Jesus will not immediately rid you of struggle with sin. Instead, the message to addicts (and to every struggler) is that we have a Redeemer who walks with us daily. He often uses our relapses and struggles to remind us of our ongoing need of him. Believers are as dependent upon the grace of Christ today as we were the first moment we placed our faith and trust and hope in him. You never wean yourself off the grace of Christ. You are forever in need of his power, his love, and his presence. And so is every other addict.

Therefore, since the entire church is a community of “recovering addicts,” and because we have a compelling message for addicts, it should follow that the church should be the best place for addicts to find hope and practical help. The church has such a wonderful message

of hope for change. This presents an excellent opportunity for it to become a community where addicts know they can find acceptance and support. Many churches already understand this, and many more still need to know why and how to do this. That is what we turn to next.

Ephesians Offers Help: A New Social Order Called the Church

Scripture offers us guidance as to how the church can be a place for people to find help. One place to begin is the book of Ephesians. The primacy of Christian community for growth in grace is described well here. In the first three chapters, Paul makes us aware of the wonderful grace that has come to us through the work of the Father, Son, and the Spirit on our behalf. Paul first describes our union with Christ (1:1–2:10). Then he paints a picture of life in the body of Christ (2:11–3:13). He prays that these two realities would become the very experience of the church (3:14–21). Paul turns a corner in Chapter 4 and begins to talk about where the newfound faith, power, freedom, and liberty in the gospel are worked out. He places our growth in grace in the context of our relationships in the local church.

Paul describes how we work out the implications of the Christian life within the church. As individuals who have been redeemed for the purpose of glorifying God in our physical bodies, we are to find spiritual nurture within the church and through our relationships with one another. Paul highlights how a Christian grows in community (4:1–16). He uses a series of metaphors to help his readers further understand the nature of the Christian life:

- New things replace old things (4:17–24).
- Truth and love replace falsehood and bitterness (4:25–32).
- Obedience replaces disobedience (5:1–7).
- Light replaces darkness (5:8–14).
- Wisdom replaces folly (5:15–17), and
- Spirit-intoxication replaces drunkenness (5:18–21).

John Stott sums up these descriptions by highlighting three things that these have in common:

First, they all concern our relationships. Holiness is not a mystical condition experienced in relation to God but in isolation from human beings. You cannot be good in a vacuum—only in the real world

of people.

Second, in each example a negative prohibition is balanced by a corresponding positive command. It is not enough to put off the old rags; we have to put on the new garments.

Third, in each case a reason for the command is either given or implied, indeed a theological reason. For in the teaching of Jesus and his apostles, doctrine and ethics, belief and behavior are always dovetailed into one another.⁴

All of Christian growth in grace is a community project, leading to concrete change that is fueled by an utter dependence upon the grace of Christ at work in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

The rest of this article will focus on the last descriptor: Spirit-filled sobriety replaces drunkenness; the Spirit both intoxicates us and sobers us (5:18–21). Paul begins Ephesians 5:18 with two commands. One is negative: “Do not get drunk on wine which leads to debauchery.” The other is positive: “Instead be filled with the Spirit.”

As I mentioned earlier, our hearts can be enticed by anything in creation. Ephesians 5:18 introduces a similar dynamic. We find something in creation that gradually replaces the Creator in our lives. We become “drunk.” The verse identifies wine as the culprit, but any strong desire can be inserted here. As we come under the influence, it intoxicates us. Whatever intoxicates us besides the Spirit will lead to a life of debauchery. The word *debauchery* in modern usage implies sensual indulgence, but here it has a more general meaning of recklessness, a life of folly, a life of stupidity, a life of darkness.

