



David Partington and Friends

Addiction Garbage, or Grace and Glory?

(Part Two)

How does a person end up with a life-controlling problem?

Most Christians think first of substances - alcohol or other kinds of drug. Perhaps prescription or 'soft' drugs. If they call it a 'problem,' it's because they've started taking something to make them feel good, to create a sense of wellbeing. Most wouldn't classify themselves as addicts, but just people who are misusing or abusing a substance. In other words, they find themselves compelled to use drink or drugs far more often than they know to be wise, let alone healthy.

Then there are those individuals whose life-controlling problem is less obvious. They have a behavioural problem which has spiraled out of control. They're desperately battling an eating disorder (anorexia/bulimia). Or maybe it's gambling, compulsive shopping, or a problem which is sexually related. Among Christians, however, I've noticed that the greatest threat is sexual sin. Yup, sex. And I called it sexual sin. Not sex - a beautiful gift from God - but sexual sin.

Sexual sin

Sexual sin occurs whenever a person behaves sexually outside God's clearly defined boundaries. We see

examples of it in the Bible, and today it includes compulsive masturbation, affairs, prostitution, pornography, cybersex, sexual molestation and rape.

Sexual sin is not restricted to one culture, continent, or church. It is prevalent everywhere. To give some perspective on its effects, here's some research from the U.S.A.:

- In 2002, Rick Warren - pastor of Saddleback Church and author of *The Purpose Driven Life* - reported that of 6000 pastors who visited his website, 30% admitted viewing pornography in the previous month.
- Dr Archibald Hart, professor of psychology at Fuller Seminary, did a confidential survey of 600 Christian men for his book *The Sexual Man*. He found that 96% of those surveyed under age 20 masturbate regularly. 61% of those surveyed who were married masturbate regularly.

What about you?

You may have a life-controlling problem or you may suspect that someone you love has one. If you do have a problem, you will know it. At the very least, you may be concerned that some kind of behaviour is starting to get out of control. Or perhaps it already has you in its grip. Whatever stage you're at, I have

no doubt that you have been agonising over it for a long time. Most do. You know it's not good for you; it demeans you and your potential. It brings you shame. Furthermore, it damages every part of you; it hurts you spiritually, emotionally, socially and mentally. You've had seasons of success, when you've stopped. But it always returns. You long to be

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Some call your behaviour an addiction. But you resist that word. 'An addict? Me? You've got to be kidding.' But then you read a definition like this one from Dr. Gary Collins: 'Any thinking or behaviour which is habitual, repetitive and difficult or impossible to control.' And you know it describes you. Not only that, word usage – semantics – is just a red herring. What matters is that you long to break free. Thankfully, God is on your side. He desires that you experience freedom, just as you do. Not only that, He has the resources for you to do just that.

So the question is not, 'how can I break free?' but, 'how can I break free on God's terms?' He wants you to know Him in a far deeper and more intimate way than ever before. He wants you to become more like Jesus. Later, we'll look at how that can be achieved, but first, we need to examine how you ended up with a life-controlling problem in the first place.

How it happened

For most of us with life-controlling problems, it's a slow burn. The alcoholic didn't wake up one day and start emptying the drinks cabinet with unfettered abandon. The church leader didn't go straight to the worst porn sites and start viewing hard core material on a whim. Instead, there is a slow build-up of behaviour, with one thing leading to another. It's often related to changed circumstances, to pressures which give rise to temptations to relieve stress.

In my case, I was working ridiculous hours. I had been promoted to a level I had never thought possible, and I was good at what I did. My company was going through a period of expansion under the leadership of a young dynamic team, and I got my

kicks by being part of that team and turning around a failing company. My family paid the price for my energetic commitment to this new 'cause', and I also made compromises in my spiritual life.

My regular quiet times (talking with God and Bible reading) became less important. So too did church attendance, not least because my work as a Regional Director required travel. Even at weekends. So, slowly but surely, I moved away from God and sought to meet my needs in ways other than in Him. Increasingly, I fell into temptation and spent more and more time with a woman who wasn't my wife. Oh, I was really good at justifying my behaviour to myself. Excellent, in fact. I was so good that I managed to convince myself that I wasn't really sinning. I had become insensitive to sin and I seriously damaged my family for several years. I caused heartbreak and denied it at the same time.

What about you?

Every person's story is different. But there are often some similarities. There are certainly some important steps, which we ALL need to take to find restoration. For a start, we need to go back and look at our pasts, and we need to face the truth. It's the only way you will be able to move forward to the fullness God has provided for you. The first thing to recognise is that sin is at the heart of any life-controlling problem. I'm not talking about behaviour alone. Sin is not only what you do wrong, it's looking at God and saying,

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The outcome of this spiritual sin is that you go deeper and deeper into the garbage pile. You pay more attention to your physical and mental wellbeing than to your spiritual wellbeing. Like me, you distance yourself from the one who is the ultimate source of all health and life and joy, namely God. Your bodily needs take precedence. Your bodily needs become a tyrant; pleasure is all consuming. So now you don't

even have any desire to connect with God. There's no room for Him. You don't need Him; you don't want Him.

