RJ GRUNEWALD



ADDICTION

LEAVING THE VOMIT BEHIND

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thanks for reading.

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Preface

This small book began as a sermon preached in the summer of 2013. This book explores some of the struggles and the fight of addiction. None of this comes from having figured out a cure for addictions, but simply as somebody who knows what it is like to struggle with sins repeatedly and to need to constantly run to the one who rescues us from our slavery.

It is my hope that in this book, we don't just deal with what we need to stop doing, but also the place we need to run to. It's my hope that in this short eBook you will be reminded of Christ's finished work on the cross and also be encouraged to find the places where God can do his work in providing healing in your addictions.

If you're looking for a book that will cure your addiction, you are in the wrong place. But if you are looking for hope in the midst of it and encouragement to do something about your addiction, this book might just have something to say.

The Power of Habit

Chapter 1

Have you ever received an ad in the mail from Target?[1]

What you may not realize is they actually have an extensive process by which they go through to determine what to advertise and to whom. Target studies the habits of their customers in order to better understand them and, in turn, strategically choose the products to advertise. They understand that knowing your customers is a vital step in directing advertisements to them based on their season of life.

One of the most valuable demographics for retail marketing is pregnant women. If they can attract a mother before birth, they are far more likely to keep her as a customer for all kinds of needs after the baby.

The pregnant woman is attractive to Target because, when a new mother shops at Target she does not go into Target only to buy diapers. A new mother is busy, so she will also be buying groceries, picking up a movie to watch with her husband, and maybe even buy that bathing suit she's been eyeing all season.

As Target studies the habits of these pregnant women, it's not actually such a simple process. It's not as easy as Target looking at which women buy baby clothes.

Because pregnant women aren't the only ones who buy baby clothes. So do grandmothers and aunts and uncles and people going to a baby shower.

Baby clothes alone can't be an indicator of pregnancy according to Target's data.

Andrew Pole, a Target data expert, described the indicators as fairly predictable:

"Expectant mothers, he discovered, shopped in fairly predictable ways. Take, for example, lotions. Lot of people buy lotion, but a Target data analyst noticed that women on the baby registry were buying unusually large quantities of unscented lotion around the beginning of their second trimester. Another analyst noted that sometime in the first twenty weeks, many pregnant women loaded up on vitamins, such as calcium, magnesium, and zinc. Lots of shoppers purchase soap and cotton balls every month, but when someone suddenly starts buying lots of scent-free soap and cotton balls, in addition to hand sanitizers and an astounding number of washcloths, all at once, a few months after buying lotions and magnesium and zinc, it signals they are getting close to their delivery date." - The Power of Habit by Charles Duhigg

Studying the habits of Target's shoppers, they not only know if a woman is pregnant, but can predict the due date.

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[1] The Power of Habit by Charles Duhigg cites this illustration and several others like it. It's a great resource for understanding Habits, good and bad.

Humans are creatures of habit. We routinely repeat patterns every morning and evening. Businesses study our habits so they can increase their bottom line. A company like Google is the internet giant they are, not because of their great website, but because of the amount of information they possess about our habits.

When I go to a restaurant, I often order the same food every time.

When I sit in church, I usually sit in the same exact spot every week.

When I wake up in the morning, I immediately reach for my phone to read some blogs, check my e-mail, and twitter.

Habits can be incredibly helpful.

They can help us deepen our relationship with our spouse and family. They can help us take care of our bodies, our physical, our mental, and our social well-being. They can even help us deepen and grow in our knowledge of the Scriptures.

But habits can also be deeply destructive. Our habits can destroy relationships. Our habits can harm us physically and mentally and socially, and our habits can even drive a wedge between us and God.

It's these habits that we want to desperately avoid. Because when we repeatedly return to these destructive habits we find ourselves becoming something that repulses us.

In the words of Stephen Covey, "We become what we repeatedly do."[2]

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[2] Stephen Covey in 7 Habits of Highly Effective People

The Vomit Proverb

Chapter 2

“As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool returns to his folly.” - Proverbs 26:11

Isn’t that odd?

Not that we’re talking about it, but the very nature of the verse, “As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool returns to its folly.”

Why is it that a dog returns to its own vomit anyway?