What is the cure? What are we to do? The second half of the verse tells us the alternative: *be filled with the Spirit*. Paul uses a passive verb. Literally, it reads, *Let the Spirit fill you*. He does not suggest a technique or gimmick. Instead, *the Spirit fills us* as we humble ourselves and cry out for mercy and help. This is not a once-for-all experience, but an ongoing one. It is a past experience that continues into the present and future. If we continually live under the influence of the Spirit we will begin to wake up and become alert to the Spirit’s work. When we are awake to the Spirit, we no longer live like we are in a drunken stupor. Nothing in creation

lays claim to our worship. We are living with eyes wide open, ready to be part of the community. This is the dynamic of change. But where does it happen?

A Community that Transforms People (Ephesians 5:19-21)

For Paul, our relationships in the church are the normal context for change. A church of Christians who cry out for mercy, repent from addictions of any sort, and are being filled with the Spirit, will be a welcoming place for addicts. This kind of church recognizes that God does not show favoritism to those who seem to be ahead of the others. People I have talked to who found help in support groups outside the church said the fundamental characteristic that appealed to them was humility. As we follow a God who shows no favoritism, how much more should the local church be a place of humility, safety and appropriate honesty?

What are the specific ingredients to creating a culture of grace and growth? Paul gives specific instruction. These ingredients move us to a practical understanding of how the church can more effectively minister to sinners and sufferers of all kinds, including those who struggle with various addictions.

Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, sing and make music to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence to Christ. (Eph 5:19-21)

A church that effectively ministers to all kinds of people is a church that:

- speaks to one another,
- sings and makes music to the Lord,
- gives thanks to God, and
- submits to one another.

This is a “support group” like nothing the world has to offer!

Let’s look at each of these in more detail. As we do, a picture emerges of what the church looks like as it ministers to addicts of all kinds. We see, in these characteristics, the *tone* that should mark the body of Christ. Creating this tone is not so much an emphasis on programs, although there is a place for structure and organization to facilitate ministry to people. Without these characteristics, programs will be hollow and unfruitful because they will lack the

very life of God as he draws near to redeem and change us.

First, the Spirit-filled church speaks to one another.

A fundamental characteristic of a typical addictions group meeting is the honesty of speech that occurs. This openness and honesty to talk about struggles with alcohol or other substances, along with the utter safety in which to do this, is the first critical step to sobriety. For the first time, strugglers feel that they are in a group that understands and accepts them. They finally find a place to name their struggles and not feel ashamed—and they find hope.

According to Paul, the church should be better at this than any other meeting of addicts! If you are looking for a book and a community of honesty and safety, then you should not need to look any further than the Scriptures and the local church. The first phrase tells us to “speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” The church has a speaking ministry. Upon first reading these verses, they might seem to make life in the body of Christ and our speaking to one another sound anemic. Who speaks to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs? But stop for a minute and consider the book of Psalms. Ponder the classic hymns and spiritual songs of the church throughout the ages. Consider Psalm 51 and the way that David honestly faces and confesses his sin. Ponder the words of the great hymn, “It Is Well with My Soul,” and learn how a father grieved the loss of his daughters in a shipwreck. Take to heart both the psalm and the hymn for how richly they describe the mercies of God. You do not have to travel far to find that this honesty and hope is precisely what the Scriptures and God’s people have specialized in over the ages: speaking to one another honestly about our sufferings and hope.

This verse reveals the horizontal, corporate connection to living the Christian life in community. The Bible consistently pushes against our tendency to think about living the Christian life in private. True spirituality is a life lived out in a physical body, within the context of one’s relationships with other people. The local church must be in the habit of speaking to one another if we are to be continually under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Community life looks like God’s people regularly having conversations about joys

and heartaches, about need and thankfulness, about our God and Savior—all the things that the psalms and the rest of Scripture are about. We offer one another encouragement to grow in grace by naming our sins and sufferings, by speaking of them appropriately, honestly, within a context of safety, without shame, and with every reason for hope.

