

 Discovery Series®

REDUCING THE STIGMA AND SHAME OF ADDICTION

THE MEDICINE OF THE GOSPEL



JEFF BONZELAAR

Created by Our Daily Bread Ministries
in Partnership with Adult & Teen Challenge

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introduction

Reducing the Stigma and Shame of Addiction

The Medicine of the Gospel

We don't like to talk about addiction, because the very word brings with it all kinds of baggage. In this booklet produced in collaboration with Adult & Teen Challenge, author Jeff Bonzelaar walks through the realities of stigma and shame when it comes to addiction. Life-controlling struggles don't have to be life-defining, however, and Bonzelaar shows how the power of the gospel can transform all kinds of shame and restore a healthy sense of self.

by Jeff Bonzelaar

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one

Introduction

Tara was a middle-aged, single mother of three children, held captive to a life of drug abuse. Her addiction started innocently enough after a car accident left her reliant on pain medication. The escalation of pain slowly morphed into a full-blown heroin addiction. To support her habit, Tara resorted to selling pills and transformed her little oasis of refuge for her tender family into a drug house. As her tolerance to the drugs grew, she took to desperate measures, sacrificing whatever was left of her own dignity to obtain the relief she craved. Facing severe legal consequences and staring at the possibility of decades in prison, a glimmer of hope

emerged through a contact coming through her mother.

George, knowing all too well the devastation of addiction having lost his own son to a drug overdose, started a program called Ryan's Hope to direct and fund men and women like Tara to programs where help could be found. Desperate, Tara listened to George and entered our facility. When she arrived, she was not able to look others in the eye. Her head was always down, and her face blank. Tara was full of shame over the person she had become. Her addiction had stripped her of everything—from her children, home, car, and job to her self-esteem, sense of purpose, and hope for the future. But over the next year, surrounded by a loving community, Tara started coming alive to God's love. Her face started to warm, light entered her eyes, and a smile began to appear. The heaviness of her heart began to lift, and she experienced a peace and a joy which had always eluded her. Ten years later, Tara is a vibrant, passionate, secure, and confident woman rescuing others from the pit to which she had once been imprisoned. If you were to meet Tara today, she would look you in the eyes warmly and communicate through her gaze a self-respect of which no one could deny her.

My life has been lived among substance abusers. I have seen the evils of addiction and the triumphs of recovery. I grew up at a drug and alcohol residential rehabilitation center where I witnessed first-hand the courage of nearly thirty ladies daily facing their demons. My sisters and I, with our parents, lived

and ate with, worked alongside, worshipped, and recreated with these residents. Some of my best memories are going to church together on a big yellow bus and singing two-part gospel choruses.

By the time I was thirteen years of age, I knew my purpose. I wanted to work with those struggling with life-controlling problems. After graduating from high school, I went to Bible school and then straight to seminary. Thirty years later I returned to school and earned a doctoral degree. All this was for the purpose of helping me better understand and minister to those with drug and alcohol problems. I have served for over thirty years as the Executive Director of Life Challenge Ministries—Detroit & Flint, an affiliate of Adult & Teen Challenge, USA, one of the oldest faith-based recovery programs in the country. My wife and I have raised four sons in this great ministry, and we would both testify that seeing people's lives radically change for the better is a joy beyond description.

My purpose in writing is to pass on some of what I have learned along the way about shame and stigma as it relates to addiction and the hope found in Jesus Christ to those fighting a substance use disorder and those living with or helping someone who is. I am not a therapist or a Bible professor. I am a pastor who works on the ground with people in desperate need of help. Most of what I have gained has come through trial and error (lots of it!) and wonderful colleagues, authors, as well as the thousands of brave men and women fighting addictions whom I have had the pleasure of knowing.

