

A D D I C T I V E  
H A B I T S

CHANGING  
FOR GOOD

31-DAY DEVOTIONALS FOR LIFE

DAVID R. DUNHAM

# ADDICTIVE HABITS

31-DAY DEVOTIONALS FOR LIFE

A Series

DEEPAK REJU

Series Editor

- Addictive Habits: Changing for Good*, by David R. Dunham  
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The names of individuals mentioned in this text have been changed to protect their identity. In some cases a composite character has been created.

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To my friend and mentor Frank Tallerico.

Frank not only taught me how to be a counselor  
but has counseled me many times over the years.

Without his help and insight,  
I would not be who I am today.



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## Tips for Reading This Devotional

EARLY IN OUR MARRIAGE, my wife and I lived on the top floor of a town house, in a small one-bedroom apartment. Whenever it rained, leaks in the roof would drip through the ceiling and onto our floors. I remember placing buckets in different parts of the apartment and watching the water slowly drip, one drop at a time. I put large buckets out and thought, *It'll take a while to fill them.* The water built up over time, and often I was surprised at how quickly those buckets filled up, overflowing if I didn't pay close enough attention.

This devotional is just like rain filling up a bucket. It's slow, and it builds over time. Just a few verses every day. Drip. Drip. Drip. Just a few drops of Scripture daily to satiate your parched soul.

*We start with Scripture.* God's Word is powerful. In fact, it's the most powerful force in the entire universe.<sup>1</sup> It turns the hearts of kings, brings comfort to the lowly, and gives spiritual sight to the blind. It transforms lives and turns them upside down. We know that the Bible is God's very own words, so we read and study it to know God himself.

*Our study of Scripture is practical.* Theology should change how we live. It's crucial to connect the Word with your struggles. Often, as you read this devotional, you'll see the word *you* because David speaks directly to you, the reader. Each reading contains reflection questions and a practical suggestion. You'll get much more from this experience if you answer the questions and do the practical exercises. Don't skip them. Do them for the sake of your own soul.

*Our study of Scripture is worshipful.* Fundamentally, any addictive habit is a worship problem. We've lost our orientation toward the One who should rule our lives, and we need to turn back to him. The Word points us to Christ, who rescues us from our plight and reorients our life. The goal of your time in God's Word should always be worship. As you grow in your affections for Christ, the King, you put to death your affections for your addiction. The expulsive power of a greater affection for Christ can transform your soul. Adore Christ. Love him. Cherish him. Praise him. Honor him. Give your whole life to him. Don't hold anything back.

If you find this devotional helpful (and I trust that you will!), reread it in different seasons of your life. Work through it this coming month, and then come back to it a year from now, to remind yourself of how to find hope in Christ.

This devotional is *not* meant to be a comprehensive guide to fighting addictions. Good volumes are already written for that purpose. Buy them and make good use of them. You'll see several resources listed at the end of the book.

That's enough for now. Let's begin.

Deepak Reju

# Introduction

I NEVER PLANNED to pastor “addicts.” As a young pastor fresh out of seminary, I not only had zero experience with substance abuse but also didn’t know anyone who had a substance abuse problem. Then God threw me into the deep end of ministry. I found myself as the counseling pastor of a church plant composed mostly of men and women from drug and alcohol rehab. It was the ministry of “God, I don’t know what I’m doing!” It was humbling for me, but it also opened my eyes to a serious issue. Over the past eight years, God has given me ever-increasing opportunities to work with those who have a variety of addictive habits: pornography, food, shopping, video games, and substance abuse (to name a few). My burden is to help, and God has been pleased to teach me many things. Some things I want to share with you in this book. Some things God will teach you himself as you walk this difficult journey with him.

Here’s what you must believe in order to successfully fight your own addiction: *God has much to say in his Word about addictions.*

Perhaps that surprises you. After all, if you do a word search, you will not find a single reference to the word *addiction* in the Bible. This lack of evidence causes some to dismiss the relevance of the Scriptures to this topic, but the Bible has a lot to say about addictions if you know *how* it speaks about them. You won’t find *alcoholic* or *addict* in the Bible, nor will you read about sex addicts, food addicts, gambling addicts, or narcotics abusers. You will read about idolaters and drunkards. The Bible does not use our modern psychological or DSM-approved labels, but it does have its own way of discussing these same issues.

Our modern context has two dominant ways of speaking

about the nature of addiction. It speaks about addiction as being a disease or a choice. Either your addiction is beyond your control and the result of a bad brain, or your addiction is entirely your choice and, to stop, you simply need to choose differently. Of course, the lived experience of addicts tells us something else. It tells us that addictions navigate a unique terrain between voluntarism and sickness. *We are both responsible for our choices and yet enslaved to them.*<sup>1</sup> Sasha does not want to go home and drink a whole bottle of Jim Beam, but she knows that she will. Jeff tries to stop eating after just two Oreos, but once he starts he feels like he can't stop himself.

