

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Overcoming Addiction

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In three 33 BC, Alexander the Great marched his Macedonian Army into Gordion the capital of Phrygia. There he found a wagon tied to its yolk with what a Roman historian described as several knots so tightly entangled that it was impossible to see how they were fastened. According to tradition, the wagon belonged to Gordius the father of King Midas and an ancient oracle had declared that any man who could untangle its elaborate knots was destined to become the ruler of all Asia. Alexander attempted to untie the knots, no luck, got a little frustrated, decided to solve the problem in a slightly different way. Drew his sword and slice that knot in half. Now, if you know your history, you know that Alexander the Great, undefeated in battle will become the king of Persia, the Pharaoh of Egypt, and the Lord of Asia. Yet it was cutting the Gordion knot that Alexander the Great considered his greatest accomplishment. Here's the irony, Alexander died at the age of 32. Now, there was no CSI cannot prove this, there are a lot of conspiracy theories surrounding his death, but some historians believe that alcoholism contributed to Alexander's demise. Here's what we know for sure. He once killed a general in a drunken rage and he also sponsored a drinking contest that resulted in the deaths of 41 people from alcohol poisoning. What I'm getting at is this, Alexander the Great conquered the entire ancient world from Greece to India, but he couldn't conquer himself. Not much has changed so many people so successful, crushing it professionally but if we're being honest, collapsing privately, resume looks great on LinkedIn right now, fighting a losing battle with addiction. So glad you're here this weekend, I think you're in the right place and, I believe God's going to set you free. I want you to know that we're in your corner, we love you, God loves you. And, it took some faith for you to be here and I believe God's going to honor it.

Well, welcome to National Community Church this weekend, continue our series 'Out of the Shadows'. Last weekend, Pastor Joshua talked about fear. Next weekend campus pastors will talk about loneliness; week, five and six, doubt and shame. Dr Foth is going to be in the house. And this weekend I want to talk about addiction, and let's be honest, I think it feels like a Gordion knot. There are dozens of different addictions, some are as obvious is opioids or alcohol, some as subtle as food and work, some addictions as painful as cutting, others as innocuous as gambling, some addictions as personal and as private as pornography and others as socially acceptable as social media. I am not putting these addictions on par with each other. Listen; checking Facebook, it will alter the neuro chemistry in your brain but obviously the damage done by substance abuse, totally different scope and scale. So dozens of different addictions and there are stages of addiction there are stages of recovery and this weekend, here's the deal, there are thousands of us across our campuses who are at different places on that spectrum. You add one more thing to the mix you can slice and dice addiction a dozen different ways. Addiction is biological, it's neurochemical, it's psychological, it's physiological, it's emotional and relational and spiritual, it's genetic and it's epigenetic addiction, incredibly complicated. And because it's incredibly complicated, I think it's incredibly controversial as well, so many different theories and therapies, talk therapy, drug therapy, depth therapy, you can do adventure therapy, art therapy, animal therapy, and I think there is validity to a lot of these different approach paths.

What I'm getting at is this, we are not going to conquer fear or overcome addiction, or solve shame with one 30 minute message. Okay, every message in this series could be a series. There is nothing easy about these subjects, no shortcuts, no cheat codes but the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. And here's what I believe is going to happen during this series. God is going to begin a good work in you and then God is going to carry it to completion, some of you; you're going to look back on this series as the tipping point, the turning point. Now, you're going to have to make some difficult decisions, going to have to take some next steps, some of you need counseling, some of you need to check yourself into a clinic that takes tremendous courage. But if you have the courage to do one of those things, I think that one small step can become a giant leap in your journey towards mental health, emotional health, spiritual health.

If you have a Bible, you can meet me in Romans chapter seven. I want to unpack a passage that I believe is one of the most discouraging and encouraging verses in the Bible, and that's going to make sense in a minute. The Apostle Paul is writing to Christians in Rome and he makes quite the confession. He says in Verse 15,

"¹⁵I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do. But what I hate, to do. ¹⁶And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷In that case, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

¹⁸I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh; for I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do this I keep on doing."