If you’ve ever witnessed this, it’s a very bizarre behavior. The dog eats something so repulsive as if they can’t help but do it. It’s as if the dog is drawn to its own vomit; that they cannot help but eat that very thing that they just threw up. And if you’ve watched a dog ever do this, it’s not like the dog is reluctant about eating its own vomit either. It’s not like they’re walking towards the vomit like, “I don’t know if I should do this. Last time, it didn’t work out so well.”

The dog cannot help but do it, and not only that, the dog very happily enjoys eating its own vomit, something that moments earlier made it sick to its stomach.

Are We So Different?

The Proverb makes a comparison between the dog and us when it says, “So a fool returns to his folly.” So we, as humans, return to the very things that are foolish; we return to certain patterns, behaviors, and sins over and over and over again.

Like a dog, there are sins that we find ourselves drawn to; that we cannot help but return to. Sins that often feel like they cannot be avoided, like we have no choice but to do what seems most natural. At times we are repulsed by these sins and behaviors and at other times we actually act as though we are enjoying them. Sin, behaviors, and patterns that repeatedly leave us feeling sick to our stomach.

Yet just like a dog, we keep on returning to the very things that make us sick.

“As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool returns to his folly.”

If we’re honest, when we look at our own lives we must all admit that we struggle with addiction. Obviously there are addictions like sex, drugs, and alcohol, which certainly should be addressed, but addiction is a much broader category. Addiction is something that we all struggle with, not just the people who are in a 12-step program. And if you’re thinking to yourself, “Well, I don’t struggle with addiction,” that just means you are still in denial.

We all struggle with addiction

We can all find areas of our own life where we are repeatedly drawn to specific habitual sins time after time after time. Like a song that has been left on repeat, incapable of moving to the next song; we find ourselves stuck in a never-ending repeat of the same old sins without any idea how to make it stop.

Anger.

Relationships.

Shopping.

Drugs.

Alcohol.

Video games.

Porn.

Facebook.

Sports.

Chocolate.

Winning.

Cell phones.

Working out.

Gossip.

Lying.

Cutting.

And the list could go on.

Some of us are addicted to things that, in their nature, are sinful. Pornography is sinful, whether you do it once or it's a repeated pattern. But others of us are addicted to things that in and of themselves aren't sinful.

Shopping is a necessity, but some of us cannot deal with a stressful day at work without going out and spending money on our credit card. Shopping is not always sinful, but it could become a problem. Facebook, in and of itself, may not be sinful, but if you cannot build relationships with the people that you're with, because you're too busy checking your newsfeed, Facebook may be the center of your life and it may have become something that owns you.

Addiction is a self-chosen slavery to something other than God.[3]

The way we define addiction is incredibly important because it also determines how we talk about Jesus in relation to our addiction. It is both slavery and it is self-chosen.

If you think about your own addictions you know this. We are slaves. We are being mastered and controlled by something outside of ourselves. We're owned and oppressed by the same repeated sin. We feel in chains to our own sins. We feel like we can't help it, like it's a need, like it's as essential as air and food for us to continue our lives.

We are slaves.

But it's also self-chosen. The reason we are in slavery is because of our own sin. The reason we are in slavery is because of our own choices and the path that we have chosen. We are responsible, yet we are victims. We are slaves, yet we are rebels at the same time.

Both of these are deeply important; if you ignore the fact that it's slavery, what you begin to do is think that you just need to work harder. And if you ignore the fact that it's out of your control, you begin to think you only need to work harder.

But slaves don't need the right program, they need a rescuer.[4]

At the same time, if we ignore the fact that it is self-chosen, we begin to focus on the idea that we are victims and we stop taking responsibility for our actions. We never acknowledge that we're slaves because of our own self-choosing. This allows us to play the victim card, and we want God to be our healer but not our savior.

And so both of these are important, because addiction is both self-chosen and slavery to something other than God.

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[3] This definition comes from Edward T. Welch's book Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave. If you are looking for a resource dealing with addictions, you have to read this book.

[4] This is nothing against 12-step programs; they are incredibly helpful and important for addicts. It is simply meant to speak of the deeper need for one who can rescue us from sin.

Sin, Slavery, and Addiction

Chapter 3

Throughout the scriptures there's a looping pattern that we see in the nation of Israel. Over and over and over again, the Israelites rebel against God. And this isn't a one-time occurrence, it happens all the time. It's not even limited to one book of the Old Testament, it's the whole thing!

One of the earliest commands that God gives the Israelites is, "You shall have no other gods." And one of the first sins that the nation of Israel commits against God is they begin to worship an idol. And then it just keeps on happening, time and time again.

