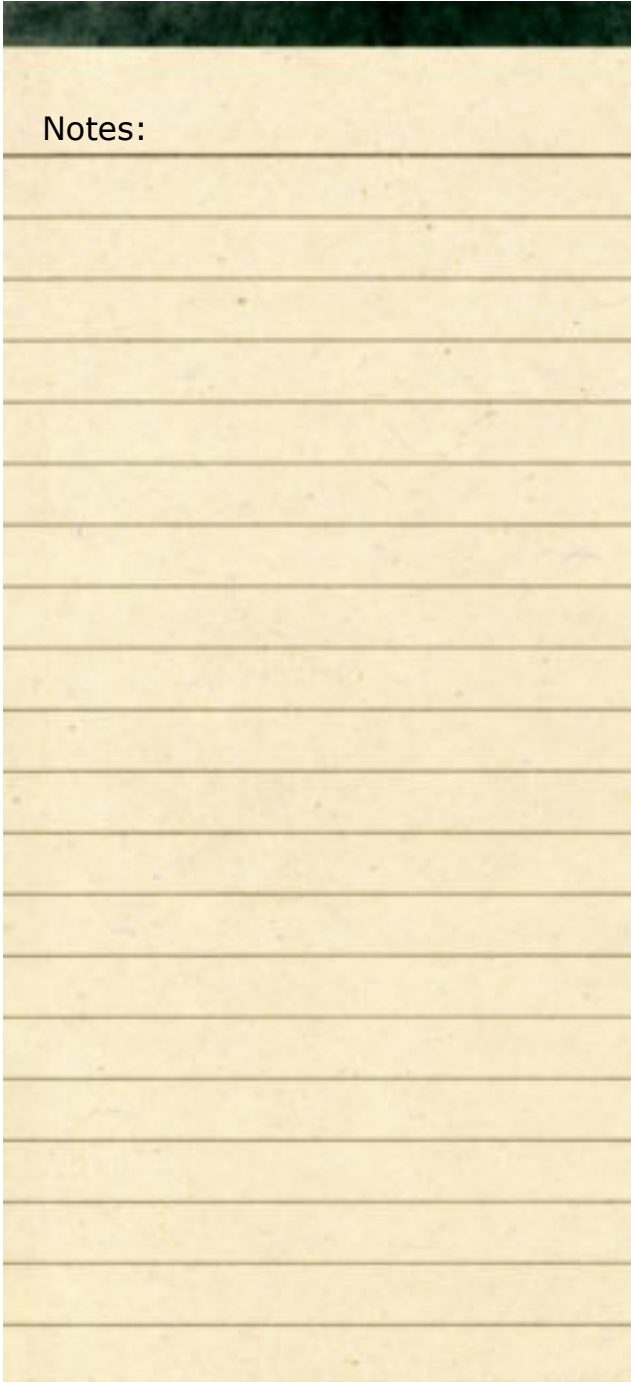


Addictions Roundtable

Mart: Okay, so I've got this problem. I've got my counselor. I've got a man with a lot of pastoral experience, and I've got this issue, and whenever I've disclosed it to anyone they've said well just stop it and all I can tell you is I've tried to stop it. Let me keep it general right now, okay. I've tried. I've tried a thousand different ways to stop it, and I can't. And I think there are a lot of other people that we're living with that have similar problems where the "Well, just stop it; just don't do it" isn't working. How does a counselor, how does a pastor, come to a person like me and offer help? Offer some hope?