One of my roles within my organization is traveling to various churches to make presentations about addiction and recovery. One of the questions I typically begin my talks with is: “How many of you are presently in recovery?” The response is *always* a small smattering of hands raised here and there. I follow with a second set of questions: “How many of you struggle with pride or anger or gluttony, . . . maybe even a little laziness once in a while? How about greed? Anyone here like to be greeted at your front door with a few Amazon treats after a stressful day at the office?” At this point, the whole room is snickering and all hands are raised. I follow up by saying, “There are only two kinds of people—those in recovery and those who need to be in recovery.”

Addiction is part of our shared humanity. While abusing alcohol and/or non-prescribed drugs may not be a temptation for everyone, we all have our “go-to” relievers and comforters. As the late psychiatrist, Gerald May, wrote in his seminal book, *Addiction & Grace*, “To be alive is to be addicted.”¹ Our addiction may not be to opioids, cannabis, Xanax, or liquor. In fact, many of our addictions may be good in and of themselves, but become counterproductive when out of balance (e.g., exercise, coffee, reading, etc.). Our addictions may not cost us a marriage or job or jeopardize our physical health. They may not require that we enter therapy or a residential program, but every addiction impedes in some way our freedom and ability to do what we have been placed on earth

1 Gerald May, *Addiction & Grace* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), 11.

to do—to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind and to love others as ourselves. For this reason, each one of us must take addiction seriously.

Addiction is complex and multi-faceted. There are numerous factors potentially contributing to a person's own unique set of addictions as well as the degree of severity of those addictions.² Substance use disorder (SUD) is a bio-psycho-social problem. It is disease and disorder, moral and medical, habit and choice. It is neurological and genetic, physical and spiritual. There is no single reason why a person becomes an addict. More, causation and motivation for abusing substances change over a person's life. How much each contributing element at any given time influences addictive behavior is something God only knows. Personal culpability is always a mystery.

Additionally, we dare not underestimate the power of environment when it comes to addiction. Systems—micro (family of origin, neighborhood, peer influences, etc.) and macro (political, educational, cultural, socioeconomic, etc.)—have significant shaping power. Many people are “destined” to be substance users. This does not mean that God pre-programs select individuals to become substance abusers, but it is clear that certain family and cultural environments, due to their toxicity, make becoming an addict more the rule and not the exception. Certain systems are rigged to produce substance use abusers.

² Due to the nature of this article, when referring to addiction, I am limiting our discussion to chemical dependency or substance use disorders vs. process addictions (e.g., pornography, gambling, gaming, shopping, etc.).



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Understanding Sin, Shame, and Addiction

Understanding addiction is essential for many reasons, not the least of which is recovery. As there are many contributing forces in a person's abusing of drugs and alcohol, simple answers are not only misleading but harmful when it comes to treatment. Notwithstanding, the Christian tradition holds firmly that the core of addiction (and everything that is dehumanizing) is rooted in a spiritual condition. As sons and daughters of Adam, we are born with a sinful, fallen nature. Our "mission control center," in the words of theologian

Bernard Ramm, has been corrupted, causing us to have a hatred toward God and his order (ROMANS 8:7). Our depravity orients us toward seeking life in ways contrary to our design and against God's will.

Sin brings God's just judgment of "guilty" (ROMANS 3:9–19, 23). Our guilt, in turn, brings shame. This double helix creates the DNA of some of our worst behaviors, including drug and alcohol addiction. In light of this, pastor Matt Chandler quizzically asks, "How much of your violent temper, your binge drinking, your sexual promiscuity, your most troubling addictions—the physical symptoms of *anger*, *abuse*, and *lust*—arise not just from a generically bad heart, but are actually being fueled by shame? And guilt? Or maybe both—in an ongoing, killer storm?"³

Though there are always multiple issues involved in a person's abuse of drugs and alcohol, addictive behavior at the core is a reaction to the pain of these severed relationships with God and others. Addiction seeks to either numb the pain of this loss of connection and togetherness or the opposite, heighten the pain to self-atone. Recovery must deal with these deeper, theological matters if it is to be complete.