How much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood? I mean this is like an ancient tongue twister, but can you feel Paul's frustration? And if you struggle with an addiction, Paul is speaking your language. Now, we don't know what Paul is referencing here and he would call it the sin nature, but I think in many ways these things are synonymous.

Here's what I want to do, I want to give you a clinical definition up front, and then we're going to do something a little bit different this week. I want to use Paul as a case study. Alright, you can jot this down if you're taking notes, addiction is a compulsive behavior that results in reward but has an adverse effect upon us. I think the key word is compulsive. See, at some point you cross a line, you no longer control it, whatever it is, it controls you. And there is some kind of reward and it's often neuro chemical, it's the dopamine in the brain. But here's the deal, it is really hard to admit that you've crossed that line, but God cannot heal, which you do not confess. And so there's gotta be a first step where you acknowledge that and you acknowledge too that there is an adverse effect. There is a reason why the first step in the 12 steps is admitting that you're powerless, that the addiction is no longer manageable. But here's the good news, if you have the courage to do it, there is a second step, there is a power that can set you free and can restore your sanity and I might add sanctification.

Now let me come back to what I said a little earlier. I think this is one of the most discouraging and encouraging verses in the Bible and I'm going to tell you why. The apostle Paul wrote 13 epistles and so about half of the New Testament has his fingerprint on it. He went on three

missionary journey, started 14 churches; I mean that's an unbelievable resume. I think next to Jesus, it is a tossup, you know, Peter or Paul who had more influence, right? And so here is someone that I'm thinking to myself, if the apostle Paul cannot seem to sanctify this sin streak, like is there any hope for me? But, I think there is a less discouraging and more encouraging way to look at this. Okay, and here it is, God used an addict to accomplish all that. Is that not unbelievable? Here is someone who struggled just like we do and yet God used him to write the Bible. Put that on your resume. Maybe just, maybe God can use me.

Listen, chiefest sinner, that's what he called himself. Some kind of addiction, we don't know what it is, a thorn in the flesh that Bible scholars love to theorize about whatever it was, it was a constant source of pain and frustration for Paul. And I'm going to add one more thing to the mix and you have to be really careful because here's the deal. There is this thing called eisegesis, it's reading into the text of scripture of what's not there and that's a dangerous thing. But I would also say you should not read right over the human element in the story. I have no doubt that Paul suffered from post traumatic stress syndrome. Are you kidding me? We read past this little verse but let me take two seconds, I wish I could deep dive this but I'm not going to. Paul says, and this is Acts 22, he says,

⁴ I persecuted the followers of the Way, hounding some to death, arresting both men and women and throwing them in prison.

I mean this is like slave traders who would coddle slaves and march them to the south. Paul was doing the same thing with Christians. You remember the vision that Paul has on the road to Damascus? Do you know what he was going there to do it? To do just this, to chain those Christians and march them off to prison or worse, and so he had this vision, and by the way, you ever notice what Jesus says? He says, I am Jesus the Nazarene, the one you are persecuting. Listen, when someone persecutes us, they are persecuting... God takes it personally. And so Paul has this moment where Saul becomes Paul, but then he adds one little memory to the mix. He says this, verse 20 he says; *"When the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him."*

Saul had a hand in the very first martyr I can't imagine the flashbacks, I can't imagine the nightmares. The apostle Paul would not be human if there was not a tremendous trauma that resulted from this. What I'm saying is this, the Apostle Paul was once a traumatized Saul, but look at what God did in his life. You read these 13 verses, these were not written in a vacuum. This is someone who when he says there is hope and there is healing and there is freedom, I think you have to take it seriously.

Let me go back to Romans seven because it does not end with addiction. It says;

Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?

Now, what's death got to do with it? Well, if you struggle with addiction, you know it's not right and wrong, its life and death. This is something that sucks the life out of us. Verse 25, *"Thanks*

be to God, who delivers me (who delivers me, who delivers me, who delivers me) through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

Let me get theological verse second I want to connect a couple of Biblical dots. When Jesus preached his first sermon he opened the scroll to Isaiah 61 and he said this, *"the spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and to set at liberty those who are bruised"*. That's who Jesus is, that's what Jesus does he sets captives free.