Larry: I've often struggled with the word *accountability*, because so often accountability degenerates into just stop it. So often it degenerates into a mood of "Look, if your problem really is sin . . ." This is why psychology sometimes has gotten mad at the church, because we look at the church sometimes and we just hear a bunch of moralistic, legalistic people who just say, "Well, you've got a sin problem, and you're making a choice, so make the good choice as opposed to making the bad choice." And then we in the psychological community respond by saying, "You know, there's more to it than that." The mistake that psychologists then make is to say the more that there is to it has no element of sinfulness to it. It's just woundedness, and now the whole cure for you who can't stop your addictive behavior is to heal your wound. I don't believe that. I'm not part of the psychological community in that. I rather believe that the sin issue goes so much deeper than just the behavior that you're engaging in, so

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when you come to me saying, “I’ve tried to stop it, and I can’t,” I would say, “Well, of course. Let’s get to know you. Let me hear what’s happening inside of you. What is going on inside of you that is far deeper than just the bad choices that you’re making?” And until we get into those kinds of issues, I don’t think you’re going to be released of your addictive behavior.

Mart: Okay, so I was going to ask you, Joe, from a pastoral, from a spiritual leader point of view, would you approach it differently? Would you offer me something different?

Joe: I fully agree with Larry that addictive behaviors usually are very deeply rooted. Things way down in our psyche. That’s not to excuse the sin problem.

Larry: Remember that the word *psyche* really means soul.

Joe: Yeah, good. Way down deep in our soul. So I realize it takes more work than just “stop,” but it seems to me that there are some things that we can do to kind of clear the landscape and to stop the behavior long enough so that there can be work done down deep in us. The Bible says, “Make no provision for the flesh,” so if you’re telling me that you have a problem with pornography—let’s say that’s your addiction problem—I immediately as your pastor would want to first of all say, “Do you recognize that’s sinful behavior and that God wants to release you from that and give you a better future?” I’d want to take you there. Then

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I would want to say, “Where do you practice this? Where do you exercise it?” And I’d want to talk to you about getting those things, making no provision of the flesh, to try to clear space, so that instead of ongoing, you have a sabbatical. You know we try to give you a sabbatical so we can get down deep into that, so that would be one thing I would like to see happen. Although that doesn’t mean they won’t fail in that sabbatical.

Mart: And the range of what I could be giving to you could be very broad, couldn’t it?

Larry: Sure.

Mart: It could be an eating issue. It could be a sexual issue, a sexual addiction. It could be a prescription drug thing . . .

Joe: Abuse.

Mart: . . . that I’m struggling with.

Joe: Is abuse addictive?

Mart: That would be a question.

Larry: You mean the perpetrator, who’s doing it to somebody else. It can feel compulsive. I had one gentlemen I worked with who was abusing his daughter—a little 6-year-old daughter—and

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he would say to me . . . he said to me that: “I would walk down the hallway at night to go in to abuse her, and I put my arms against the wall trying to stop myself from going in and doing this horrible, evil deed that I knew was terrible. And I didn’t have the strength in my arms to keep me from going. There’s an internal flow that almost requires (that’s how he put it) that I go in and do this horrible thing to my daughter. How can you help me with that, cause I can’t stop it,” is what he was saying to me.

Joe: So that would be addictive behavior.

Mart: Okay, then you’ve got street drugs. I mean, it just seems like almost anything that you can enjoy, you can somehow overcommit to, to the point you’re captured by it.

Larry: Why?

Mart: Right?

Larry: Why does that make sense? That’s a great sentence. Anything you can enjoy can become an addictive response. Why would that be the case?

Mart: Okay, you’re the counselor.

Larry: Well, come on now, but you’re a good thinker too.

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Mart: Now I've got the problem, okay?

Larry: I've got some problems too; let me tell you.

Joe: As a theologian, I would say the Bible speaks to that issue of enjoyment getting out of balance. The Bible tells us that God has given us all good things to enjoy—that's food, that's sex, that's just name it. Go right down the list. It's . . .

Mart: Our desires come from Him.