Paul echoes this same sentiment in Colossians 3:16 where he says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you *teach and admonish one another with all wisdom.*” The writer of Hebrews says we are to “encourage one another daily,” and “spur one another on toward

beyond the superficial, both when things are going well and when they are not.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote his book *Life Together* while living in community with other pastors. As he experienced both the blessings and the difficulties of living in relationship, he says that the times of disappointment with our fellow believers are salutary moments. It is at the point of discouragement that the gospel especially expresses itself in ways that far exceed how it expresses itself when things are going well. Bonhoeffer leads us to consider how we are doing in our relationships when we are upset with one another. Do we see these as redemptive

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love and good deeds” (Heb 3:13; 10:25). These verses do not suggest a mechanical approach to our conversations. Rather, they call for the kind of conversations that lead us to engage in spiritual evaluation of ourselves and of others, bringing the hope and help of Christ to bear.

Do these types of conversations happen in your church? Is your church a safe place for people to honestly talk about their struggles? Are there appropriate contexts where such conversations can flourish? Do the leaders humbly confess their sins, their struggles, and their faith? Do you hear articulate, well thought out testimonies of God’s grace at work in the lives of his people? What characterizes the conversations occurring in the small groups and friendships in your church? Are certain sins off-limits? Are people encouraging one another to grow in grace? Are they spurring others to live for God and neighbor?

We must be willing to do all of these even in the midst of disappointment and relapse. We can be adept at speaking wonderful words of encouragement into one another’s lives—until the other person sins and, particularly, until the other person sins against me. When there is sin, the fruitful speaking suddenly stops and it turns to accusation, gossip, slander and judgment. The Scriptures argue for conversations that go

opportunities? Do we see troubles as salutary moments when the gospel can shine by the way that we treat one another? Bonhoeffer begins with these sobering and stern words,

Only that fellowship which faces... disillusionment, with all its unhappy and ugly aspects, begins to be what it should be in God’s sight, begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it.... A community which cannot bear and cannot survive such a crisis, which insists upon keeping its illusion when it should be shattered, permanently loses in that moment the promise of Christian community.⁵

He continues with these words of encouragement,

Thus the very hour of disillusionment with my brother becomes incomparably salutary, because it so thoroughly teaches me that neither of us can ever live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and Deed which really binds us together—the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. When the morning mist of dreams vanish, then dawns the bright day of Christian fellowship.⁶

God is with us and present with us when we relapse and fail. In fact, this is when the grace of Christ can be prominently displayed. It is an opportunity!

Our challenge then is clear: how can we, as the body of Christ, be with one another in the relapse? How can we become more adept at cultivating a culture of honest speaking and safe listening? If you have friends who are in addictions recovery groups, then you know that whenever they travel they call their sponsor and find out the location of the local chapter. They do this because it is a life or death issue for addicts to stay in community. How much more do God's people need to see the life and death nature of speaking into one another's lives? God grant us grace that we might flourish as a community that speaks with greater candor, compassion,

God who is both transcendent and immanent. The Christian God is the true and only living God, not an invented power. He comes close, redeems, and loves us in the person of his son, Jesus. If there was ever an organization that has a *raison d'être*, it is the body of Christ! You will not find a God like this in any other organization on earth! The ministry of worship, singing and making music in your heart to the Lord, expresses the true vertical orientation.⁷ Listen to Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14–19:

...I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches

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and hope than any addictions group meeting. God, let us speak more like our brothers and sisters in the Scriptures and in the classic hymns of the church.

Second, the Spirit-filled church sings and makes music to the Lord.

Every recovery program and organization has a liturgy, an order of service or "worship" when gathering corporately. This liturgy also provides a foundation for the individual participant's identity, something greater than the individual to rally around. Every organization needs a *raison d'être*, a reason for being. If the organization only exists for its own members, it will slowly die. It needs something transcendent, a bigger purpose, a vertical orientation. For most groups helping addicts, the liturgy is driven by referring to a "higher power" that can help in the struggle. The individual can choose who the term higher power refers to. I had a friend who made his deceased (and very moral) grandmother his higher power.

