

# Addiction

*Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast  
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**Scripture: Romans 7:14-25a**

## Sermon

Our topic for the next month is addiction. And I'm no expert on the subject. I know addiction only second-hand, like the second-hand smoke that filled my lungs for the first twenty-one years of my life. But my knowledge of addiction is real, as real as my father's grave and as real as the cigarettes that put him there.

I know addiction only second-hand, like the second-hand problem of scrambling to put some music together on a Sunday morning when a hungover church pianist doesn't show up. But my knowledge of addiction is real, as real as the ashes of that pianist after he drank himself to death.

ADDICTION IS A TEASE. Addiction is a trap. Addiction is a prison. And there is no easy way out. I suppose my dad wanted to quit smoking. I know I wanted him to quit! I got tired of hearing him hack up a lung every morning.

More than once I threw his cigarettes away, whole cartons of them! And after he died, I almost mailed his leftover cartons to the RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company. I wanted to tell them that those cursed cigarettes had accomplished their mission. My dad was dead.

I suppose he wanted to quit. But he never did. Oh, he did stop for a little while, after his first heart attack. But as soon as he went back to work, he started smoking again. Wrenches and grease and cigarettes, they all went together!

I hate cigarettes! And I hate the evil schemes of tobacco companies, schemes to get people hooked and to keep them hooked. I hate it that they found a way to exploit the brokenness in every one of us. I hate it that they found a way to put my dad in their prison.

ADDICTION STINKS. Addiction steals. Addiction strangles. And you know it, don't you? You know how sneaky addiction is. How it lies to you. ("Just this once; that's all!") You know how destructive addiction is. How it plants a hunger in you that can never be satisfied.

You also know how mind-altering addiction is. How it makes you paranoid. How it turns your friends into enemies. And you know how powerful addiction is. How even the iron bars and razor wire of prison are no match for the power of addiction.

BY NOW, WE'VE ALL HEARD about 12-step programs. So we know all about how important it is to acknowledge the power of addiction and to acknowledge our own powerlessness in the face of addiction's power.

By now, some of you have been fighting the good fight against addiction for a long time. And you know you don't have the power for that fight, not on your own. You know the power has to come from outside you.

But you know Jesus Christ has the power. And you are relying on his power. And you've got some confidence, because the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. Hallelujah!

BUT IT'S NOT EASY, IS IT? Addiction is a powerful enemy. Because addiction plays off our basic human brokenness. Addiction exploits our greatest weakness. Here's the truth. Addiction is in a partnership with sin.

Sin is the great power that wants to undo every good thing God has done. Sin is the great power that wants to undo you and me. Sin is the great power that takes even good things and uses them against us.

WE JUST LISTENED TO part of Romans 7. Now, that passage is not about addiction. But it sure sounds like addiction, doesn't it? "I don't want to do it, but I keep doing it. Something has its hooks in me, and it won't let go. So I can never manage to do what I really want to do. I always wind up doing what I hate. I always wind up doing what's going to be the death of me."

That's the sort of thing Paul says in Romans 7. And it sounds like the deadly trap of addiction. But actually, Paul is talking about the Law of Moses. That's where the connection between sin and addiction shows up.

THE LAW OF MOSES WAS A GOOD GIFT to Israel. It outlined a way for them to be the unique and holy people of God. But there was a problem, not with the Law, but with the people, with Israel. Because, like every other people, Israel had a problem with sin.

Sin will use whatever it can find to turn us against God. Sin will use whatever it can find to trap us, to imprison us. Sin will even use something that's good. I can just imagine sin taking special delight when it gets to use something good against us! Well, that's

what happened with Israel. Sin took the Law, which was holy, just, and good—sin took the Law and turned it against Israel.

Because of sin, no matter how hard Israel tried to follow the Law, they always failed. Because of sin, the Law that was supposed to mark Israel out as the holy people of God—because of sin, the Law only revealed that Israel was as desperately wicked and broken as every other people on earth. Because of sin, the Law could only condemn Israel. It was a trap. And there was no way out!

IN ROMANS 7, PAUL IS WRITING as a faithful Israelite. He is writing as someone who made it his life's work to follow the Law. He is writing as someone who knows first-hand the extent of his people's failure and the extent of his own failure. He is writing as someone who knows the trap first-hand, as someone who knows the strength of its iron jaws.

So he cries out, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death!" He wants to be free. He needs to be free. He wants his people to be free. They need to be free. And there is a way. One way. The only way. And so he says, "Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

JESUS BREAKS THE BACK OF SIN. Because of Jesus, sin no longer has its nearly absolute power. The power of sin is death. Sin will make us fear death. Sin will make us instruments of death. Sin will hound us to death.

But Jesus has broken the power of sin, because he has broken through the stranglehold of death. Jesus lives! And because he lives, sin shall no longer have dominion over the people of God. Hallelujah!

NOW, AGAIN, IN ROMANS 7, Paul is not writing about addiction. He is writing about the bigger questions of sin and the Law. He is writing about the rescue of the children of God.

But you hear the connections with addiction, don't you? You can recognize the parallels. And we all know that whatever traps us, whatever has taken us captive, it's only Jesus who can and will set us free.

NOT TOO LONG BEFORE that church pianist died, he was baptized. Now, he was not baptized because he had overcome all his sins. And he was not baptized because he had conquered the demon of addiction that had stalked him for so long, the demon that would kill him one long, lonely night.

No; he was baptized because he was entrusting himself to Jesus. He knew he had no power in himself. He knew he was walking on a tightrope every day. But he staked his life on Jesus.

At his funeral, I preached on Psalm 124.

If the LORD had not been on our side,  
let Israel now say;  
If the LORD had not been on our side,  
when enemies rose up against us;  
Then would they have swallowed us up alive  
in their fierce anger toward us;  
Then would the waters have overwhelmed us  
and the torrent gone over us;  
Then would the raging waters  
have gone right over us.

Blessed be the LORD!  
he has not given us over to be a prey for their teeth.  
We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowler;  
the snare is broken, and we have escaped.  
Our help is in the Name of the LORD,  
the maker of heaven and earth.

Now, it is true that addiction defeated that church pianist. But it did not get to speak the last word over him. Not at all. The final word always belongs to the Lord, who will not break a bruised reed, who will not snuff out a smoldering wick. The final word always belongs to the Lord, who gives us the victory!

So whatever your struggles with addiction, keep up the fight. And always trust in the Lord. There is no better helper!

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Glory and thanks be to God:  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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