

A PASTOR'S COLD CONFESSION

FROM ADDICTION TO FREEDOM



DOUG BATCHELOR

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I have a confession to make.

I was addicted to a substance for more than 30 years. Some of that time was when I was a pastor!

Are you ready for my cold confession? I was addicted to ... ice cream.

You might think I'm kidding. I'm not.

In fact, it was a serious and problematic addiction.

It started innocently enough, sure, but it got so bad that I couldn't even go to bed without my nightly fix. At the very least, I wasn't living by the Bible's counsel found in 1 Corinthians 10:31: "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

To clarify, I am not suggesting that eating ice cream is a sin. But it got to a place where it really was sinful for me.

Read on and you'll understand ...

Sticky Fingers

It all began when I was just a kid.

Do you remember those hot summer days when the ice cream truck rolled through the neighborhood? All the children would gather and form a crowd along the street, then practically

throw themselves in front of the truck to get their hands on those exotic cold treats.

I still remember my favorites.

The Rainbow Rocket was a double popsicle with two sticks, so you could break it in half and share with a friend. I'm sure it was full of artificial dyes, chemicals, and corn syrup, but it was delicious. They had another one that was orange with vanilla cream inside.

That ice cream truck was so important to me. I was frustrated that my grandmother wouldn't give me a dime or a quarter every day for ice cream. She would say, "It's a treat. You can't have it every day."

One of my earliest memories, unfortunately, is stealing money from my grandmother for ice cream. She hung her black leather purse over the doorknob of her bedroom. Inside, she had a little change purse with one of those difficult snaps you have to twist to open. I don't know how many times I stole from her, but one day she caught me.

My punishment was worse than death! No ice cream for two weeks.

That's where my life of crime began—stealing money for ice cream.

Cold Comfort

After my parents divorced, my brother and I moved to live with my mom in New York City. Perhaps I was just seeking a little emotional comfort during those times, but one of the highlights of my existence was eating ice cream and watching *The Wonderful World of Disney* or *The Ed Sullivan Show* with my mother and brother.

When I was sent off to military school, I got ice cream only about once a week. I looked forward to that day all week long. The school gave each cadet a cheap Neapolitan ice cream sandwich—with chocolate, strawberry, and vanilla stuffed between two wafers. How I relished that!

I would beg and bribe the other cadets to try to get their ice cream sandwich. I'd trade them any of the food they wanted on my plate for their ice cream.

Eventually, I moved to live with my dad and stepmom in Miami Beach. That's when my addiction started to get serious.

The milkman from McArthur Dairy would deliver fresh milk, orange juice, and ice cream twice a week. At the time, my brother was very sick, and I was struggling emotionally. One of my favorite ways to self-medicate was to mix half a pint of vanilla ice cream with a big splash of

fresh-squeezed orange juice. The flavor reminded me of the orange bars that the ice cream man used to sell. It was so good.

But then my stepmother started asking, “Who’s eating all the ice cream?” Of course, it was me. I was eating it every day, and it was always the highlight of my day.

From User to Dealer

My addiction went from bad to worse when summer came—I got a job at Baskin-Robbins.

The owner of the franchise liked me because I’d been to military school and was a cleaning fanatic. I knew how to use the waxing machine to buff the floors, and I was able to clean the display windows without leaving streaks—something none of the other kids could do.

When I started working there, I asked, “Now, I’m just wondering, are we allowed to eat any of the product?”

“No problem,” the owner said. “You can eat as much as you want. You’ll get tired of it.”

But I never even got close to getting tired of it!

Baskin-Robbins' slogan is "31 Flavors," not because they have a total of 31 flavors, but because they guarantee having 31 flavors in any one of their stores at any given time. They have hundreds of flavors, and new ones are constantly being rotated in.

Of course, I had to try them all. I would eat a Pralines 'N Cream banana split for lunch; then I would have a hot Jamocha Almond Fudge sundae for dinner. I mean, I ate a lot of ice cream.

My addiction was getting more intense. But I was more than just a user now. I was a dealer who was getting others hooked!

My Last Few Pennies

It was hit or miss with ice cream after I turned 15 and ran away from home.

I moved up into a cave in the Southern California mountains where, of course, I had no refrigeration. It was a long, hot, grueling hike through the desert into town for groceries, so the goal of every trip was to panhandle enough extra money for ice cream.

Back then, you could get a triple scoop of ice cream at Thrifty's Drug Store for just fifteen cents.

On busy corners, I would beg, “Could I please have fifteen cents for something to eat?” I’d ask every passerby while trying to look as pitiful as possible. I didn’t tell them what I was going to eat, but it’s true: I would always spend my last fifteen cents on ice cream.

I wasn’t the only one. Other street people did the same thing.

