

Part 1-

“What happened to John?”

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“Two things about life are certain,” John fumed three months ago, “It’s pointless and painful.” The promised hunting trip with his dad had taken backseat to his father’s duties at church. The memories were vivid in his mind, and he could feel the anger again as if he were fresh out of the argument.

“This won’t happen again. Dad’s going to pay,” he vowed.

That was then, and this is now. At the moment, the darkness felt so heavy. Every time he thought he found something to fill the void, it left him emptier than before. Although surrounded by his fun-loving friends, he could never quite kill the loneliness he felt inside. Music worked temporarily, but its effects were short-lived. There had to be another way. He was willing to try anything for freedom. He was desperate.

“Tonight, I’ve found it,” he asserts. “This has to be the answer.” So, as his friends count to three, he lifts the marijuana joint to his lips and inhales.

Who is John? Is he a city-bound evangelical who’s lost his way? Sorry, he’s an average Anabaptist youth who is bitter about life...and he’s a drug user. I’m sorry to tell you, but he may be our son.

Addiction-The Blight of Modern Anabaptists

Substance abuses and addictions are no longer urban pests; they’re rural giants. They are staring us in the face, defying our ability to stop them. Drugs, alcohol, tobacco, food abuse, pornography, etc., are very widespread problems in conservative circles. In the ongoing C.A.R.E. survey of our conservative Anabaptist people, nearly 70% of men acknowledge having used pornography at some point in their lives, with nearly 20% - 25% in ongoing usage. (From other signs in the survey, actual porn addiction statistics are higher.) Substance abuse seems to be increasing at alarming rates. We are producing generations of Anabaptists ripe for addictions.

Why?

We ask the big question—“Why?” Is it simply the sin nature and the evil influence of the culture around us? Or are there ways in which we, as an Anabaptist culture, have weakened ourselves to the pull of addictions? We’ll consider the following two questions: 1. **What is at the heart of the pull toward sinful addictions?** and 2. **How can we best address the issue in our conservative circles?** As we wrestle with the questions, consider 2 *Timothy 3:1-5*: *This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away.* We are undoubtedly living in the last days. As in Noah’s day, sin grows increasingly prevalent, while love for God decreases. Three areas play a big role in the vicious spiral away from God, as well as the pull of addiction.

Spiritual Roots of Addiction

As we observe people (myself included) in the work at Fresh Start, there seems to be an ever increasing level of pride. At the root of any addiction, you will find a plenteous supply of pride. Attitudes such as “I’m looking out for number one” or “You don’t have to agree with me, you can be wrong if you prefer” are pervasive. We tend to be a proud people. The tricky thing is that pride manifests itself in so many different forms, even desires for pleasure. Granted, some of our desires for pleasure are legitimate—from God Himself. However, when the desire for pleasure becomes the driving factor in our life choices, at the expense of our relationship with God and others, we are elevating ourselves and our desires to God’s place. That’s pride; and it seems to be the core problem in the life of nearly every addict.

Pride, in reality, precludes the possibility of love for God or others. A proud person cannot love, and a loving person will not be proud. The extent to which we experience the one will be the limiting factor in the existence of the other.

The second main spiritual root cause appears to be bitterness. Bitterness is like bad breath—it’s often easy to pick out in other people, yet amazingly difficult, no matter how bad the smell, to spot in oneself. It’s driven by pride, and it produces rebellion, destructive anger, etc. If you’re unconvinced, try asking a few bitter people “Are you bitter?” Better yet, ask those with whom you clash, “Am I bitter?” Warning: I cannot be held liable for any adverse results!

Relational Roots of Addiction

The second key area in the pull of addictions is relationships. There seem to be four relational conditions which set an individual up for addictions.