Joe: Yeah, it's pleasure no matter how that's expressed. And by the way, I just have to say parenthetically I'm so thankful that God is such an interesting God. And it's made life enjoyable. Think if eating were like fueling your car, like there were no taste buds. There was no color; there was no hunger; there was no interest. But all of that to say is God's given us the ability to enjoy cause we're made in His image. The pattern in Scripture is that Satan continually takes those things that God has made for us to enjoy and seeks to turn them to destroy us, which then destroys the very glory of God, which is His full intention, so it's all about ultimately getting to the place where I'm willing to enjoy within the context of what God has given us and refuse to let the adversary take that to a place where it destroys me or destroys the relationship.

Mart: Okay, so you feel it all goes back to God ultimately. I've

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twisted . . .

Joe: Yeah. we've twisted . . .

Mart: . . . get something out of . . .

Joe: Out of whack.

Mart: . . . out of place. Yeah.

Joe: Out of whack. By the way, if I can go back a little earlier, I said I would want to, you know, have someone understand that this is sinful behavior. I've rarely worked with anybody in addictive behavior who doesn't readily admit this is wrong.

Mart: It's wrong.

Joe: You know I don't have to usually tell them about that, because we all know down inside that something went, you know, a switch flipped on us and all of a sudden. And isn't addictive behavior doing things you don't even want to do but you are compelled to do them?

Mart: Captured by it.

Larry: Which is where addiction came out in Romans 7. That what I don't want to do is what I end up doing, and what

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I do want to do, I don't seem to be able to do. And then his deliverance came through Christ. So it has to go back to God, but it has to go back to Christ as He reveals Himself. Jesus, I think in Matthew 23, when He said that rather than telling people just to clean the outside of the cup—stop watching pornography—you've got to clean the inside of the cup and dish, then the outside will become clean as well. So the issue of sin goes so much deeper than just bad choices. And I totally agree with Joe when he says we've got to deal with landscape issues, maybe put in the block in the computer whatever, looking for provision of the flesh that we are engaging in and making choices to move against that. And if there's a willingness to move in that direction than that opens the door for me as a counselor, for me as a friend, to go into the deeper issues of the inside of the cup and dish. Then the question is biblically: What's on the inside of the cup and dish? What is Jesus talking about? And surely He's talking about the wounds, the shame, the hurt, the damage, the emptiness; but He's also talking about a very deep sense of self-justification. You say that the addictive person knows that what I'm doing it wrong, that's true, but there's something inside of each of us—I could claim this for myself—that in the moment this feels justified. I know it's wrong, but it feels justified. And I want the person to deal with himself or herself at that level. And until we get to that level, we're not dealing with the inside of the cup and dish.

Mart: Okay. Now let me just stop it at that point and say: But both of you are referring to the Bible. Both of you are saying this

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has spiritual roots. If that's the case, why is it that it seems today that in any serious addiction, whether it's a gambling addiction, whether it's . . . you know, there are 12-step groups that appear to be . . .

Larry: More effective.

Mart: Very, very. And, yeah, more effective than many of the spiritual communities. Do you accept that, and is it true and is it an option?

Larry: I wish you were wrong. I don't think you're wrong. I think that's a very sad commentary, because I think that there are things that are happening in some of the 12-step groups and some of the recovery type groups, and I'm thankful for churches by the way that are getting involved in those kind of group activities to be of help.

Mart: And can't you be thankful for the 12-step groups that are giving people release?

Larry: Of course, of course I can because they are drawing from a certain biblical worldview, whether consciously or not, they're talking about authenticity in relationship. They're talking about acknowledging what is really going wrong in my life. They're talking about the need for a relationship where the word *accountability* can be used properly as opposed to simply

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a pressure—stop it—but to come to you knowing that you're for me as opposed to you're my critic and my judge and when I fail, you're not going to reject me.

Mart: You're saying that's typical of a 12-step group.

Larry: The 12-stepper group more often than it is perhaps typical of what people sometimes find in a church environment.