In addition to some attempt at a vertical dimension, the liturgy also forms one's identity. In most recovery groups, you self-identify as an addict: "Hello, my name is Tim and I'm an alcoholic." Such a confession of faith communicates who I fundamentally am, reaffirming the need for help.

The church's liturgy is fundamentally and radically different from most recovery groups. A Christian liturgy connects people to a personal

he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

This amazing expression of worship also changes your affirmation of identity and need for help.

Fundamentally, your identity is not determined by a particular addiction, experience of suffering, family history, biological predisposition or any other life circumstance. According to this passage and all of Scripture, if I am in a relationship with God by grace alone, then I am his child, holy and dearly loved. When I stand up and confess my faith, I say, "Hello, my name is Tim and I am a child of the living God. By God's grace, I now fight and struggle against particular temptations." This is not a semantic mind game. It is the truth about you and to whom you belong. Listen to another of Paul's prayers. Here he prays passionately that the Ephesians might live out of their new identity in Christ:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that

the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. (Eph 1:17–19)

The new identity is *in Christ*. People once defined by the sins of addiction (Eph 2:1–3) are redefined.

Worship reorients us to God and provides us with a new and true identity. It is a vital component of growing in grace. The corporate worship on Sunday encourages worship as a lifestyle. As I worship God, I am forever reminded that I am his child. Do the recovery groups do a better job with their limited liturgy proclaiming an imaginary god and a sin-defined struggler? How can we grow in this vital area? We are fortunate to have an utterly unique God to worship and a fundamentally solid identity in Christ. Is the local church helping people understand worship as a lifestyle that shapes one's identity? As we go about our daily lives are we aware of the temptation to make something other than God more functionally important to us? The answers to these questions have serious implications for fighting sin and growing in grace.

Think about this: we do not *behave* ourselves into sin; we *worship* ourselves into sin. If I am angry, then I have already been worshipping something that is not God for many moments, minutes, hours, days, or weeks. Perhaps I've been worshipping my comfort and my "right" to feel good. When you get in the way of my comfort, you are not witnessing an impulsive response of anger. Instead, you are impeding a heart that has, over time, given itself over to something other than God. This is the very nature and dynamic of remaining sin in every believer.

This is the same process by which someone becomes addicted to drugs, gambling, or pornography. It is not merely our behavior that has to be corrected, but a heart that needs deliverance from its sinfulness. *We worship our way into sin and we must worship our way out of sin.* To do that, we have to be a part of a worshipping community that gathers weekly and models what it looks like to repent and believe on a daily, moment-by-moment basis. The local church must demonstrate worship as a lifestyle on a day-to-day basis, because we are easily

captivated by false objects of worship and easily deceived.

All creation-worship replaces the Creator and moves in the direction of "drunkenness" and "debauchery." All false worship ultimately leads to despondency and hopelessness, though it may feel life-giving at the moment. That is the subtle nature of false worship. It does not seem false, and that is why we are so prone to do it. The Old Testament reveals a people constantly tempted to worship false gods and local deities because of the subtle promise of blessing. Songwriter Neil Young writes: "The same thing that makes you live can kill you in the end."⁸ This is a powerful and succinct description of any addiction.

Ephesians calls us to become a part of a community that worships, sings, and makes music in our hearts *to the Lord*. This vertical Godward reorientation is a lifestyle that comes only as the gospel of grace begins to transform us. While many recovery groups point people to a higher power, you do not find a personal Redeemer who is so mighty, gracious, patient and personal as you do in Scripture. A church that is reaching addicts will celebrate him even more than they will celebrate recovery itself! In fact, the recovery is the result of deeply rooted worship of the true and living God. It is a by-product and a blessing of worshipping the One who gives these blessings. God, grant us grace that we might flourish as a community that worships you every day of the week and above everything else.