1. **An Adversarial Relationship with God**—Many of our people “love God,” and know all about Him in their head, but are bitter at God in their heart. One simple, but sure sign of the extent of our bitterness toward God is our time spent with Him. If it is, more often than not, short or non-existent, meaningless, or simply something to check off the list so I can have a “good day,” there are likely to be some problems at a very core level of an individual’s heart. Often, our operational view of God is warped. This condition stems directly out of the spiritual problem of bitterness and affects many of our daily choices. Freedom in this area can only be found in wrestling with God, just like Jacob in Genesis 32.
2. **The Father Wound**—Proud, absent, passive, impatient (angry), materialistic, lustful, or addicted fathers propagate addictive lifestyles in the hearts of their children. Consider this: only 29% of those surveyed considered themselves to have a close relationship with their father. I am not a blame-the-parents advocate. Everyone must take responsibility for his own sin, we as fathers included. Yes, the Bible teaches that most generational curses are nullified through coming to Christ (some parts of the Adamic curse still affect believers in a real way). However, both Scriptural study and observation, teach us how sinful patterns are easily passed along from generation to generation until someone makes a clear break from them. Conversely, we all (my own children included) will need to extend forgiveness to our fathers in order for that wound to be healed.
3. **Motivational Lies We Believe** (i.e., John’s case – “life is pointless”) / **Self-Protecting Vows We Make** (i.e., John’s case – “I will never let anyone do that again”). Both are based on untruths and designed to protect from pain. Both must be addressed through repentance in order to find freedom. From my experience, this area is closely tied to bitterness toward God. When either our Lies/Vows or Bitterness toward God is truly resolved, the other will come to light and be resolved as well. Many choose to live in denial; but, we cannot repent of sins which we will not admit. It seems scary, even wrong, to write out or verbalize some of the things we’ve internalized against God, but it brings truth and healing. Two things are certain: 1. He sees it all anyway, and 2. His love is big enough to handle our honesty.
4. **Loneliness**—“I feel so alone. It’s my biggest hidden secret. It feels like there is no one out there to help me. No one has the time to keep me accountable. This has been a very dark valley for me.” The man with whom I was sitting is one of many who feel alone. For every one who exposes those deep, dark secrets, there are many more who fail to do so. We often relate no deeper than the “How are you...I am fine” stage. Being transparent and truly caring for the hearts of people is messy; so we have subconsciously trained ourselves to keep others at a safe distance and live alone in our hypocrisy. Instead, we must expose everything to the light in order to find hope, help, and healing. Until we are willing to address the spiritual and relational factors at the root of the aloneness and emptiness, the pull of addictions will always be there.

Life Purpose Roots of Addiction

The third key area contributing to addictions is a lack of purpose in life. While 85% of our people know in their head that they are here to glorify God, less than 50% are aware of or are pursuing a specific calling from God. A life calling is something of which we should all be aware. God does have a plan for everyone, but few seem to be interested enough to earnestly seek it. Obviously God’s call is not only to missions or pastoral leadership; remember one calling is not more significant than another. However, our type of calling doesn’t give anyone a free pass when it comes to living a life of purpose. Furthermore, it is impossible for a purposeless generation to raise a purposeful generation. If our young people see us living lives devoid of God’s purpose, they will choose a purpose of their own as well.

In reality, few people have ever lived life with no purpose. Even the most “purposeless” people are usually only superficially purposeless. When you open the heart in even the most depressed individuals, you’ll find a life purpose. Sure, they may not be good, but hey, they are still purposes. As Ravi Zacharias (a Christian apologist) reminds us, though, everyone longs to live for a purpose greater than themselves.

Conclusion

We’ve considered three key issues, pride/bitterness, lack of (meaningful) relationships, and lack of purpose. The feelings of guilt, loneliness, and shame produced by these issues are tremendous. As a result, people will use anything (even self-inflicted physical pain) to get their mind off the inner pain. The emptiness screams to be satisfied.

Three things will likely need to happen in order for the void to be filled. **First**, we need to humble ourselves and release our bitterness. **Second**, all of us need to acknowledge and rid ourselves of our own deception and bitterness toward God and others. Christ longs to replace pride with humility, deception with truth, and loneliness with relationship. If you are a leader (we as fathers included), you will need to be willing to be

vulnerable with your most risky “personal” secrets, listen to where you have failed, and begin seeking to build meaningful relationships with those in your care. **Third**, we must seek to allow God to develop in us a specific calling for our lives, and help others do the same. Relationships are hard work. Passion in life is difficult to maintain. However, accountability groups and mentoring relationships within the church are wonderful tools to accomplish both purposes. We’ve lost too many soldiers through complacency and distance. Godly passion is our only option.

So, what happened to John? Do we really care enough to find out? It may mean that we’ll need to get messy. Our attempts to care may be mocked. Likely the most difficult part of caring for someone with an addiction (especially if we have offended them) is the need humble ourselves, admit our own failures, and persevere in the face of rejection. Few people are really willing to invest in this way. Yet Christ’s love in us never quits or keeps track of wrongs (1 Corinthians 13). Many times, it is the only way to call those around us into true life.

-Part 2-

John... 20 years later!

The aroma of strong coffee hung heavily in the air, calling to John as he reached for yet another 1099 form. It was April 14, 9:30 p.m., but he and his employees had a long way to go before the clock struck midnight on Tax day. “We burn both ends of the candle this time of year” he remembered joking with a client earlier in the day.