Joe: And I think that one of the differences is that a 12-step—alcoholic, gambling, pornography—is that you enter an arena of belonging, and then you believe a few things and then you behave differently. Churches sometimes, cause there are some very fine examples of churches that are creating environments in which, by the way, are more effective than a secular 12-step group because you're bonded to the Word of God; you're bonded to Jesus. But churches don't do the belonging, believing, behaving. Churches tend to do: Behave, believe, and then you can belong to us, and I think that's one of the . . .

Mart: You're saying that's healthy, or not?

Joe: No, that's not healthy.

Mart: That's not healthy.

Joe: I think Jesus started with belonging. He opened up: "Come

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unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” And then He taught them, and then their behavior changed. And I’m saying the secular groups are often: Belong to us. We accept you. Believe with us that these things will help you. And your behavior changes. We flip that. Behave like us, then you can belong to us, and you can believe like us.

Larry: And then the question becomes from that paradigm, which I think is entirely correct: How can I, how can a church, how can I as an individual meaningfully communicate to somebody else that they belong? What does the word *belong* actually mean? And for me I think that means my understanding of the . . . I think what the Scriptures teach is that when you come to me and tell me that you’re struggling with whatever your addiction is—gambling, alcohol whatever—that I want to encourage you to share with me what is going on at your worst, and not back away from you. Because what you’re going to expect based on your experience, if you let me know actually what’s happening in you, there’s going to be something in me that’s going to go, “Oh gee,” you know, some kind of a “ooh” as opposed to “I’m so glad you came to see me.” This is so good. Is there any worse thing?

I remember telling a woman just the other day, “You cannot tell me anything that will make me back away from you. You can tell me that you’re a prostitute. You can tell me you’re a bank robber, and I’m going to look at you with hope because you and I belong together in relationship. We belong together in the

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fellowship of Christ, and you cannot tell me anything that's going to violate my commitment to be involved with you.”

Joe: You know I just think that's so true. Just look at Jesus. I mean, you know, we follow Him. He's our model and, embarrassingly, I think we don't show Him off. But who did He affiliate with? You know who felt like they belonged to . . . it was the woman at the well, the marginalized, immoral woman at the well. It was the prostitute in Simeon's dinner party. It was the thief on the cross. They all belonged to Him. He can't get it. He came to seek and to save that which was lost. Not just save that which was lost. He sought them out, and I think when we as a church begin to understand our leader, that He was for all these kinds of people, and that somehow can we ever have a church like that? The First Church of the Heavy-Laden is what I want to call it.

Mart: Okay, so let me say I come into the door of your church. Then let's say my problem, Joe, is gambling. Okay? I can't stop. I'm ruining my family. I've maxed out every credit card. I'm going to lose my home.

Joe: Yeah, if that's your problem, then I want to ask you this question: If you walk in and you look at our bulletin and there's a little announcement there that gamblers' anonymous or whatever—that we have a support group in our church for those struggling with the addiction of gambling—would that make

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you feel like you belong? Larry, you're the counselor, would that create a sense of belonging?

Mart: Part of me says, "Oh good night, you mean there are other people like me in your church?" Let's say my problem's alcohol, you know, I'm ruining my family, my marriage; my children are fed up with me. I'm about to lose my job because I drink. I don't drink all the time, but every once in a while I'll lose it. Now what do I do?

Larry: What is the power that makes that compulsive?

Mart: So I need a counselor?

Larry: I'm not sure. That stereotypes a counselor as opposed to the church, as opposed to spiritual resources, but I think that's the right question. What is the power that makes that compulsive, that makes it ineffective to say to you, "Stop it!"

Mart: What if I say I don't have a clue?

Larry: Well, I'm asking myself this.

Mart: I've been doing this . . . okay.