Third, the Spirit-filled church gives thanks to God.

At some level, all recovery programs seek to cultivate an attitude of thanksgiving. Often, this may be gratitude to a person's "higher power," sponsor, group, or even to sobriety itself. No one can make progress without the fundamental element of gratitude, which is an evidence of humility. Humility says, "I can't do this on my own. I need help and I am grateful for the help I have received." Pride kills humility and obliterates the acknowledgement of deep dependence and neediness.

According to Paul, thankfulness is an essential ingredient to the change process. He also contends that if anyone has reasons to be grateful it is a child of the living God! We, of all people, are to be filled with gratitude, always

giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (5:20). Consider these truths:

When we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom 5:6–8)

Take this to heart, and you will fall to your knees in utter gratitude.

Why are gratitude and thanksgiving so important in the battle against sin and addictive, life-destroying behavior? Paul says *always* give thanks for *everything*. We are to give thanks to the Lord in any and every circumstance, whether good or bad. Both good and bad circumstances can make it difficult to obey and easy to sin. When times are hard, it may be difficult to obey. When times are good, it may make it easier to sin because our guard is down. James captures this well:

Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business. (James 1:9–11)

Riches and poverty are both trials. It is hard to obey when things are going badly. These are times you may get angry at God for what you are experiencing. But it may also be easy to give into sin when things are going well. The temptation then is to think that you do not need God or even need to think about God. Yet God calls us to grow in grace in *all* circumstances. He calls us to give thanks in *everything*.

Giving thanks enables us to grow in contentment (Phil 4:11–13). The life of the believer is marked by joy and sorrows, successes and failures, growth and set-backs. These experiences are challenging for anyone. The struggle to stay centered can be heightened for those coming out of a lifestyle of addiction. Godly contentment allows us to calibrate the highs and lows and not be deceived in either situation. It prevents us from thinking that the hardship is the end of life or that the blessing

defines life. Instead, we give thanks. We give thanks to God that he is conforming us into the image of Jesus and will complete the good work he started (Phil 1:6).

Often times, it can be easy to settle for less than what God is accomplishing in our lives. When times are tough, we often just want the difficulty to go away. We can be easily tempted to think that God is not present, does not love us, or that he has turned away from us. When times are good, we can easily go on spiritual auto-pilot and not ask how God wants to use a season of blessing to make us more like Christ.

We settle for things that are fleeting. All the while, God is saying, “I want to conform you into the image of my Son.” No matter what the circumstances, we want to grow in our ability to give thanks for everything, so that we aren’t deceived and succumb to the temptation to find escape or comfort in something in creation. Only God’s grace can produce this kind of contentment. The grace of God reminds us that the seasons of blessing are nothing compared to the Blesser. The grace of God reminds us that the seasons of difficulty will in no way compare to the glory that awaits us and is presently at work in us.

A church that gives thanks in everything will be a safe home for everyone who struggles. Successes will be celebrated, but they won’t be worshiped. Christ will remain at the center. Failures will be handled by the wonderful reassurance that the grace of Christ is for sinners. That same grace will produce in strugglers both an ongoing eagerness to do good and certainty that fighting against sin is not in vain.

Ephesians gives the believing community something—or better, Someone—to be thankful for. We are grateful. The basis of our gratitude includes, but also goes beyond, the community, an accountability partner, or sobriety itself. It takes us to the fount of all blessing, the Triune God who saves sinners and redeems us in the midst of our suffering. God, grant us grace that we might flourish as a community filled with gratitude because of your mercy. Enable us to extend that grace to addicts of all kinds.

Fourth, the Spirit-filled church submits to one another.

A fourth element vitally important in any recovery group is the humility of submitting to others. One of the supporting columns of

addiction is self-deception and a lifestyle of deceiving others. No active addicts want to listen to anyone who has the courage to call them out on their addictive, self-destructive and relationally-destructive behavior. But this is precisely what an addict needs! Without submission to others who are further along in their “recovery,” an addict’s chances of maintaining any degree of sobriety are impossible.