The Pattern of the Judges

The book of Judges provides a glimpse of this repetitious pattern.

The Israelites are drawn to the same sin over and over again. The Israelites are addicted to the sin of idolatry; they cannot help but repeatedly worship other gods. Just as a dog returns to its vomit, so the Israelite repeatedly returns to what God commanded them not to do. And eventually this leads to their slavery.

In their behavior, we see a pattern emerge: sin, slavery, and death.[5]

Rebellion against God leads to slavery. And being enslaved, owned and oppressed by their enemies, eventually leads to tragedy. And this happens not once, but many times.

In Judges 2:16-18,

"Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. Yet they would not listen to their judges, but prostituted themselves to other Gods and worshiped them. Unlike their fathers, they quickly turned from the way in which their fathers had walked, the way of obedience to the Lord's commands. Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived, for the Lord had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them."

Israel rebelled against God which led to this slavery. They are owned by their enemies and in the midst of this slavery they cry out to God. God actually steps in by sending judges, but what we find is that even when they are rescued, "they would not listen to their judges."

Sin, slavery, and death.

James speaks of this cycle that we all face when he writes:

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[5] Edward Welch describes this as the "Descent of Idolatry." The progression is sin to slavery to tragedy or unprepared to friendship to infatuation to love and betrayal to worship.

"But each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." - James 1:14-15

The temptation to sin grows and eventually gives birth to death. A growing, dangerous cycle.

But God interrupts this cycle of sin, slavery, and death with rescue. God sends judges to rescue the people of Israel before it ends tragically, but then Israel starts that pattern over again.

And it grows progressively worse each time.

Judges 2:19 describes Israel's repeated response. "But when the judge died the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshipping them they refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways."

"As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool returns to his folly."

I read Judges and can't help but be frustrated. Really? God rescues you and you just go back and do the same thing again. Not once, not twice, but over and over and over again. How can someone keep returning to the same thing they've been rescued from?

But then there's this sense that we aren't too different. Their story is our story. We find the same sins to return to time and time again.

And their cycle becomes our cycle.

Sin, slavery, and death.

It always starts with sin. It begins simply, with a rebellion against God. God says,"Don't do this," and we do it. For the Israelites this is idolatry. God says, "Don't have other gods." The Israelites rebel and worship other gods.

This is where our addictions begin. Idolatry. A rebellion against God as we worship something other than God. Addiction is always an issue of worship. Luther described our gods as whatever we fear, love, and trust.

When you are faced with a difficult situation, where do you turn? If you turn to your addiction, you are trusting that behavior to provide what you are looking for.

And while we may have difficulty making the connection between the Israelites' idolatry and our idolatry, the purpose of idolatry is the same today as it was then. Most of us don't struggle with the temptation to worship tiny statues, but the statues aren't the end-goal of idolatry. Edward T. Welch writes, "The purpose of all idolatry is to manipulate the idol for our own benefit."[6]

For the Israelites this means that if they can find a way to manipulate their gods then they might get what they want. If they worship in a certain fashion, if they behave a certain way, if they do certain things, then Baal will be happy with them and give them the desires of their hearts. In Israel's case

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[6] Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave, p. 49

idolatry often revolved around fertility and rain and growing crops. So if they behaved a certain way they could manipulate the idol into providing rain to help their farms flourish.

For us we just replace tiny statues with people, experiences, substances, or behaviors.

We use those things in a certain way in order to give us what we want. We manipulate a relationship, a substance, or an experience in order to meet our needs. They'll help us be happy. They'll help us deal with our stress. They'll help us cope with our self-image issues.

The purpose of idolatry is always manipulating the idol for your purpose. The culture of Israel may be a lot different from ours, but the struggle is really the same.

Sin makes a promise that it won't deliver on. Idolatry tempts us to believe that it will meet our needs, but it will never happen. Sin tries to appeal, it promises happiness, relief, or freedom.

But it gives us something different.

"They promised freedom, but they themselves are slaves of sin and corruption for you are slave to whatever controls you." - 2 Peter 2:19

Sin promises freedom, but it brings only slavery.

Wants become needs. Desires become what the body demands. Addictions - even for things like anger, shopping, video games, lying - all have a physical effect on the body. Just like drugs, alcohol, and sex have chemical reactions that the body gets addicted to, so do these other behaviors. And as we struggle with these sins, the body literally begins to rewire itself so that it doesn't just become a want, but the body begins to crave and need those behaviors.