We must always be careful, however—especially in the church—to never reduce addiction to a simple sin issue. What may have started out to some degree as rebellion, lust for power, or sloth may devolve into real psychological and neurological problems over

3 Matt Chandler and Michael Snetzer, *Recovering Redemption: A Gospel-Saturated Perspective on How to Change* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 122.

time. The longer an individual uses drugs and/or alcohol, the more such use adversely impacts brain chemistry by altering nerve and synaptic connections leading to increasingly automatic behaviors. What was the *result* of addiction now becomes the *cause* of addiction.

A deficient, reductionistic understanding of addiction can be a serious roadblock for someone who needs help as well as for those surrounding such individuals. Admitting one has a problem is difficult enough, let alone imagining the possible social fallout of entering treatment. Persons may wonder how their standing or that of their household will be negatively affected. Thus, we must do our best to become educated on this topic. Individuals and families are at risk.

■ SHAME UP CLOSE

Shame appears in the very beginning of the human story. No sooner had Adam and Eve eaten from the forbidden tree than they went into hiding. What motivated this behavior? The Bible states that their eyes were opened “and they realized they were naked” (GENESIS 3:7). The guilt of their disobedience brought shame. Their shame caused them to feel dirty, undesirable, and unlovable. In response, our first parents made coverings for themselves—self-protecting, self-punishing walls—alienating themselves from one another and God.

Shame affects us all in various ways and comes in all shapes and sizes. Shame is a heaviness, a feeling of unworthiness and unacceptability, an inward sensation

that we do not measure up in our various roles as son or daughter, husband or wife, father or mother, friend, etc. At the core of shame is the belief that *I am not enough*. Shame is the feeling of not only personal inadequacy and inferiority but also of defectiveness, that *I am a mistake*. Shame can be a lingering low-grade sorrow or an acute, punctuated pain. It can slowly suck the life out of individuals or suddenly spring upon a person, immobilizing him or her.

Shame makes people feel insecure which can lead to hypersensitivity, criticalness, competitiveness, and jealousy. Shame can be underneath depression, hopelessness, and anxiety. Shame can make a person emotionally numb and lead to dissociative personality disorders. Shame distorts, obscures, and disables emotions, transforming normal sensory pleasures (e.g., a warm touch, a pleasant smell, a beautiful sunset) into guilt feelings. Shame leads to self-rejection and self-sabotage. Shame renders the receiving of love and good things (e.g., health, friendship, leisure, etc.) increasingly difficult. Shame is a real life-inhibitor.

Shame can come from things over which a person had no choice—race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, a parent's divorce, sexual abuse, physical impediments, etc. It can stem from one's family of origin or partner (e.g., the way he or she acts, dresses, parents, etc.). It can be associated with having a sibling who is incarcerated or, the exact opposite, a highly successful brother or sister who has risen in the ranks of corporate America. Shame can derive from having a son or daughter who self-identifies in

ways unacceptable to a parent or a grown child who cannot hold a job for any length of time. The list is endless over which people can feel shame.

Shame can also result from something a person did—some grievous wrong (e.g., a crime, an act of marital infidelity) or a series of small blunders and improprieties committed over a longer period of time (e.g., financial, vocational, moral). Often, shame comes not so much from what a man or woman did but from what he or she *did not* do—not finishing high school, not taking proper care of his or her body over the years, not being present when his or her parent died, not raising his or her children in the ways of the Lord to their harm now as adults, not supporting a friend at a critical time, etc. It could be falling short of one's parents' expectations academically, athletically, relationally, or vocationally. There is no shortage of possibilities.

The insidious reality about shame is that it seriously jeopardizes a man or woman's recovery. It mocks, "Who do you think you are!? You will never amount to anything. You do not matter." Shame convinces people that they are not worthy, and when people do not feel worthy, getting clean and sober seems like something they're not allowed to do. The narrative goes: "If I am bad, I deserve bad things. I should suffer." Shame is exhausting in every way—physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. Shame is at the root of all kinds of destructive behaviors (e.g., eating disorders, domestic violence, bullying, sexual offenses, gambling, gaming addictions, hoarding, etc.).