The ringing of the phone jolted him out of his mental assessment of progress. It was his 7-year-old son, Joe.

“Dad, when are you coming home?” he queried.

“Oh, not for a while” John absent-mindedly replied.

“Dad, there was some dirty things the boys were talking about at school today, and I need to talk”, he continued, almost as if John had invited him to spill his story.

“Son, I really don’t have time right now” John said tensely “We’ll talk some other time, OK?”

“Sure, Dad, whatever”. Silence. Dial Tone.

Two weeks later...

John pulled out of the restaurant parking lot with a lot on his mind. It was his first meeting with his discipleship advisor** and he had asked John some tough questions.

“John, what are your goals in life...with your walk with God, your wife, your children, and your job? How are you doing with the moral battles you face? Tell me what you enjoy most about your relationship with Jesus. What past or present addictions have you experienced? Are you willing to be a builder like Nehemiah?”

No one ever asked him these questions before, and he certainly wasn’t prepared to answer them now. Distant memories of the marijuana joint incident flooded his mind. Then there was the time in that gas station restroom where he was caught off guard by that one magazine. Yet, what did those incidents have to do with his life now?

“After all, they’re under the blood. I’m a church member with a nice family and a successful business” “Of course, there are those times when I think about several women I know” he mused, “But I quickly get rid of those thoughts. Every man has temptations. Besides, we can’t keep a bird from flying over our heads, but we can keep it from building a nest.” Suddenly, he realized he was arguing with himself.

“What **is** my purpose in life? Why **do** I get harsh with the children? Shouldn’t marriage be more than what our marriage is? If I have so many friends, why do I feel so alone?” John’s insides churned. “Ok,...Ok,” he resolved “Wow, I’ve blown it, but I’ll be a Nehemiah. Whatever it takes, whatever the cost, I’ll share everything.”

We Can't Do It Alone

Whether you identified more with the teenager John or with adult John, most of us wrestle with these issues in a very significant way at least once in our life time. These stories are happening all around us: in our work places, our churches, and our families. We are all fighting battles in the ultimate war. While our side will win the war, many battles are lost in the loneliness of secrecy. Many of us would like to think that we do just fine in relationships, yet few know how to productively enter another's battles. For some, the pressure to look like we have it all together reigns as king. Maybe it's not been safe to share, or maybe our flesh has valued reputation over relationships. Whatever our reason, when it comes to dealing with who we really are, there is a large, silent majority in our circles trying to go it alone.

If you're unconvinced, ask yourself and others these questions: How many people close to me do I know well enough to discuss our deepest struggles greatest spiritual victories? Do I currently *know* their private battles; their wins and losses? If not, what holds us back?

See the Need

This is a call to action to all men regardless of past or position: lets lay who we think we are aside, and join our brothers in the trenches of their "private" battles. Here is where we are at:

Leaders of the churches often tend have their lives "put together". By and large, they appear to have overcome their personal struggles. They've found "purpose" in leading the congregation. One of their primary concerns is how to balance the demands on their time. As a result of their busy schedules, relationships with those in their congregation tend to be conducted on a firefighter-type basis: the relationships that are on fire get the attention. Consequentially, many leaders feel lonely (i.e. "I can't share with anyone in my congregation"); many live on the edge of burnout. Still, they do love the Lord and long to lead well; to impact people for Christ and eternity.

Laity, on the other hand, tend to be directionless. They haven't been "called" to "ministry or missions". As a result of this mentality, many of our men do one of three things: 1. shrivel up and die spiritually & relationally; 2. put position, possessions, or some other preoccupation above relationships; or 3. pick something superficial over which to fight (approximately 50% have been through at least one church split***). Lack of purpose and misdirected focus in turn, frequently opens the door to more obvious and addictive sins. Yet, most laity long to contribute in lasting and meaningful ways to the lives of others as well.

I ask the question: Is this what we want? Or does Christ call us to something deeper and more real? Remember, the state of our relationships with our brothers usually reflects the state of our relationship with God.

Count the Costs

What is the answer to our dilemma? The Word of God clearly spells it out-- meaningful, living relationships with God and man. If we are going to find the true strength of relationship, though, we all must come to the same point as John. We've got to admit we've blown it; we must commit to real relationship whatever the cost. The strength we find in relationships will mirror the extent to which we are willing to be real and vulnerable with God and those around us.