Larry: I'm not saying to you as my client, if you will. I'm talking to myself. I'm saying if I want to build a church that's

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going to be able to minister to you with your gambling or alcohol, or whatever your addiction might be, then I need to understand what is the power that is keeping that going. And I would talk about the power of shame. I would talk about the power of self-justification. I would talk of the power of being in control of your immediate felt sense of fullness; and given all those kinds of dynamics, then I would say that the church has to do more, not less, than have in the bulletin that gambling anonymous group is available whatever. That could be a positive thing, but that the whole culture of the church has to be a sense of community where at your worst you belong; and that has to be communicated in a very powerful way by virtue of the preaching, by virtue of the worship time being more than happy songs, being lament songs as well. There has to be a recognition that life is a struggle. One pastor I know his vision statement for his church wouldn't be a vision statement but his identifying DNA of his church is we are people who long to struggle well. Not to finish our struggles but to struggle well. Are you struggling? This is the place where you can learn to move into your struggles and struggle well, because we're not going to reject you or criticize you when you struggle. We're going to help you struggle well.

Joe: And I would think too that the church ought to be open to modeling the victory; people who have found healing. I mean what a powerful thing it would be, on one Sunday morning, for Sally to get up and just say, "Two years ago I walked into this church, and I was struggling with a pornography addiction. And

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through this step and this group I've been healed. And I come as a fully devoted follower of Christ who continues to struggle in other areas, but I'm thankful that God gave me the victory." You know, it's just not that we're strugglers that the church offers healing.

Mart: And part of me says that's wonderful. There's a part of me that reflexes to that and says but, you know what, I've heard that all my life. I've heard the stories of individuals who came into the church. They were down and out. They were addicted. They were at the end of themselves. They accepted Jesus by faith, and they say, "And I never drank again."

Joe: No, I understand that. I'm not talking about followers of Christ who are struggling with addictions, who have found healing. I guess the only thing I'm really rooting for, however it happens, Mart. is that there is a sense of hope. That we can win in Jesus Christ. We are all co-strugglers, but we all don't live in the ditch for the rest of our lives. That there are exit ramps for us and that the church will help . . . Christ will help you with that. His Word will help you with that.

Larry: I wonder if hope is the first step. I think the first step is authenticity. I would like to see that maybe when Sally gets up and shares her story of: "As a Christian I was involved in certain things, and now through the ministry of this church, I've moved into some level of victory." And I would want to say some level

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of victory because complete victory awaits heaven. But I'd love to have the next Sunday have Pete get up and say, "I'm still a mess."

Joe: Yep, for sure.

Larry: And I've been in the same group as Sally and I've gotten worse, but I'm sticking with it. I'd like that level of authenticity, because it's in authenticity that you find the courage to continue.

Mart: Okay, but you know what it honestly sounds like to me? It almost sounds like we're saying in a perfect world this is what the church ought to be, and now I'm coming through the door and I'm sorry my life is up in flames. I'm out of control, and we're talking about how in a perfect world it would be great if we had churches like this. But I can't find a church like that. I'm scared to death to go to a pastor. I don't have the money to go to a counselor. What do I do?

Larry: What's your answer to that, because we don't live in a perfect world and given that we're not going to develop the perfect church—there's no such thing—then what is the hope that we can give to that person who says I don't know what to do? Wait for a perfect church? We're not going to be able to say that. So what then can we say to the person?

Joe: You asked the question, Mart. What do you think?

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Mart: Well, I'm headed for a 12-step group, unless you can tell me otherwise.

Larry: What my thinking is that if that person's in the church and says, "All that you're saying, that's going to wake up the church," it ought to wake up the church to what really could be done to become the kind of safe community that we're after. And I would like to see people, ordinary Christians, not just psychologists or pastors but ordinary Christians, get a vision that they have the power because of God. They have the power to talk to that guy that came in; to take him out for lunch and to spend time with him.

Mart: But can you do at least for me as 12-steps and more? I mean isn't it true 12-steps came from the Bible? You track it back, right?

Larry: I'm not opposed to 12-steps. I think it would be a wonderful place to go.

Mart: But and so if we're going to move into a Christian community, can I hope for that much and more or can I hope . . . Let's say I can't find it, I'm going to go to 12-step group, but I'm not going to lose hope in the Bible.