Now, let me venture out on a little bit of theological thin ice. Have you ever stopped to think about what Jesus did between the crucifixion and the Resurrection? The Bible doesn't tell us much but Ephesians 4:8 says this, when he ascended on high, he took many captives. The King James version says he led captivity captive. I like that language but what does that mean? Well, the Apostle's creed, interpreted this way, said that he descended into hell, why, to set captives free. And there's a fancy name for this, it's the harrowing of Hell. Harrowing, old English word, it was a piece of plowing and what did Jesus do? Well, I mean, we don't know for sure, but he descended into the realm of the dead and led captives out. Now this is tricky territory but here's what I'm getting at. Jesus didn't just go to the cross for us, went to hell and back. And I think that's significant, that's who God is. This is not just heaven invading earth, this is heaven invading Hell.

Now, let me connect one more dot. Jesus said, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. And now I love this because I think Jesus goes avenger, right and rips the gates of hell off of its hinges and it's this incredible moment. It's a picture of what I think God wants to do in our lives, wants to invade our hell and proclaim freedom to us.

I am not naive, addiction does not happen overnight. It took one day for God to get Israel out of Egypt, took 40 years to get Egypt out of Israel, this is not happening overnight. I know that relapse is real, but I also believe in God's sustaining grace and God's sustaining power. Now you cannot just pray like it depends on God, you're going to have to work like it depends on you. I have no doubt that God can deliver us. Now he doesn't always deliver from, sometimes delivers through, very different things. But here's the deal when you experience God deliverance you have got to back it up with some daily spiritual disciplines. And I want to be careful because this is not about trying harder, it's about the spirit of God doing something in us that's beyond our ability. I do you not want to oversimplify addiction, but I am not going to underestimate the God who is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine according to his power that's at work within us.

Normally message would end right here cause the chapter ends here but if you stop here you stop before you get to the stop gap. For the record, chapters were not added to the Bible until 1227 AD and it was the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton who thought it would be much easier to read the Bible if there were chapter divisions. But, here's the deal, I don't think he put all of them in the right place. I think Romans seven and eight are a great example. And so you get to the end of Romans seven that's great. But then Romans 8:1, have you ever read the first word, 'therefore'. Now I heard this a long time ago, when you come across a 'therefore' you got to figure out what it's there for. And so here's what it says,

"¹Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. ³ For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

I want you to dial in right here, this is so critical. You have got to understand the difference between the conviction of the Holy Spirit and the condemnation of the enemy. Conviction, good, good thing, God thing. This is when we feel guilt because of unconfessed sin. This is like the pain we feel in our body when something's wrong and indicates we might want to get some help. This is a loving God who says, I want to heal your soul. I want to help you. I want to heal you. And so conviction then turns into confession, which begins the healing process. Conviction, good thing, condemnation, exact opposite. It's feeling guilt over confessed sin. Stick with me, this is sin that God has forgiven and forgotten, but we can't seem to forget ourselves and we cannot seem to forgive ourselves. And listen, what condemnation does is it compounds the problem; it is hard enough trying to overcome addiction, yes? And then you try to overcome condemnation with it, my goodness. I want you to know today there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ.

The enemy, a couple of names; one is the accuser of the brethren. Can I tell you, his tactics are as old as the Garden of Eden and they aren't too complicated, wants to remind you of everything you've done wrong over and over again? Why? So that you use all of your emotional energy, all of your spiritual energy on guilt over things, you can't even change anymore. He wants to paralyze you with past mistakes, wants your addiction to become your identity but, I want you to know that he's just an accuser and there is an advocate and we'll talk about that in a minute. And then he's called the father of lies. I think that one of these lies is that once addicted, always addicted. Again, not naive, I know that there are addictions that you have to manage very carefully, but do not tell me that God cannot set you free.

Elvin Selmrud said this, 'the greatest source of our suffering are the lies we tell ourselves'. I think that's good. I think that's true, but I also would say it's the lies we believe from the enemy. Now our pastor of prayer, Heidi Scanlon says this all the time, I don't know exactly where it comes from, but this is good. It says, any area of our lives where we have a loss of hope, it is a lie believed from and a foothold given to the enemy. Maybe I should say that one more time. Listen, anywhere where we have a loss of hope it's a lie believed from and a foothold given to the enemy.