■ STIGMA AND ADDICTION

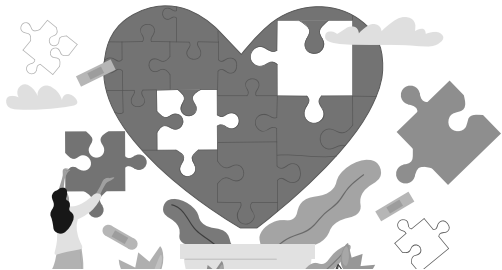
Shame is perpetuated by stigmas attached to addiction. Addiction is viewed in various ways. Some see those who struggle with drug and alcohol abuse as being weak or self-centered, lazy or ignorant. These perceptions, in turn, negatively shape the attitudes and actions of those surrounding such individuals. Those suffering from an addiction may be viewed with anger or disdain, fear and distrust, and treated accordingly, only compounding the shame. It cannot be overstated: How others see sufferers of addiction—especially family, friends, and caregivers—is watershed.

The word *stigma* originally meant “burn, tattoo, or brand.” It was a mark inflicted upon another to signify disgrace. Today, stigma means labeling and stereotyping. Like prejudice, it is an adverse judgment or opinion made beforehand without full knowledge of facts. No one is innocent when it comes to stigmatizing certain people groups whether the obese, Mexicans or African Americans, baby boomers or Gen Z, gay, New Yorkers, etc. All of us make judgments all the time about people based on what they drive, wear, hair style, whether they work in skilled trades or the government, live in the south or the northwest, etc. James wrote about this evil propensity when he admonished his readers to not show favoritism toward those perceived to be rich based on their attire (2:1-7).

Many of us, due to ignorance and lack of personal engagement, have developed negative stigmas toward those with a substance use disorder. We may

talk about addiction as if it is purely a choice and a moral failure. We may view those with addiction issues as uneducated or unloving. We may see them as fundamentally bad people—cheaters, liars, . . . selfish. These assumptions become manifest through disparaging words and discriminatory behaviors and, consequently, threaten treatment and recovery.

Stigma (like shame) can be a major deterrent in getting help for individuals struggling with SUD. By some estimates, people who perceive high stigma around SUDs are only half as likely to receive some kind of treatment for their disorder. Additionally, many individuals with SUDs internalize stigma, known as self-stigma. When stigma is internalized, a person's self-esteem and confidence levels drop even lower, making him or her even less likely to seek help. The results of this can be fatal.



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Healing the Shame and Stigma through the Gospel

The ultimate antidote to shame and stigma is groundedness in the love of God revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ, embodied and communicated through the body of Christ. Just as shame and stigma happen between people, so their defeat takes place in the context of loving connections. Though there may be clinical aspects to a person's shame which will need to be addressed professionally, shame is not a therapeutic or

medical issue. Shame (as well as stigma) is a social affliction and can only be healed in relationship—relationships based and built upon the gospel.

■ SIN, SEPARATION, AND THE GOSPEL

The Christian tradition states that people have been created by a triune God, made *in* relationship *for* relationship. Life is found in community, belonging, love. Addiction, however, destroys all this. Guilt and shame drive addicted persons into isolation. Salvation and recovery are predicated upon the restoration of relationship. A person cannot heal or be whole outside relationship. The problem is: No person can simply enter true fellowship with God or others apart from grace. Sin—and the accompanying guilt and shame—separates. Sinners move away from—not toward—God and others. Gospel deliverance is the only hope. The apostle Paul writes of this good news in Ephesians declaring that Christ’s work on the cross destroyed the “barrier,” the “dividing wall of hostility” (2:14). The alienation that sin brings was effectively and decisively addressed by Jesus at Calvary. He made the two one and so brought peace (2:17). “Consequently,” Paul continues, “you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of [God’s] household” (2:19).