As we count the cost, keep three words in mind—risky, messy, & necessary. We will get hurt in relationships, things will even get messy; but we will find healing there as well. Sure there is risk involved in getting close to people, but it's like a business venture—there is both great risk, as well as great potential return. So take the risk, get messy... be real. Christians really don't have an option anyway. (Heb 3:13; 10:24-25; 1 John 4:7-8).

Reasons For a Plan

Deep relationships will inevitably require a plan. Jesus lived with his disciples day and night. Ananias and Barnabas both discipled Paul. In turn, Paul spent years discipling Timothy, Titus, and many others (2 Tim. 3:10-17, Titus). What a profound impact these types of close interpersonal relationships had on the birth of the early church.

Personally, I've had the privilege of being disciplined by several men. I've also had the opportunity to disciple others, and participate in several accountability/men's groups. Through relationship, Christ has been giving me a freedom and purpose in life; freedom from lust, anger, fear, a critical spirit, etc. He is bringing purpose through opening my eyes to the hurting lives around me. My relationships with the Lord, my wife, and my children have become my most thrilling investments. The hardness of my heart surprised and shocked me; but God has begun to soften it.

In short, I submit to you that organized one-on-one discipling relationships as well as accountability groups are clearly supported in scripture (1 Tim 3, Titus). I also believe they could alleviate many of the relational conflicts in our churches. Managed well, they have the potential to both significantly reduce demands on leaders (i.e. Moses in Exodus 18) and at the same time, give lay brothers a meaningful avenue of building the church (Acts 6:3-6; 1 Cor. 14). It's unrealistic for our leaders to expect, or be expected, to have time to adequately build personal relationships with every member in the congregation. However, like Moses, in Exodus 18, a system can be set up for doing so.

Differences in learning styles and personality are further reasons to consider our options. While Sunday definitely has its place as an act of meaningful corporate worship, is it wise to limit our relational interaction to a large group setting? Personally, I don't learn very quickly in a classroom setting, especially when it comes to relationships. I need hands-on training. It's quite a powerful motivator when my strengths and weaknesses are exposed to a brother. It allows others to speak into my life in a personal way. Really, that's what the sharpening process is all about (Proverbs 27:17).

Brothers and sisters, the opportunities are all around us. Many people within our churches are silently longing for someone to care enough to venture deeply into their heart. However, the enemy's opposition to meaningful relationship is fierce. If we attempt these types of relationships without a plan, they will likely be defeated. With a plan, there's no telling what God will do.

Develop a Plan

Here are some specifics for developing a plan. First, choose a discipleship advisor carefully. Examine his relationships. Are those under him following him with respect or resentment? Ten years from now, the state of your relationships may resemble the present state of your discipleship advisor's relationships. What is the vision of the man you are considering for mentor? Is that the direction you want to head? As you venture into relationships, begin praying about how God would have you disciple others.

Fathers, our family is our first priority. As children grow, they are our #1 call to discipleship. Later, as they enter teenage years and begin finding their direction in life, why not help them find an additional discipleship advisor. Also, consider the possibility of leading a Bible study/accountability group within the church. Look for someone to disciple as well. If you are a minister, I encourage you to lead out in calling men into the fray. If you are a lay brother, be sure to wait for and work under the blessing of your church leadership. Remember, this is a plan to unify and build our churches, not divide them.

However you choose to go about building deeper relationships, here are several things to consider: 1. Relating closely is not an option; and we need a plan 2. Room for improvement in relationships is the biggest room in any church. 3. Conflicts in relationship are simply opportunities in disguise. 4. Many hands in building relationships make light work- don't try to go it alone. 5. As we grow our capacity to love others, our capacity to love God grows as well; and vice-versa 6. One will never have more intimacy than he has honesty.

Like John, God is calling us to be 'Nehemiah's. Remember, though, he didn't build the wall in 52 days, everybody worked at it together. Together, we can build our relationships. As our relationships are built, the army of Christ will be strengthened as well. We can rescue the wounded brother; we can save our brother's soul from Hell (James 5:19-20)!

Jeremy is a husband and father of four wonderful & normal children. He also serves at Fresh Start as HEART program facilitator / counselor. His burden and calling is to serve the Anabaptist people and encourage lives of purpose and devotion to Christ. If you or your church would like to participate in the CARE survey; or if you would like to request discipleship or accountability group resources, please contact him at jsensenig.fs@gmail.com.

****Discipleship Advisor= A more mature believer assigned or asked to disciple another believer within the body of the church, preferably the local church.**

*****Statistics taken from the CARE survey (Conservative Anabaptist Relationship Evaluation)**