The Bible acknowledges this reality when it discusses the doctrine of sin. For we are at one and the same time sinners *by choice* and sinners *by birth*. We are both sinners in *action* and sinners in *nature*. If this news sounds hopeless, then you need to remember the rest of the story: *God has a solution for sin!*

My friend Brad has been sober now for fourteen years. When I asked him how he'd done it, his answer was indicative of his character. "Jesus made the difference," he said. Such an answer is what makes Brad a wise counselor to other addicts, but he is not unique. The same answer came from Brandon, as he shared how he'd overcome pornography, and from Sarah, who overcame an eating disorder, and from Cathy, who quit cutting. They all pointed to Jesus.

In the process of fighting their addictive habits, Brad, Brandon, Sarah, and Cathy had done many things to change. They had worked hard, they had turned from sin, they had sought accountability, and they had restructured their lives in order to resist temptation. At the end of the day, though, they all attributed their "recovery" to Jesus. He is the key. The gospel can turn around the life of any addict. Jesus will make the difference in your battle against addictive habits. Whatever your habit, whatever your struggle, Jesus can transform your life. You need Jesus, and that is true even if you are a Christian. As a believer,

you will need the constant reminders of the gospel and of God's love for you. That day-to-day reminder of truth keeps us motivated and oriented in the right direction.

Far too many Christians think of the gospel as a message they believed once, at the moment of conversion, before moving on to more important and significant matters. This is especially true when we think about addictive habits. We can easily become so consumed with following steps and adhering to the wisdom of the world that we forget that the power of God brings about change. The gospel is the power of God for salvation (see Rom. 1:16). We need to remember it, meditate on it, be inspired and motivated by it, and live in it. That's what this book is designed to help you do. The thirty-one devotional studies are aimed at reminding you how much you need God's help in order to change and how much God delights to help you change. Each day contains a verse to meditate on, a short lesson to help you reflect on that verse, and a series of questions to help you apply the verse in your life. The more time you spend with God meditating on the gospel, the more empowered you will be for the fight to change your addictive habits.

There is a lot of work ahead of you, friend. I don't want you to be naive about the difficulty of change. Reading this devotional will not grant you victory over sin and addiction in your life. You must seek out others—a godly disciple, a wise pastor, and a biblical counselor—who can walk alongside you and help you to wrestle with your own heart. This book is simply one tool among many that can be a resource for motivating you to change.

As you read, cry out to God for insight and wisdom. James 1:5 tells us that “if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all” (NIV). Would you ask God to grant you wisdom to know yourself and know him better? You need help, and God delights to give it. Change is possible, because God is in the business of transforming you (see Phil. 1:6).



# RESPONSIBILITY

Freedom begins with our willingness to accept our own role in cultivating our addictive habits. While addictions turn into bondage, they always begin with choices. Repenting of sin requires admitting responsibility—we must admit responsibility for our actions, attitudes, thoughts, and desires. This section invites you to meditate on your responsibility as a part of your repentance.





## DAY 1

# Shame, Identity, and Change

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. (2 Cor. 5:17)*

WHAT DEFINES YOU MOST? Is it your job, your fears, the opinions of others, or, worst of all, your addiction? Does your addiction shape your identity more than anything else? Addictions never stay at the level of behavior. Instead, they strike at our sense of self. The deeper we go into an addiction, the more we may feel that we *become* it.

Paul Tripp explains: “The longer we struggle with a problem, the more likely we are to define ourselves by that problem (divorced, addicted, depressed, co-dependent, ADD). We come to believe that our problem is who we are. But while these labels may describe particular ways we struggle as sinners in a fallen world, they are not our identity! If we allow them to define us, we will live trapped within their boundaries.”<sup>1</sup> Addictions say, “This is who you are, and you’ll never change.”

Addictions impact our identity in two ways. First, *an addiction requires us to give up significant parts of our life*. We abandon dreams, jobs, family ties, moral convictions, and more. The deeper an addiction goes, the greater the sacrifices become. As a result, significant parts of self are lost in pursuit of addictive habits. Second, *the deeper into an addiction we go, the less willing we are to be vulnerable and open to others*. We fear exposure. Identity is formulated in relationship with others, but the addict misses this key element.

Your addiction defines you. Who you are becomes synonymous with what you do. One evidence of this is the shame you begin to feel, which signals that you have formed your identity

around your addiction. You feel shame because you hate yourself. The deeper your experience of shame, the more hopeless you tend to feel about the possibility of change. The result is that you are less willing to fight your addiction.

But there is hope through Christ. Yes, you are a sinner; but in the gospel you are forgiven. In Christ, your identity has been re-formed, so that now you are not a sinner, not an addict, not an alcoholic. *First and foremost, you are a Christian.* Shame is dismantled in Christ, because he gives a new identity. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.” You no longer are what you once were. “The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

Shame says, “I am my addiction.” Your emotions tempt you to believe that lie. Christ takes that identity from you and gives you a new one. Your identity is grounded in his victorious work, not in your failure. It is grounded in his triumph over sin, not in your struggle with sin. In him, you may still struggle, but there is hope of freedom because you are not defined by your struggle. You are defined by your relationship to him!