As we appropriate and experience in real flesh and blood this new reality created in Christ—the fellowship of the saints—what is intellectual proposition becomes visceral, affective knowledge. God’s love gets beyond our brains into our bones.

In the context of Christian community, we start realizing and feeling our true belovedness, that we are valuable, good, and God's dearly loved children. The more grounded we are in this agape love, the freer we become. Lacking this assurance and identity, we hold on to narratives of rejection with their accompanying scripts that decry, "You are unworthy, undeserving, and need to be punished" which only leads to more destructive quests with the wrong people in the wrong places.

Christ's work at Calvary undid what Adam's sin did to community, identity, and mental-emotional vitality. Christ's death provides for our atonement (i.e., at-one-ment). We are no longer cut off but God's beloved sons and daughters. Theologian Sinclair Ferguson writes, "The notion that we are children of God, his own sons and daughters . . . is the mainspring of Christian living."⁴ In fact, so important is this theme in Paul's exposition found in Romans 8:14–25 (ESV), that as Tim Keller observes, three times Christians are called "sons" (*huiōi*) of God (14, 15, 19) and three times "children" (*teknon*) of God (16, 17, 21). If we are going to live as children of God, we must see ourselves as children of God.⁵ Gospel recovery is living out of our loving heavenly adoption.

■ THE MEDICINE OF THE GOSPEL UP CLOSE

The crucifixion and resurrection of Christ means and accomplishes many things. Christ's work

4 Timothy Keller, *Romans 8-16 for You* (USA: The Good Book Company, 2015), 25.

5 Keller, 25.

provided the necessary grounds for our forgiveness. Jesus's death as a ransom liberated us from the power and control of Satan. His death and resurrection were the ultimate condemnation of the principalities and powers of this world. His suffering and self-giving sets before us an example of the commitment and dedication to which God calls us. But the overarching, driving message of the cross centers on God's supreme, unsurpassable love for sinners. Paul writes, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (ROMANS 5:8; SEE ALSO EPHESIANS 5:2; GALATIANS 2:20). The word "demonstrate" is in the present, active tense meaning the cross of Christ is God's never-ending revelation of his indomitable, inexhaustible love.

This love is our sure and only recovery. The apostle Peter, referencing the prophet Isaiah, wrote, "By his wounds you have been healed" (1 PETER 2:24; SEE ALSO ISAIAH 53:5). Jesus bore in his very body the stigma and shame of our sin so that we might experience his justification. No wonder Paul determined to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 CORINTHIANS 2:2). Illumined to the redemptive power of Christ's death, Paul professed, "For what I received I passed on to you as of *first importance*: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 CORINTHIANS 15:3 FF., EMPHASIS MINE). Accordingly, Paul boldly and shamelessly boasted that the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (ROMANS 1:16; SEE ALSO 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18).

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the cure for every ill—physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual.

All efforts at undoing the damaging effects of the shame and stigma of addiction (e.g., therapy, support groups, Christian disciplines, etc.) are futile unless they are viewed as instruments to help us see and savor more fully the person and work of Jesus Christ. Medication, counseling, meditation, stress reduction techniques, etc. are measures taken to remove obstacles (whether physical or psychological) that hinder spiritual apprehension and application of Christ's salvific work.

■ THE IMPORTANCE OF RE-REMEMBERING

People are held hostage by memories—hurtful words spoken to them, mistakes and failures of the past, and betrayal and abandonment of family and friends. Memories have the power to destroy and derail lives by becoming seedbeds of guilt and shame. Many more people, however, are kept captive by failing to *keep* a particular memory. In what was likely his final book, the apostle Paul tells his young son in the faith to remember just one thing: “Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David” (2 TIMOTHY 2:8). Paul, knowing that Timothy would experience rejection and failure in his ministry, was deeply concerned about the effects these tests could have on his identity, security, and sense of significance. So, he tells Timothy to “remember Jesus.”