This is why our addictions feel like slavery.

This is why our addictions own us, because after a while our body actually needs it. This is why addiction is so oppressive. This is why those of us who struggle with addiction begin to feel beaten and worn down. This is why we feel like we can't fight the battle any longer.

It's slavery. It owns us. It masters us.

Israel's rebellion leads to their slavery. And it doesn't end in slavery. For the Israelites their homes are ripped apart, their families are destroyed, and their national identity lies in ruins.

You've likely experienced this yourself through your own or others' addiction. It doesn't just stop with the slavery. Eventually slavery progresses to death.

It seeks to destroy families and friendships. It destroys people physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Parents no longer talk to their children; husbands no longer talk to their wives. This is what sin does. Sin progresses to slavery and slavery to tragedy. Sin seeks to destroy. It grows progressively worse and worse until it rips apart heart and soul. It devours us and rips apart families.

Sin never sits dormant. It progresses. It doesn't just go away. And it doesn't even stop at slavery. It seeks to destroy us and end tragically. Sin appeals and then it owns and then it destroys.

The God Who Rescues

Chapter 4

There's good news.

Throughout the book of Judges, God keeps sending judges. It's not a one-time occurrence, it happens over and over and over again. While Israel repeats this cycle of sin, slavery, and tragedy, God doesn't step back and watch it grow progressively worse.

Instead of letting Israel destroy everything, God steps in. God intersects the cycle of sin with rescue. No matter how ugly things get for the Israelites, God interrupts this cycle with grace and forgiveness. And this is not a one-time thing, it's repeated throughout the entire history of the nation of Israel.

Psalm 106 describes this:

Many times he delivered them,
but they were bent on rebellion
and they wasted away in their sin.
Yet he took note of their distress
when he heard their cry;
for their sake he remembered his covenant
and out of his great love he relented.

No matter how many times we repeatedly turn to the same sins over and over and over again, God says, "My grace is enough."

And he doesn't just say, "I forgive you," once. He says it a second time and a third time and a hundredth time and a two-hundreth time. The depth of our sins do not dictate the mercy of God. The frequency of our sins don't determine the grace that we receive.

The preacher Tullian Tchividjian says, "Our God is not a God of second chances. He's the God of one chance and a second Adam." God isn't giving us more chances to "not screw it up," but instead he provides the rescuer who stands in our place.

And that is not based on your behavior. It is not dependent on the sins you've committed, the pain that you've caused, or the tragedy that your choices have led to.

The Israelites keep committing the same sin over and over and over.

When we read this in the book of judges, I can't help but think, "These guys are idiots." And then I realize I do the same thing.

We do the same things over and over again; we return to the same sins time and time and time again, yet God remembers his covenant. He says, "I love you the same."

What's in your barf bag?

We all have something that we keep returning to.[7]
Just as a dog returns to his vomit, so we also return to our own vomit.

What are you slave to?

What do you feel mastered by?

Where have you seen your own sins progress to slavery? Where do you fear those same sins ending tragically?

Where do you find yourself drawn to sin time after time after time? This is your vomit. And it is time to leave it in the barf bag and never open it back up.

Guilt & Shame

As we talk about these types of struggles, we likely also will deal with feelings of great guilt and shame. Guilt says, "I'm sorry. I did something wrong." Guilt uses judicial language; it says, "Here's the law and here's what I did. These don't match up."

And so we feel guilty. We feel guilty because when talking about our addiction, we understand that God said not to and we did it anyways. And we did it not only once, but we did it repeatedly. We feel guilt because we know that the slavery we face is a result of our own sins. We feel guilt because we see the consequences that have come from our own decisions and how it has affected others.

And guilt weighs us down.

But there's not only guilt, there's also shame. Where guilt says, "I'm sorry, I did something wrong," shame says, "There's something wrong with me." While guilt yearns for justice, shame seeks hiding. Like Adam and Eve cover themselves in the Garden of Eden, shame runs from the spotlight because we are afraid people will see us for who we are.

Where guilt is judicial in its language, shame speaks to our identity.

Shame says:

I am an addict.

I am a shopaholic.

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[7] Find a paper bag that you can use as your "Barf Bag." Get an index card and write out your addictions and put them into the sack. Leave the bag out as a reminder of what you don't want to return to or throw bag in the trash as a reminder that your guilt and shame has been removed.

I am a workaholic.