One day, I was hanging out on the street with my friends. A child walked out of Thrifty’s with a triple scoop of ice cream. He wasn’t paying attention, and the whole top-heavy, triple-decker ice cream fell off the cone. It landed, intact, on the warm sidewalk; three cold, colorful scoops sticking up like the Tower of Pisa!

The kid began to cry, so the parents said, “Come on, we’ll get you another one,” and they walked back into the store.

“You know, only part of that hit the ground,” I told my friends. “That kid didn’t even lick it yet, and if he did lick it, the part he licked is on the ground. The other stuff is still good.” Before I could act on my thought, my friend Richie got down on all fours and, like a dog, began to lick and eat the ice cream off the street.

I didn't do it, but I was rather mad at Richie because he beat me to it!

Häagen-Dazs Antidepressants

I used to wonder why ice cream was so important to me.

Later, I learned about a study published in the *Journal of Clinical Investigation* in 2011 in which a team of researchers from the University of Belgium studied brain activity during times of sadness.

Twelve volunteers agreed to have a feeding tube inserted into their stomachs while having their brain activity monitored by MRI. They were then shown either neutral or sad images while listening to corresponding music. They were then asked to rate their sadness on a scale of 1 to 9. When the participants reported feeling sad, the researchers would administer either a saline solution or a fatty solution into their stomachs.

The participants didn't know which solution was going into their stomach, but the fatty solution—which was similar in composition to ice cream—had a significant psychological effect. The fatty solution reduced the intensity of sad

emotions by almost half, which is about as much as any prescription antidepressant can achieve.

I guess you could say I was addicted to antidepressants—but in the form of Häagen-Dazs.

Excuses for Excess

You may think I jest when I say I was addicted to ice cream and that it was sinful for me.

But the Bible states that while a little of a certain thing might be okay, when it is taken to an extreme, it becomes a sin. “Blessed are you, O land, when ... your princes feast at the proper time—for strength and not for drunkenness!” (Ecclesiastes 10:17).

And I ate ice cream to excess.

After I moved out of the cave, I ate it every night, sometimes as much as half a quart. Once, I stayed up late and ate an entire quart while watching commercials on a tiny black-and-white TV.

After I got baptized and moved into the hills in Northern California, I would drive an hour round trip just to get ice cream. I would provide some Bible “justification” for it—“*God is taking us to a land flowing with milk and honey. God believes*

in ice cream. This is heavenly food!” Then I found Häagen-Dazs had a flavor called Honey Vanilla. I thought, *“Praise the Lord! This is biblical.”*

But Proverbs 25:16 says, “Have you found honey? Eat only as much as you need, lest you be filled with it and vomit.” Some things that are good—that God would bless if you enjoyed it as a treat—you can take to excess. This is an important principle for the Christian life. God wants us to practice moderation and to never let our desires for pleasure be stronger than our allegiance to Him.

By the way, even though God promised to bring the Israelites to a land flowing with milk and honey, that doesn’t mean He wanted us to mix it all together and eat it in large quantities. In the book *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, it says, “Some use milk and a large amount of sugar on mush, thinking that they are carrying out health reform. But the sugar and the milk combined are liable to cause fermentation in the stomach, and are thus harmful”—meaning, at times, I may have gone to bed mildly drunk from eating the ice cream.

My Wake-Up Call

Not only was I still an addict, but I was also influencing others.

When Karen, my wife, and I first began to date, I'd frequently ask, "You want to split some ice cream?" I'd order the Vanilla Swiss-almond flavor—then I'd eat the ice cream part, and she would eat the chocolate-covered almonds.

When I traveled with one of my pastor friends, we'd get a pint of Häagen-Dazs to share; only he'd wait until the ice cream had halfway melted to drink it. Another friend would cut the pint carton of ice cream in half, and we would each eat a side.

No matter where I was preaching, at the end of the evening, I always went on a safari in search of ice cream. I'd often go a long way too. It was like a ritual.

As a TV evangelist, I'd get on camera in front of everybody and preach about the health message. I'd even do a backhand spring. But then I'd go home and, sometimes, eat an entire pint of ice cream.

The average American eats 42 pints of ice cream a year. I was eating about 120. I'm not exaggerating! But then the doctor would say my

health was fine, so I told myself the ice cream wasn't bothering me.

I had plenty of other rationalizations too. However, I realized my addiction had gone too far when, on one out-of-town speaking trip, I asked my ministry, Amazing Facts, to get me a rental car—but all I used it for was to get my ice cream fix each night.

It dawned on me that night that Amazing Facts supporters were sacrificing for people to learn the Bible truth, but I was using it to secure ice cream for my addiction.

I felt really guilty, so I paid back the rental money to the ministry. I actually calculated that ice cream cost me about \$35 a pint!