To remember means, quite literally, to put broken pieces back together, to *re*-member. To recreate wholeness out of what has become fragmented and separated. Paul implores Timothy to remember, to put together in his mind and heart, again and again,

the story of “Jesus Christ, raised from the dead (and, by implication, Jesus crucified). It is that simple and that profound. To forget the person and work of Jesus is to become unhinged from the story that defines us, heals us, guides us, protects us, sustains us, and empowers us.

Below are a few of the many great Scriptures which highlight some of the rich gospel benefits of Jesus and his saving work:

- “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life has set you free from the law of sin and death” (ROMANS 8:1-2).
- “It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption” (1 CORINTHIANS 1:30).
- “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 CORINTHIANS 5:21).
- “So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir” (GALATIANS 4:7).
- “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins” (EPHESIANS 1:7).

Addiction-recovery—if it is to be complete and lasting—must be solidly anchored in the bedrock of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He is our debt-paying, sin-forgiving, wrath-removing, judgment-averting,

guilt-relieving, Satan-defeating, sin-conquering, new creation—generating, righteousness-imputing, shame-assuaging, alienation-alleviating, family-restoring, relationship-giving, honor-bestowing, peace-providing, hope-filling, joy-producing, love-empowering Savior. Jesus is God’s definitive and decisive revelation that we are wanted, treasured, desired, valued, claimed, pursued, seen, heard, remembered, . . . *loved!* . . . blessed with every spiritual blessing, tasked for important responsibilities, trusted to co-labor with him, and cared and carried always by grace every step of the way.

Remembering Jesus—his person and work—is a matter of life and death. This alone is the defeat of shame and stigma. To that end, Paul exclaimed, “Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (GALATIANS 6:14 ESV). Paul’s charge to Timothy may very well have been rooted in Christ’s command to his disciples on the night of his betrayal when, after taking both the bread (representing his broken body) and the wine (representing his shed blood) and sharing them with his closest friends, he said, “Do this in remembrance of me.”



four

Helping Others

If the gospel of Jesus Christ is the cure to addiction and all the resulting issues surrounding addiction like shame and stigma, how can we as God's people better assist others who are struggling? How can we partner with God in being more faithful conduits of the good news? The answer: By being Jesus to others. We are called to not only *believe* the gospel but to *become* the gospel. Our calling as followers of Christ is to not only benefit from the riches of Christ but to bear witness in word and deed of the salvation of Jesus Christ. Pauline scholar Michael Gorman writes, "What Christ is to us—righteousness, wisdom, sanctification, redemption—

Christ must now be to the world.”⁶ It is in our being, doing, and saying of the gospel that others will come to meet Jesus and believe the gospel and know personally God’s salvation in all in parts, including freedom from shame and stigma.

So, what does this look like in practice? It means that through our conduct we demonstrate the rule and reign of God, that we become a living theater for all people to see the glorious sin-forgiving, righteousness-imputing gospel of Jesus. Below are three specific ways we can put God’s amazing love in Christ on display.

PRACTICAL STEPS TO REDUCE SHAME AND STIGMA IN OTHERS

1. Looking with Eyes of Grace: Learning to See Others More Carefully

Jesus used his eyes to communicate grace. He noticed others. No matter how busy he was or large the crowds, individual people always captured his attention. He saw not just the faces of the masses at large but distinctly relished the particularity of every person. He saw hearts, individuals with unique sensitivities and longings, dreams and hurts. He could see value in others that they themselves could not see and called it out accordingly. He told the wavering Peter, “You are a rock!” Most poignantly, when he saw others, he was moved. Feelings arose within him for others. Matthew notes that when Jesus

⁶ Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), 6.

saw the crowds, “he had *compassion* on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (9:36).