Joe: Yeah, no that's true I think.

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Mart: I'm going to get help out here I can, and then I'll come in here and get you guys, you know, to ask me some good questions, and you'd have encouraged me to trust the Lord.

Joe: In any large community, I think it's fairly safe to say that there are churches who have come to grips with this and have effective support groups. I, for 3 years, was a teaching pastor in a church that had a support group for alcoholics, for people addicted to pornography, and some of the testimonies out of those groups were that there is victory. You know, that I made it through with God's help. So I would say that before you go to the 12 step—although I'm not opposed to that—go online, you know, Google all the churches in your area to see if there's anything within the context of a local church and Jesus Christ the victor in the Word of God.

Mart: Who can offer me help with anything that's consuming my life.

Joe: Exactly. Yeah, even if I don't find it in my church—and my guess is the kind of church that has those support groups would be very happy for you to be in on it on Thursday nights and stay in your church on Sundays, which may be more comfortable actually.

Mart: That's interesting. So it doesn't have to be . . .

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Joe: But if you're in a small community, it's more difficult because probably the churches aren't large enough to have those kinds of resources. But there are resources, a lot of good resources in print, online today. I guess what I'm rooting for is get help—wherever you can find it. Because it is a pattern of destruction. And it's Satan's desire to destroy you, your relationships, your family, your job—any addictive behavior.

Mart: Through my workaholism?

Joe: Through workaholism, eating, drinking, abuse, whatever. I mean, it is the road of destruction. "There is a way" the Bible says, "that seems right onto a man." And when you're eating or when you're doing the addiction it seems really right, but the ends thereof are the ways of death. And I'm just pleading with people, you know, whatever it takes. Like Jesus said, "It would be better that you take your eye out," whatever it takes, get help.

Larry: And get help so that. To give a person a vision of what the word *help* could produce. A vision of what you could become, because most folks that are involved in some addiction feel like it's overwhelming to the point where: "This is never going to change." They might stop it for a month. Maybe even 9 months, but I'll do it again. And I'd rather say the real vision that you can have, as somebody who's addictive, is not just that you'll stop doing your addictive behavior, but you can become such a whole

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person that the addictive behavior will lose its grip on you.

I remember a fellow who in counseling some time ago after a year of ineffective marriage counseling. Why I got nowhere. He came into the session one day, and he said, “I need to confess that I’ve been visiting prostitutes for the last 5 years.” I had no idea. His wife had no idea. That didn’t lead to a happy session let me tell you. He fell on the floor and began weeping and screaming. And his wife sat over him and yelled at him; and it was quite a time. You know I’m supposed to know what to do in that situation. A week later, I took him out for coffee, got him out of my professional office, and I sat down and for 40—I don’t know how long it was, 20, 30—minutes I painted a vision of who he could become, and I said, “If you have anything in you that has hope of that kind of vision, then you stay involved in the process.” And it was the vision that sustained him to the point where now he’s a really rather whole man today.

Joe: You know, and I think the thing I love about God’s Word, it gives us that kind of a vision. “If anyone of us be in Christ, we’re new. Old things are passed away; behold all things are become new.” Satan wants to take you into the past and destroy you. Jesus wants to take you into the future and liberate you. I know that’s simplistic, but that’s the goal. That’s what Jesus wants to do for us. He wants to give us our future back again. He wants to give us our wholeness back again, and so I fully agree with Larry. You know, it’s not just, “Stop this.” It’s, “What can this become?”

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Larry: And the only place where that gets simplistic—and it's not simplistic at all in my judgment—the only danger of it becoming simplistic is when we don't identify the struggle to move in the direction of becoming all that Jesus intended us to be and to reveal the authenticity that's required in order for that vision to become real.

Mart: And there are no simple answers, right? Don't we have to acknowledge it's not as simple as stop doing it or just do this or just believe today? There's a process.