Here, too, the church can offer something better. Paul’s final instruction is to *submit to one another out of reverence to Christ*. Here, Paul brings us back to Ephesians 4:2 and shows us one of the greatest marks of vibrant fellowship: the people of a local church submit to one another in humility. This submission is one of the essential evidences and stimulants to the Spirit’s work in our lives. The word *submit* was used in a military context. A soldier would relinquish his personal rights and become a part of a greater team. Rather than a sign of weakness, it was a mark of strength and it promoted the common good rather than just one individual. No church can thrive without this fundamental virtue. Without this crucial character quality, we will spin off into our own personal groups and simply fight with others and compare ourselves with others. We will elevate ourselves above others. An insipid self-righteousness will abound and destroy Christian community. We do this naturally and quite well!

John Calvin was attuned to this motivation that resides in every human heart:

We are all so blinded and upset by self-love that everyone imagines he has a just right to exalt himself, and to undervalue all others in comparison to self. If God has bestowed on us any excellent gift, we imagine it to be our own achievement; and we swell and even burst with pride. If the same talents which we admire in ourselves appear in others, or even our betters, we depreciate and diminish them with the utmost malignity, in order that we may not have to acknowledge the superiority of others. Everyone flatters himself and carries a kingdom in his breast.⁹

The writer of Hebrews was keenly aware of our need to submit to one another due to the straying nature of our hearts. We are easily self-deceived and then live deceitful lives. It comes with the territory of remaining sin and an attitude of unbelief. That is why he says,

See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end.” (Heb 3:12–14)

A lifestyle of submitting to one another as well as submitting to those whom God has placed over us (Heb 13:17) is vital to the Christian’s growth in faith and obedience. The church has a foundation for submission that no other organization has. It is rooted in hearing God’s voice. We have One who submitted to the Father on our behalf. The faithful Son gave his life for self-deceived and deceitful people like you and me. We not only find a superior example in Jesus, but also a superior Savior. Jesus submitted to the Father for his people, in order to make atonement for our sins and liberate us from a life of deception. He did this so that we might have confidence to come out of hiding and live as members of the body of Christ who submit to one another *out of reverence to Christ*.

For the previous three directives to grow in the life of a community, there must be this essential posture of humility before God and one another. Without humility, there is no ability to even stay in the same room with one another, much less the same church. If we cannot remain in close fellowship with one another, then there will be no speaking, worshiping or giving thanks. We have to persevere with one another, in lasting friendships, marriages and small groups, in good times and bad times, or none of the previous things can flourish.

Are we teachable people who are willing to both speak and listen to one another? Are we willing to heed other people’s counsel? Are we willing to let people challenge us, encourage us, and even correct us? This humility and this act of submitting to one another is the vision that God has given for what our churches can look like. As we commit to bringing about this vision, we will begin to live out these qualities of speaking, singing, giving thanks, and submitting.

How is this lifestyle of humble submission to be lived out in the body of Christ? Sinners do not do this naturally. In fact, we are quite good at just the opposite. In our pride, we prefer to ignore

people’s advice, worship anything besides the true God and complain rather than give thanks. Humility does not come easily. Can you imagine an addict’s accountability to another person anchored in accountability to Christ? Can you imagine an elder willing to receive advice from a former addict because both live in submission? What pictures of humility! What a testimony to the power of the Spirit.

Are you beginning to see the rich wisdom of Scripture that guides us to think about how the church can minister to addicts of all kinds? We have much to offer. The Scriptures are clear and convincing. The wisdom of Scripture far

literally means “recklessness” or “reckless living.” This simple word also appears in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). Here the word is used to describe the son’s lifestyle. The prodigal son took his share of the inheritance, left his father and engaged in reckless living.