We are not going to unravel every dimension of addiction this weekend, but I want to draw the sword of God's word and I want to talk about who you are and who God is. Listen, there are a thousand things I want to talk about this weekend but I just think cybernetic theory, you know first order of change, second order of change. First order of change is doing something more or less and that's great. Second order of change is changing at a much deeper level. And I just think some of us, we're telling ourselves the wrong story that we don't really know who we are, we don't really know who God is in fact we think we feel God's condemnation when it's the enemy,

it's not him. And so we've got to get this right, I think the road to recovery begins with self discovery. Your addiction is not your identity.

Now, if you've experienced trauma, the body keeps score; a great book by a Dutch doctor, it's going to be a tough read, Bessel van der Kolk and in that book he just shares one little story about his mentor in medicine. Elvin Semrad. And Semrad actually discouraged his students from reading too many textbooks their first year because he felt like it might lead to pseudo certainty of psychiatric diagnoses. And so van der Kolk just shares the story about one day evaluating one of these patients and says to Semrad, would you call this patient schizophrenia or schizoaffective? Semrad kind of strokes his chin a little bit, looks like he's in deep thoughts says, I think I'd call them Michael McIntyre. Are you tracking with me, like I think we're quick to listen... DSM 5, wonderful. These diagnosing personality assessments, I love them. You are not four letters on Myers Briggs, you're not a number in enneagram. I think it's so easy to reduce ourselves to labels, to our a dictum mistakes that we've made. I just want to make sure this weekend that you know who you are. You are the image of all mighty God. You're the apple of God's eye. There's a God who sees you, who loves you, cares about you. You are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works prepared for us in advance. You are an over-comer, you are more than a conquer it. Listen, even your name isn't your name, not according to the book of Revelation. God has a unique name for you and just like he changed Saul's name to Paul I believe that there is a God who can alter our identity. We can begin to find our identity in the person of Jesus Christ. Listen, pride is a problem, but so is false humility. I'm going to tell you what it is, it's believing that you are anything less than who God says you are.

If you begin to believe those lies about who you are, what do you have to live up to you? You've heard me say this a hundred times. I'm going to say it 101; there never has been, never will be anyone like you. It's not a testament to you; it's a testament to the God who created you. And what it means is this; no one can worship God like you or for you. I just think that that uniqueness is such a gift from God, unique fingerprint, a unique voiceprint, unique eye print. I mean science is unbelievable, unique sweat print. Did you know this? And I might add a unique soul print. I think this road to recovery, self-discovery; I wrote a book a couple of years ago 'Soulprint' and just felt like this week wanted to have it at our connection tables, a gift from Lora and I. And if you want to pick one up to kind of help you in your journey; it's a gift from us to you. So that's who you are.

Let me talk a little bit about who God is and we'll keep it short and sweet. I want to tell you what God is doing right now. Long before you woke up this morning, long after you go to bed tonight, the spirit of God was interceding for you with groanings that cannot be uttered. My self confidence, I think if you kind of compared it to other people, I think it's below average. My holy confidence, I don't even know that it's on the chart because of God's faithfulness, because of the miracles. I mean, God heals my asthma after 40 years, right? I mean, at some point you got to figure out that God is able and so my holy confidence and my confidence for what God can do in your life it's off the chart this weekend and is because there is a God who is interceding for you. And it's not just the spirit of God, they're tag teaming, Jesus is interceding for you as well as if one of the Godhead is not enough, there are two members of the Godhead interceding to the third member of the Godhead on your behalf. Come on. I'm going to tell you what else he's doing. Prophet Zephaniah said did he is singing songs of rejoicing over you. If you add hearing that was

good enough, I think you would hear the heavenly father saying, this is my beloved son, this is my beloved daughter in whom I am well pleased. And then Psalm 32 he's singing songs of deliverance around us. This is so powerful, all the time. God is surrounding us with these songs of deliverance and setting captives free. You cannot out sin God's grace and you cannot out addict his deliverance

I want to close with two testimonies this weekend. A couple of members of our staff, I want you to know that our pastors, myself included, everybody on here, listen, we're on the same journey you are. I think everybody wrestles against certain things and I mean, again, thousand directions I'd love to go, love to talk about predisposition. I think some of us, there's an incline and some circumstances that we found ourselves in because of other people's addiction that maybe set us back a few steps and I'm not ignoring any of that, but I asked a couple of staff members just to share their story. And so let, let me share two of these real quick.