**Reflect:** How has your addiction influenced your sense of identity? Who do you think you really are? How does the gospel challenge that view of self?

**Act:** Spend time meditating on the gospel. Read gospel books (such as *A Gospel Primer for Christians* by Milton Vincent), listen to songs, or download sermons that will put the gospel front and center for you this week.

## DAY 2

# You Can Change Because God Is Changing You

*Many . . . walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. (Phil. 3:18–21)*

CHANGE REQUIRES BOTH work and surrender. Paul says, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling”—the Philippians were responsible to fight for their faith (Phil. 2:12). Yet he adds, “For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (v. 13). In Scripture we are called to work because God works in us. In your battle against addictive habits, you will have to both work and surrender.

This duality is important. If you don’t fight sin, you will never change. You will fail to follow Jesus. Yet, if you think that all your striving is what produces change, you will drift toward self-reliance and self-righteousness.

Paul warns in Philippians 3 that we are not to neglect the first part of this equation: our responsibility. Verses 18 and 19 set up the warning. There are some who Paul says “walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.” Their lifestyle denies or distorts the gospel of Jesus. “Their god is their belly”—they are ruled by their desires. “They glory in their shame”—they delight in immorality. They set their minds “on earthly things”—they are consumed with ungodly thoughts. Their end is destruction. It’s a warning to all: if you do not make it your goal to follow Jesus, you will be an enemy of the cross. Paul warns us to strive after godliness.

Yet Paul reassures us, too. If all our hope hinged on our faithfulness, we would have little reason to hope. We are frail and fickle. Paul gives this encouragement in verses 20–21: Jesus Christ will transform you. While these “enemies” have their minds set on earthly things, Christians have a “citizenship . . . in heaven, and from it we await a Savior.” We have every reason to hope, because this Savior is coming. He will transform our weakness, frailty, fickleness, and inconsistency. The same “power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” is the power at work in us. We can trust this Savior because he “[works] in us that which is pleasing” to him (see Heb. 13:21). We have the promise that “he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6). This is a rock-solid guarantee. We labor against our addiction because ultimately God will change us.

God calls you to action—there is no passivity in the Christian life. Yet you have this confidence: the Lord Jesus Christ will transform you! His work is the sure guarantee of your hope; your work is the response of confidence.

**Reflect:** In what ways do you need to work harder? What things do you need to surrender to God? What does it mean to “surrender” to God?

**Act:** Write out a prayer confessing your dependence and asking God for specific help with fighting your addiction.

## DAY 3

# You Become What You Worship

*Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them. (Ps. 115:4–8)*

IN SEVERAL PASSAGES in the Old Testament, God uses the language of sensory-organ malfunction to describe the spiritual blindness that is concomitant with idolatry (see Isa. 42:17–20; 43:8–10; 44:9–20).<sup>1</sup> Just as idols have eyes and ears that are carved on them but do not actually work, those who worship such idols lose their spiritual senses. What we worship has the power to conform us to its image. So the psalmist writes, “Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.”

We see this happen with Israel’s false worship. In Exodus 32, after the people made a golden calf and bowed down to it, God refers to them as stiff-necked (see v. 9). In Hosea 4:16, the false gods were making the Israelites look different from what God had called them to be.

*We too become what we worship*—only we don’t usually worship cattle or little statues. We worship things like money, sex, physical appearance, possessions, control, and respect. Worshiping any of these things will alter us over time. Dillon worshipped money; and, the more he acquired, the more greedy and insecure he became. Amy worshipped the praise of others, and she found herself willing to do things she had sworn she would never do. Anderson worshipped control, and when he wasn’t in control he became angry, manipulative, and abusive. Idolatrous worship drove each of these people to false hopes, ungodly behavior, and

bad ethics. Who they were was dramatically changed by their worship of false gods.

If we worship our way into the problem of addiction, we must worship our way out, too. The Bible tells us that worshipping Jesus makes us look more like him. As we increasingly behold the “glory of the Lord,” we are being transformed into his image “from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). The goal of the Christian life is to be conformed to the image of the divine Son (see Rom. 8:29). If worship shapes us, then we ought to be increasingly consumed with the worship of the Son.

This truth means that we must take responsibility for our hearts’ desires. What do you love about your addictive substance, habit, or person? What do you love about food, porn, drugs, alcohol, or shopping? How do these things draw your heart away from God? How does God offer you a better alternative? How is your pursuit of your addiction really worship? How is it idolatrous? Slow down and wrestle with these questions and, as you admit your false worship, turn to God in repentance. He is ready to receive you again (see 1 John 1:9).

**Reflect:** Write out your answers to the questions in the last paragraph. Give serious thought to each one.

**Act:** Make two columns on a sheet of paper. On one side of the page, write out what you love about your addiction. On the other side, write the alternative that God offers to your desires (if you don’t know, ask a friend, pastor, or counselor for help).