But what was it that convinced the prodigal son to repent, leave his reckless lifestyle, and return home? It was something equally reckless, but good: his father’s passionate, overflowing and unwavering love for him. Remember what happened? The straying son came to his senses and remembered what his father was like. When the father saw his son returning, he ran out to

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pre-dates the recovery movement of the last 100 years. In fact, fragmentary remnants of Scripture give all these groups the strengths they have. The church has been far too passive and allowed well-meaning groups to outdo what the church should and could be doing. The church has all the ingredients to play a primary role. With these four marks—speaking to one another, worshiping the Lord, giving thanks to God, and submitting to one another—the Spirit-filled church has all that it needs to create a welcoming place for addicts and everyone else. True worshipers are a body of redeemed sinners. There are no longer any differences that mean anything to God, for all are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28). This is a new social order.

There is only one way that these virtues will be formed in our lives and relationships, but it requires a second and closer look at Ephesians 5:18–21. Let us look once more at this text and other teachings in Scripture as we seek to locate the dynamic for change of both personal growth and corporate growth.

A Different Kind of Reckless

As we saw, Scripture tells us that drunkenness leads to debauchery. The word Paul uses in Ephesians 5:18 is the Greek word *asotia*, which

meet him, kissed him, embraced him, called for his best robe, and ordered that the fattened calf be slaughtered for a celebration. This reckless love outdid the reckless debauchery. The reckless love of the Father that is demonstrated for us in the gospel is what constantly calls us back to him. Tim Keller speaks of the prodigal son’s father and his love this way:

The word *prodigal* does not mean “wayward” but “recklessly spendthrift.” It means to spend until you have nothing left. This term is therefore as appropriate for describing the father in the story as his younger son. The father’s welcome to the repentant son was literally reckless, because he refused to “reckon” or count his sin against him or demand repayment. This response offended the elder son and, most likely, the local community. In this story the father represents the heavenly Father Jesus knew so well. St. Paul writes: “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not reckoning to them their trespasses” (2 Cor 5:19 ASV). Jesus is showing us the God of Great Expenditure, who is nothing if not prodigal toward us, his children. God’s reckless grace is our greatest hope, a life changing experience...¹⁰

Jesus’ intention is clear. He uses the parable to

talk about his own Father's love. His reckless love cost him dearly. The price to win back reckless addicts like you and me would involve a holy reckless love that far outspends even the most reckless sinner.

This is the same love that calls us back into communion with the Father, Son, and Spirit. It is the love that then sends us into community with our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ with humility and submission to one another. It does this over and over and over again. Day after day. Year after year.

We want our churches to live filled with the Spirit, becoming communities of believers that are a persuasive presence in the world. Listen to the words of the famous seventeenth century hymn writer, Horatio Bonar, that remind us of the primacy of God's grace. They are based upon the same parable of the lost son. (His words are in italics, punctuated with my prayers of application.)

No gloomy uncertainty as to God's favor can subdue one lust, or correct our crookedness of will.

Lord, correct my crooked will because you love me.

But the free pardon of the cross uproots sin, and withers all its branches. Only the certainty of love, forgiving love, can do this.

Please uproot and wither all that is wrong in me.

Free and warm reception into the divine favor is the strongest of all motives in leading a man to seek conformity to Him who has thus freely forgiven him all trespasses.

Thank you, Lord, for forgiving all of my trespasses. I am forever grateful that I am in your favor.

A cold admission into the paternal house of the father might have repelled the prodigal, and sent him back into his lusts: but the fervent kiss, the dear embrace, the best robe, the ring, the shoes, the fatted calf, the festal song—all without one moment's suspense or delay as well as without one upbraiding word, could not but awaken shame for the past, and true-hearted resolution to walk worthy of such a father, and of such a generous pardon.

Thank you for receiving me as your child. Thank you for the generous pardon that I have been given in Christ.