I am a porn addict.

I am my job.

I am my relationships.

I am _____.

The Good News deals with both of these. The death and resurrection of Jesus deals with both guilt and shame. On the cross, you are declared not guilty. No matter what you've done or how many times you've done it, you are declared innocent.

Not guilty.

And the cross also covers shame. It speaks to your identity.

It says, "You are a new creation. The old is gone. The new has come." You are not your addictions. You are not who you were.

In the book of Galatians, the Apostle Paul says it this way, "But when the time had fully come God sent his son born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under the law."[8] Notice the language he's using here. It begins very judicial, "That God sent his son born of a woman, born under law," why? Because we had been guilty of breaking the law God sent his son, who was innocent, to redeem those who were guilty.

And as he continues, there's a shift in his language, "That we might receive the full rights of sons." He begins speaking to our identity, "Because you are sons. God sent the spirit of his son into our hearts, the spirit who calls out Abba, father. So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir."

There's actually a confession from 1581 that often gets used by churches even today:

O almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto You all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended You and justly deserved Your temporal and eternal punishment. But I am heartily sorry for them, and sincerely repent of them, and I pray You, of Your boundless mercy, and for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter suffering and death of Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to be gracious and merciful to me, a poor, sinful being. - The Lutheran Hymnal[9]

"Poor, miserable sinner." This is about shame.

"Justly deserved Your temporal and eternal punishment. This is about guilt."

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[8] Galatians 4

[9] This is the General Confession and can be found in The Lutheran Service Book, Divine Service, Setting One

And how does Jesus respond to his confession? He declares, “Your sins are forgiven.”

Guilt removed. Shame removed. Your sins, forgiven.

You addictions are not who you are. You are no longer slaves, but you are sons and daughters.
You are not your addictions. You are a child of God.

Practical Steps to Dealing with Addiction

Chapter 5

God heals addiction. But the way he does that is not always by automatically removing your temptations and desire for that addiction without any work.

It's not that easy.

You're going to need some help. Find some friends, a spouse, a pastor, or a counselor - or all of the above - and start working through whatever enslaves you.

In the book The Power of Habit, there are some principles to changing habits that are helpful:[10]

1. Identify the routine.

What is the sin that you are struggling with? I'm guessing that if you're reading this book, you know what that routine is. But even this can be difficult. This is why so often in 12-step programs the first step is always admitting you have a problem.

What's your addiction?

Be clear about your addiction.

2. Isolate the cue.

The way habits (and addictions) work is that something cues a habit into process. A cue triggers a routine and performing the routine gives a reward. Once you know what your addiction is, you can begin to try and understand what exactly triggers that behavior.

Almost all habitual cues fit into categories of: location, time, emotional state, other people, and immediately preceding action.

Write down these five things when the urge for your addiction hits. Where were you? How were you feeling? What time was it? What were you doing right before this? Who else was around?

3. Have a plan.

If you know what your addiction is and you know what is triggering it, it's time to make a plan to change the behavior.

When those feelings are triggered who are you going to call?

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[10] I actually adapted this from the Appendix of The Power of Habit. The book actually also includes a step to Experiment with rewards. I felt that step didn't fit quite as well in the way we talked about addictions here.

Talk to your pastor about these things.

Find a counselor who specializes in addiction.

Share your struggles with your spouse or a close friend.

Now What?

You are forgiven without this work. But dealing with your addiction and the patterns that you have formed over the course of your life is important. It is important and painful. And this pain - the pain of changing behaviors, the pain of difficult conversations, and the pain of hurt feelings - is all part of the way that God is at work in helping you deal with your addictions.

When we pray for daily bread, God certainly gives us our daily bread. But he does that through bakers and truck drivers and grocers. When you pray for healing from your addiction, he will certainly do that. But he might require counseling, accountability, and years of painful conversations.

So what do you do if you've read the book and were confronted with your sin?

First, rest assured that by faith in the promise of Jesus your sins are forgiven.

Second, "Go and sin no more."

Author Biography

I'm RJ Grunewald and I love getting to do what God has called me to do. I'm a husband to my wonderful wife, Jessica, and a dad to our son Elijah and our daughter Emaline. I also have the privilege to serve at the church my wife and I have grown up at, Faith Lutheran Church in Troy, Michigan. I am currently attending Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri through their Specific Ministry Pastor program.

If you want to check out more of my writing, you can find me at www.rjgrune.com.