Recognising sin for what it is, and how it takes control, is more important than most Christians realise. The greatest tool of the Enemy is to downplay sin and the effects of sin in our life. Sin is all around us. It comes at us in various ways, through:

- Our own deliberate choice.
- Rejection, shame, despair, errant behaviour etc.
- Abuse, our own and others - emotional, sexual or physical.
- Other peoples' sin, both from our own immediate family and from previous generations.

Until sin is recognised for what it is, it rules us. Until we recognise sinful attitudes and behaviour for what they are (and deal with them), they can take control. Slowly but surely. The person drinking alcohol loses all sense of what is enough. The bulimic becomes enthralled by his/her behaviour. The sex addict becomes consumed by the images. The results can be painful and disturbing, especially as we slide deeper into sin. Our attitude towards God and other people is damaged. We don't treat people the way we know we should. We start to hate the degree to which the substance/behaviour controls our lives, harming our self-esteem. As we move further away from God, we become rebellious. In our weakened state, we turn to substances to satisfy our needs. As the slide picks up pace, we develop some pernicious beliefs which rule our lives. Here are some:

- I CANNOT live without sex, alcohol, drugs, gambling - whatever turns me on.
- Without my substance or behaviour, I am less than I would be if I keep it up.
- No-one else can meet my deepest needs.
- In spite of the damage my behaviour is causing, I will continue to meet my needs on my terms.

The horror show on display is one characterized by slavery. But it's not slavery from outside, but bondage from within. These are choices we have made. The life we had surrendered to God we have taken back. We are back in the Garden of Eden. We have become our own god.

The effects on those we love

Most of us don't live on our own. We live with those

whom we love. They find it hard to see the change in us. Here are some possible beliefs/behaviours that can emerge in us. We are:

- Critical of others and especially church leaders.
- Judgmental and lacking in grace towards those who care for us the most.
- Unhealthily weary - physically and mentally.
- Highly sensitive to criticism of any description.
- Introspective, avoiding people and situations where once we thrived.

We're not unaware. But we constantly justify our bad behaviour. We make excuses like they're going out of fashion. We love making resolutions, but we break them with barely a backward glance. We lie to ourselves and others, sometimes out of a misguided attempt to avoid hurting them. Our dependence on our abiding sin becomes ever more intense, leading to behaviour we never thought we'd display. As the slide becomes steeper, we find we can't avoid a slow descent into despair.

Withdrawal

If we finally decide to stop, we face the agony of withdrawal. And it is agony. Most people have heard about cold turkey and the difficulties of coming off drugs, but it can be just as painful to withdraw from other life-controlling habits. It hurts a lot. No wonder many can't face it. No one knows more about how much it costs than you. But it's often when the pain is at its absolute worst that we finally reach for REAL answers.

I know there are REAL answers, from my own life and the lives of many hundreds and thousands of other people with life-controlling problems. However, to suggest that the way out is easy is laughable. It isn't. But that doesn't change one fundamental truth: God really does have the answer to your life-controlling

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Want to know the first step?

Acknowledge the problem. That's it. Say it out loud. Write it down. Tell the truth to someone you love, someone you trust. Once you do, you'll begin to see that the problem loses some of its power. But even before talking to another human being, you should talk to God. He is a God of immense grace. His love is the kind which spans the universe and reaches into the darkest of places. He won't be shocked. He won't reject you. He loves you with a powerful love which never gives up. Here are some words you could use, if you find them helpful:

'Lord, I want to fully acknowledge that I really do have a problem with _____. I know I do. You know it too. You see me as I am, not as I pretend to be. Please help me as I take the first few steps towards a new life. I place my life in your hands. I place my bodily urges, desires and needs into your hands. Please begin your healing within me. Please fill me with your life-giving Spirit. Thank you for your great love, made so wonderfully visible in the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Amen.'

In my next article, I'll be telling a powerful story of recovery and grace.



David Partington

David Partington worked in drug rehabilitation for seventeen years before becoming the General Secretary of ISAAC (International Substance Abuse and Addiction Coalition) in 1997. ISAAC has grown into a network of well over 3500 individuals, with projects in over 70 countries. He is the author of two books on addiction, *Kicking It* (IVP) and *Pills, Poppers and Caffeine* (Hodders). Many of the articles listed on the Living Leadership website are edited excerpts of his latest book, *Garbage, or Grace and Glory?*

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