Larry: There's a long process.

Mart: But it's worth it.

Larry: And a difficult process that if you don't engage in it, then think of the vision that comes from not moving in this direction, you know, incredible shame, loss of relationships, yeah. One path leads to death; one path leads to life.

Joe: Larry, you know, in your research, I'm sure as a counselor, you're aware of the fact that they say that sometimes our addictive behavior is directly connected to things in our past, like someone who's been abused will become an abuser or addicted to pornography or whatever that might be.

Larry: Certain vulnerabilities are present.

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Joe: Yeah, how far back does a person need to go to get liberated? You know, where do you cut that tether, that thing from the past that drives. Do you have to uncover all of those? Do you have to go back to the person who abused you when you were 6 or whatever?

Mart: Or can you move ahead?

Joe: Yeah, right.

Larry: I think Freud was wrong. I think the notion of going past and healing all the wounds of the past is not the right direction to go. I do believe that going into the past uncovers what the real issues are in the present. The issue is not to heal what happened 30 years ago. The issue is to perhaps explore some past issues to understand what are the dynamics in you right now.

Mart: Why I might be falling back into the same problems.

Larry: Why you might be right now falling into patterns, that's right. If you were, you know, badly abused whatever and right now there might be within you a justification that says that given the level of pain I've lived with all these years, I am justified in doing anything that provides immediate relief. Alright, we then must deal with that's a dynamic in you now that I could maybe only understand and you could become clear on by looking at

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your past, so there is a place to look at your past. I've heard a lot of Christians criticize me as a psychologist and other psychologists: "Well, you're just, you know, contemplating your navel and looking at all the historical stuff and get on with Jesus and all that." And my response is, of course I agree with that, but to get on with Jesus means to start where you are and sometimes the only way to understand where you are is to look back at a lot of things that maybe have taken place in your background.

Mart: And to know what to bring to Him now.

Larry: What to bring to him now. That's always the key. It isn't that I'm behaving now in a bad way because something was unhealed 30 years ago. No, there are dynamics going on right now that could be maybe understood and brought to light by virtue of looking at one's past situations, so I spend a lot of time in the past when I work with people.

Mart: So even though I feel out of control, and say I come to you and feel like I'm going up in flames, there is hope. That's what you're saying to me.

Larry: And as long as you say there's hope and then say, "For what? What is there hope for?" There's hope for you becoming far more of the man that God created you to be. Far more of the woman that God created her to be. And when you get a vision of what you can be as a whole human being, a fully alive human

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being, when that becomes so attractive to you, when that becomes more attractive than the chocolate cake (if you're a foodaholic), more attractive than the next million-dollar deal, more attractive than the pleasure from pornography, when there's an attraction of and there is an attraction because I was created for fullness in Christ, so if I can paint a vision that something in your soul says, "Are you meaning that's possible?" Then as an old Puritan put it, Thomas Chalmers, said this, he said that there's an explosive power to a new affection. When I have a new affection for what could be, it releases to some degree over time, not being simplistic here, but it weakens the hold that the power of the addiction has had because you're after something more. Until you're interested in something more than what you're now experiencing, you won't get over your addiction.

Joe: And I think that just to hitchhike on that, while this may seem mystical but it is so real, is that Jesus has provided himself to satisfy our soul, the singular satisfaction of our soul. Then he gives us gifts to do that with, friends, you know, relationships, material things, but He is the ultimate source. When I go for an addictive behavior, I'm basically saying Jesus is not enough. I need this too. I need Jesus plus my pornography, plus my eating, and I think part of what Larry is saying is to push us back to find the satisfaction and not ever fully because heaven is when we'll get that full satisfaction but growing toward the fullness of Jesus in my life. That He is the one who will satisfy me, and then that shields me from the destructive things that I think will satisfy me. So I would like to turn somebody's heart to that vision as well.

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