Andy, kind enough to share this, he said, I've had an addiction to food. It's hard to even type that because I don't want it to be true like everyone else with an addiction problem; I was addicted to how it made me feel. It was my coping mechanism on a hard day. It's how I celebrated holidays, birthdays, job promotions, family victories. It's what I did when I was bored in the evening; it's what I did under the cover of night. He says this, one of my health coach is a former pastor said that food is the acceptable addiction in the church. And then, 108 days ago, a switch flips and over that time Andy has lost 90 pounds. Yeah, I think that's clapable. Now he says, I'm still not where I want to be, but I've gained so much more than I've lost. Think about that. If you had told me nine weeks ago, someone that despised exercise of any kind would run three 5k's in a week, I would've laughed at you. If you had told me three months ago that I would drop below my high school weight, that's 20 years ago, I would not have believed you. If you had told me three months ago, I'd be a certified health coach helping dozens people find the same freedom I've been looking for my entire adult life I would have told you, you are out of your mind. You know why I love sharing that? Because if God did it for Andy, he can do it for you. If God did it before, he can do it again.

Let me share one more because I know this weekend some of you, you don't struggle with an addiction, but someone you love, it's profoundly affected your life, a parent, child, spouse, friend. Ah, I have been praying for you this week, it's a heavy burden to bear. I want you to hear me say this, you are not responsible, but you are response-able. You have to put a little hyphen in there. I think sometimes, especially if you're young, you experience trauma; you experience someone else's addiction. There's just this tendency to accept some of the blame and I want you to know you are not responsible for someone else's addiction but you are response-able. And what I mean by that is this; you're able to choose your response. Again, your treadmill might be at a 7% incline because of the addiction you've experienced at the hands of someone else. But listen, God can help you. God can help you.

So Ashley kind enough to share this; trying and says, and these are thoughts about how she has dealt with two parents who dealt with addiction much of her growing up years. She shares this, trying as best you can to see the person you love as sick is the most helpful advice I've gotten. Stick with me. I tried to ask myself if my mom had cancer and that's why she couldn't come to my graduation, would I still be mad at her. If the answer was no, then I tried not to be mad at her

for missing big things because of her addiction. If my mom was saying hurtful things to me because she had dementia or Alzheimer's, would I still be mad at her? If the answer was no, then I tried to not get mad at her saying hurtful things because of her addiction. Now quickly, next paragraph.

That being said, I would also set up good boundaries today in order to protect your ability to love someone tomorrow. My mom went through cycles of sobriety and relapse and the boundaries that I set when she was using were instrumental for us having a healthy and loving relationship when she would get clean.

And finally, I think that there is something to be said of faithful prayer. Hoping against all hope doesn't happen every time, but my grandma prayed faithfully for my dad for 40 years and today, nine years into his sobriety, she tells everyone and anyone about her prodigal son that was as good as dead, but is alive again and the one that was lost but is now found and at 96 years old, every chance she gets, she celebrates the faithfulness of God.

It takes grace, takes patience, it takes wisdom. I'm going to let Ashley had the last word. She said, you know how in the New Testament when you could name a demon, then you had power to drive it out. I'm praying that by naming addiction this weekend that we regain power over it and drive it out of our lives in Jesus' name. And to that I say yes and amen.

I'm going to invite our worship teams to come; I'm going to invite our prayer teams to kind of be at the ready this weekend. Here's what we're going to do. We're going to celebrate communion together, it is a pilgrimage back to the foot of the cross. Listen, if you struggle with addiction and fear, shame, loneliness, come on, you have got to make a beeline for the cross. You mean the cross to Christ? This is where the curse is broken. This is where the blessing is bestowed. This is where healing begins. This is where deliverance happens. We are not just going to worship this weekend. We're going to get into an atmosphere of God's presence and then we're going to be bold enough to believe that there is a God who can meet us right here, right now, begin a good work in us, and then carry it to completion.