Revellings, banquetings and abominable

idolatrics come to be the abhorrence of him round whom the holy arms of renewed fatherhood have been so lovingly thrown. Sensuality, luxury, and the gaieties of the flesh have lost their relish to one who has tasted the fruit of the tree of life.¹¹

Make it so for all your beloved children.

The Father's love has the power to change lives. This is the good news. The kingdom of God has broken into our world in the coming of Jesus. It is this message that can form churches where people are filled with the Spirit—intoxicated with God. In these thriving communities, sinners of all kinds and degrees will find welcome, embrace, comfort, encouragement, grace, power and a call to grow in love of God and neighbor.

What Does This Look Like Practically?

Without the ingredients that we have been discussing and without a tone and culture of grace and growth, no program or structure, no small group or support group will bring about this kind of helping community. Without the transforming work of the grace of God in us, we will not be good at reaching out to “prodigals,” for we will fail to see that we ourselves are prodigals in need of that same grace.

When such a culture begins to form, then the structures, groups, systems, and programs will not be impersonal, lifeless machinery. Structures become scaffolding upon which vibrant ministry to addicts will thrive. Many churches find that initial support groups are a good place to begin. These are specific to a particular struggle: e.g., groups for people struggling with pornography, eating disorders, alcohol, chemical addiction. Groups may also form around a similar experience of suffering such as divorce, losing a spouse or a loved one, or facing a life-threatening illness. This is a good place to begin, but the goal must also include ways of protecting people from letting their personal struggles with sin or suffering become their fundamental identity. This becomes a matter of wisdom for leaders, as they encourage strugglers to also find places in the body of Christ where they serve alongside others in ways that are not defined by their personal struggles. This enables strugglers to see themselves as part of a greater community where everyone is more alike than different. Sin and suffering—and hope—are common to us all (1 Cor 10:13).

The opportunities to think creatively about

structuring ministry are endless. Every church must contextualize ministry in such a way that it best fits the culture and the people. Over the past few decades, many churches have reached out to provide ministry and help for people struggling with life dominating sins and sufferings. Investigate what is and is not working. Talk to church leaders in your area. Seek out the help of ministries that are designed to provide useful resources for the church.¹² Evaluate what you hear and see by its fidelity to Scripture.

* * *

Is the church a place that can minister to addicts? Is it possible for the church to be a place where addicts find acceptance and support? Does the gospel even speak to addictions? The answer to all of these questions is YES—because of God’s grace and reckless love.

1 Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 85.

2 For a fuller treatment of addictions see the following resources: *Blame it on the Brain* and *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave* by Edward T. Welch. See also Michael R. Emlet’s “Understanding the Influences on the Human Heart,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 20:2 (2002): 47-52.

3 Note how James 3:9–12 uses similar analogies to show that our behavior is the result of inner person loyalties.

4 John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1979), 184.

5 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1954), 27.

6 *Ibid.* pp. 28-29.

7 Horizontal means between self and others. Vertical means between self and God.

8 Neil Young, “From Hank to Hendrix”

9 John Calvin, *Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952), 31-32.

10 Tim Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Dutton, 2008), XIV-XV.

11 Horatius Bonar, *God’s Way of Holiness* (CreateSpace, 2011; orig. 19th c), 27.

12 For some helpful resources, see CCEF’s curriculum:

(1) *Crossroads* by Edward T. Welch is a companion curriculum to *Addictions: A Banquet in a Grave*, and is designed for small groups. (2) *How People Change* is also a curriculum based upon the book (of the same title) that is intended to be used in small groups. It provides a way for Christians to think about the dynamics of change for any issue. See also “Biblical Ministry in a Rescue Mission: Interview with Bob Emberger,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 17:1 (1998): 15-22. Emberger, the Executive Director of Whosever Gospel Mission, describes practical ways to help men and women caught in addictions. Finally, I teach a CCEF course about ministry systems and structures: *Counseling in the Local Church*.

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