

Working with Addicted Persons

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When we work in a ministry to addicted persons, homeless or not, we take up our crosses by being available to and suffering with those we seek to reach. Bearing the cross for addicted persons means holding them accountable for their actions. It also means that we are not totally responsible for their recovery. At the same time that we are ministering to their needs, it is vital that we consider the risk to us and our own vulnerability.

Most people who display addictive behavior will deny it. In general, their behavior can be described as manipulative, people-pleasing, and tyrannical. In more than ten years working with addicted men and women, I believe I have heard every lie, every story, and every derivative thereof. “Dope fiends,” as one recovering addict described himself and other abusers, are controlled by their addictions. The addict worships drugs—alcohol, crack, cocaine, heroin, ice, or other mind-altering chemicals. Each man, woman, or child addict shows overall allegiance to whatever drug god has control over them. Because of this, addicts will speak and act in manipulative ways to get what they want when they want it. They will also speak and act in manipulative ways to avoid the consequences of their actions. They will usually speak and act in pleasing ways to avoid conflict, but their goal is still to manipulate people into giving them what they want.

It is important when dealing with addicted persons to understand the above behavior and then know how to protect yourself and your church. As a minister at Tenth Presbyterian Church, I encourage all leaders to provide consistent counsel to those who are addicted. Many times addicted people will turn to others for “help” after I have refused to give them what they want. So it is vital that I communicate the addicted person’s story immediately to others. More times than not, the addicted person will promptly try to exploit someone at Tenth he/she feels is more naïve and can be manipulated. At Tenth Church, all other leaders know to direct those people back to me. And when addicted persons understand that “No” means “No,” they usually leave and do not come back.

It is also vital to protect the church if the addicted person is a member or attendee. Consistency is important, as above, but more crucial because of the constant effect the addict has on family and staff. Here, an overall plan should be developed to provide real help for the addict’s recovery. Help for the family is usually necessary, too. Almost everyone is affected by the addict’s destructive behavior. And remember that ministry to addicted persons is a cooperative effort. We must not work harder than the one in need or we will foster another dependent relationship.

When seeking help for the addicted person, I tell church leaders that they need to know or discover three levels of resources. First of all, who in the church can help? Who knows about addictions? Who are the social workers, counselors, and police, etc., who can network or help to navigate the drug treatment system? Second, what resources do other churches have or use? Third, what resources are available in the community? Specifically, what credible and successful Christ-centered programs are accessible to the need at hand? If we have a working knowledge of these three, then there is no need to “re-invent the wheel” and struggle to find appropriate help.

It is easy for the pastor or other leader to want to do all the work. Setting limits, delegating to others, and using available resources will strengthen the body and protect the leader from burnout as well. Cross-bearing with an addicted person affects us personally. Many years ago, I could be manipulated easily. My need for personal approval—from anyone—was great. So I would give the addict what he

wanted. I was afraid to say “No” to actual strangers, even, for fear he or she would not like me. Now, however, I understand how to provide tough love in situations that call for it. I know my strengths and delegate in areas where others are strong. It no longer matters whether addicts like me; the important thing for me is to tell them the truth. If they do not appreciate the truth, that is their problem. My desire, now, is to please God and not people.

If addicts really want help, they will respect the truth. Those who want to recover from their addiction will come back. Telling the truth with Christian love will set a good foundation for focusing on the God of truth who alone can provide recovery from addicted behavior. God is the one who is ultimately in control of the recovery time. He is in control of the transformation of each one who comes to him for help. When we understand that Jesus is the only Savior who can rescue addicts and others, we will respect his agenda and timetable for people’s recovery. This does not minimize the pain and suffering leaders, families, and churches endure. What it can do, however, is help us set limits on what our and others’ responsibilities are, help us rely on the expertise that is available in our churches and communities, and help us, most of all, trust God for all things.

Taking up our crosses usually implies, in ministry, going beyond our comfort zones with people others discard and consider unworthy. Cross-bearing takes us into situations of others’ pain and suffering, and that usually means that we bear or absorb some of its weight. Taking up our crosses may mean being with those who are unlovely and unloved. Ten years ago I dined with several homeless men. They spoke about how they felt about themselves. One described himself as “a loser,” and another, “a no good rotten bastard.” However they phrased it—low self-esteem, negative self-image—they all felt unworthy. They were seven men: Black and White, homeless and addicted. I am White, middle class, fed, dressed, and housed. Yet, hearing their words brought me to the truth. Without Jesus we are all losers and bastards. In Jesus we are all victorious, adopted children, and heirs of a great inheritance.