Just as there is a difference between hearing and listening, so there is a difference between seeing and beholding. Can we learn to see, *behold*, people like Jesus did? Can we see human beings and not reduce them to some dependency or category? Can we learn to pay attention and see God’s handiwork, relishing the goodness and beauty before us rather than fixating on weakness and character deficiencies? If this is to occur, we ourselves need training and healing. We need to learn certain skills (e.g., empathy, intonation, mirroring, etc.) as well as work through our own emotional baggage to be truly present in order to better help others feel seen and understood. Most importantly, we need the power of the Holy Spirit to override our lazy, self-indulging fleshly self. People’s well-being is in balance. How we see and look at others determines destinies. If those held in the prison of shame are to move forward in their journey, it will require human eyes of grace looking lovingly, *carefully*, at them.

2. Speaking with Words of Grace: Learning to Talk to and about Others More Carefully

Words are powerful. They shape both what we see and how we act. The sage wrote, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (PROVERBS 18:21). Words have authority to change lives. This is why using person-centered language as opposed to labels is so critical. Person-centered language references a substance use

disorder (SUD) as one aspect of a person's life—not the person himself or herself. Persons who struggle with SUDs are more than the SUD. Their SUD does not define them. Examples of person-centered language include:

- A person with an alcohol use disorder vs. an alcoholic.
- An individual with a substance use disorder vs. an addict.
- A person with an opioid use disorder (OUD) vs. a junkie.

Jesus used person-centered language to convey honor and respect to those whom he ministered. He called the lady caught in adultery found in John 8 “Woman,” another way of saying, “Ma’am” or “Miss” (in contrast to the many pejorative names she was likely called). He addressed the woman with the issue of blood as, “Daughter,” a term of affection and endearment (LUKE 8:43–48). Noteworthy, too, is that when he engaged with people, he would frequently address them by their name. One such instance is the story of Zacchaeus (LUKE 19:1–10). Here was a man who was despised by townsfolk because of his collaboration with the Romans against his own people, the Jews. He probably heard numerous derogatory terms used against him. Notwithstanding, when Jesus passed by him, he looked up to the tree in which he was perched and said, “Zacchaeus, come down. I would like to have dinner with you tonight.” Jesus, in using Zacchaeus’s personal name

(as opposed to some label or general term of greeting) humanized him, recognizing his personhood and individuality. These small examples (which make a significant difference) underscore the importance of how we speak to and about those suffering from addiction.

3. Moving with Feet of Grace: Learning to be with Others More Carefully

The message of the gospel is about relocation, radical proximity, closeness. Theologian Samuel Wells argues that the most important word of the Bible is *with*, but the word we tend to focus on is *for*.⁷ Jesus makes it abundantly clear that God is “for” us, and we rightly celebrate, but an even greater revelation of Immanuel is that God is “with” us. John writes in his gospel, “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood” (1:14, MSG). So important is “withness” that Jesus’s final promise to his disciples was, “I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (MATTHEW 28:20).

The good news is that the redemption Christ provides calls and empowers us to be with others—to move toward others in a giving-receiving relationship, to befriend. Jesus directs us to be more than helpers or service providers. Such roles assume a position of power and superiority. Friending, by contrast, is relational and egalitarian. Friending necessitates mutuality and thus, diminishes distance. Helping and serving are good, but as Father Greg Boyle

⁷ Taken from Richard Beck’s, *Stranger God: Meeting Jesus in Disguise* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 222.

notes, “It’s just the hallway that leads to the Grand Ballroom. Kinship . . . being one with the other.” Isn’t it interesting that one of the leading criticisms levied against Jesus might be one of the greatest compliments he received? What if we as the church moved out of our comfort zones and spent more time building relationships with others—especially those suffering from addiction—than developing religious programs? What effect might that have on shame and stigma?

PERSONAL STEPS TO REDUCE YOUR OWN PREJUDICE AND FEARS

1. Identify Your Own Issues

Knowing and admitting your personal woundedness and accompanying vulnerabilities and weaknesses is the first step. We all have a shadow side, unhealthy patterns, hurts and hangups, that limit our ability to be messengers of grace. Own them and work through them.

2. Understand Addiction Better

Prejudices and stigmas are created and perpetuated by misinformation and assumptions that are not fact-based. Get educated about addiction. At the same time, recognize that you have your own addictions (though they may not be drugs or alcohol). As many a preacher has said, “The ground at the foot of the cross is level.”

3. Learn to See the Divine Image

Before any other category—whether skin color, age, gender, national/religious/political affiliation, economic standing, IQ, legal record, addiction-recovery status, etc.—we must learn to see people first and foremost as fellow image bearers, carriers of the divine breath, persons for whom the Jesus Christ, the Son of God, shed his blood.

4. Widen Your Circle of Acquaintances

Stigmas are not reduced principally through information. Perceptions change through contact, face-to-face interaction with others. If you are not in personal relationship with someone battling addiction, consider volunteering at a drug program or attending a Celebrate Recovery or AA meeting.

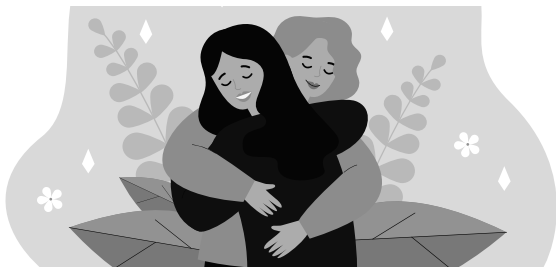
5. Engage Others with a Posture of Receptivity

God has plans for your own growth. One of the primary ways he shapes us more into his image is by putting special people in our lives—people that can help *us* in *our* journey. Be open to the possibility that the very people you are trying to reach may be the very ones God had ordained to reach you and bring about your own healing.

6. Surrender Your Desires into God's Hands

We must let go of our need to be in charge, right, have the last word, to gain a proper confession or apology, be heard and

understood, appreciated, or respected. We must submit our agendas, timetables, hopes and expectations into the loving hands of God. Pray these words of David, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (PSALM 51:10 ESV).



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Conclusion

As we participate with God in becoming the gospel, we must remember that it is God's mission. We do not bear the load alone nor are we to assume chief responsibility for the results. God will do whatever convicting, enlightening, judging, and transforming he determines necessary. Our role is to discern what God is doing and join with him in loving wisely, sincerely, tangibly, and sacrificially. We are God's co-workers, partners with him in his mission of reconciliation and liberation, trusting that in the end he will do all that is right.

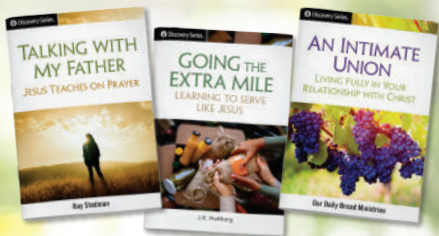
Whether you are struggling currently with an addiction or living or working with someone who is,

you may be at your wit's end. You may be tired and discouraged. Nothing seems to be going right. You may feel used, misunderstood, and wrongly judged. Perhaps you are confused and don't know what to do or are scared, wondering when it will all come crashing down. Whatever your feelings, be assured that Jesus understands completely. He knows what it is to be rejected, betrayed, shamed, stigmatized, and overlooked. He was a "man of suffering and familiar with pain" (ISAIAH 53:3). The writer of Hebrews put it like this, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin" (HEBREWS 4:15). Because he himself has experienced every hurt and pain possible, we can trust him and go to him for help in our time of need. Cast your cares on him because he truly cares for you.

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We don't like to talk about addiction.

Just the word itself brings with it feelings of failure and shame. What does the hope of the gospel say about the stigma of addiction? In this booklet discover how life-controlling struggles don't have to be life-defining, and how the power of the gospel can transform all kinds of shame and restore a healthy sense of self.

Jeff Bonzelaar is the Executive Director of Life Challenge Ministries (ATCUSA)—Detroit & Flint, as well as the Great Lakes Regional Representative for ATCUSA. He's married to Lori, and they have four grown sons, two daughters-in-law, and two grandchildren.

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