I knew I was addicted to ice cream because I couldn't stop eating it. It was preoccupying my thoughts and organizing my days. I was even willing to spend my last fifteen cents on the stuff.

Withdrawals and Recovery

Finally, I became convinced I had to do something about my ice cream addiction.

So, I started praying about it in a way I hadn't before. *"Lord, I've got to stop eating ice cream. Please help me!"*

The following couple of years were a real struggle.

I think I went through all the throes and the twists and turns of addiction recovery. I could go a day or two without ice cream and feel good about it. So, I'd think, *"I'm under control now. I think I can just have a little bit."*

Of course, that took me right back into the cycle of addiction.

I was eventually able to cut down to half a pint a day. Then I got down to a third; one little pint of Häagen-Dazs would last me three days. I felt like I was making progress.

That went on for a couple of years.

My mother-in-law would invite me over for a birthday party and offer me ice cream. I'd say, "No, thanks"—because I had good stuff at home. Yes, I could turn it down only because I knew I could have some before I went to bed.

And, for some reason, even if I ate too much food late at night, I always had room for ice cream. If I didn't have it, I felt incomplete.

I eventually reached the point where I could go two days without eating ice cream. But it was a struggle every time I went to the market. I'd walk up and down the frozen treats aisle and look at the

ice cream. If it happened to be on sale, I'd reason, "*Lord, it must be Your will today,*" and I would buy enough to last me until the next sale.

I figured I wouldn't buy it anymore unless it was on sale. That's how I grappled with my guilt.

One awkward problem was that a member of my church worked at the supermarket where I shopped. She noticed that I would show up at 10:00 each evening just to buy ice cream—and she'd always make some teasing comment. "Looks like the pastor's going to have a party!" Or, "More ice cream?" So, I started looking up and down the aisles to see if she was there and then snuck around to get my ice cream. I'd also try to use the self-checkout lane before she could spot me.

A Hypocrite

I was living a secret life. I was a hypocrite!

I was preaching the health message, but I was addicted to junk food. I was wasting money on something I knew wasn't good for me. Little by little, it had taken over my life.

Jesus spoke about my spiritual condition when He said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers" (Matthew 23:14).

In Luke 11:46, He says, “Woe to you also, lawyers! For you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers.”

I’d preach a sermon on gaining the victory over bad habits when I myself was a slave to sin!

Years ago, Larry Groce wrote a clever song called *Junk Food Junkie* that depicts the kind of hypocrisy that anyone with an addiction struggles with—you’ve got your public life, and then you’ve got the secret reality.

The song lyrics went something like this:

You know that I love organic cooking, I always ask for more, they call me Mr. Natural on down at the health food store. I only eat good sea salt, white sugar don’t touch my lips, and my friends are always begging me to take them on macrobiotic trips, but at night I take out my strongbox that I keep under lock and key, and I take it off to my closet where no one else can see. I open the door so slowly, take a peek up north and south, and then I pull out a Hostess Twinkie and I stuff it in my mouth. In the daytime I’m Mr. Natural,

just as healthy as I can be, but at night I'm a junk food junkie, dear Lord, have pity on me.

The last verse said it well:

Oh, folks, but lately I've been spotted with a Big Mac on my breath, stumbling into a Colonel Sanders with a face as white as death. I'm afraid someday they'll find me just stretched out on my bed, with a handful of Pringles potato chips and a Ding-Dong by my head. In the daytime I'm Mr. Natural, just as healthy as I can be, but at night I'm a junk food junkie, dear Lord, have pity on me.

Has It Gotten Too Big?

Addiction plays itself out in a lot of different ways.

For me, it was ice cream.

For one pastor I knew, it was online shopping. He would get online and start buying stuff he didn't need—and he couldn't stop. His house and garage were filled with unopened packages that he had bought impulsively. He had spent all his money, and his retirement was in doubt.

Is there any sin in shopping online? No. It can be a convenient way to shop and a good way to save money. But some people can't shop online without it taking over their lives.

The apostle Paul says, "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any" (1 Corinthians 6:12). A certain thing may not be inherently bad, but if it is out of balance in your life and it's taking up too much of your time and thoughts, then God wants to set you free from it.

I don't know what your pet temptation is, but the devil knows. He wants to make that temptation so big that it controls you and becomes the defining influence in your life.

At some point, you're going to have to take that step and say, "This is out of control. Lord, I've got a problem, and I need Your help."

Victory!

My addiction and shame got so bad that I had to get on my knees and plead for victory over ice cream. I finally had to say, "Lord, help me. I cannot do this on my own."

While I believe God intervened, it did require real human effort—yet as I made my efforts, however humanly weak they were, the Lord stepped in with divine power and took the desire away. He gave me His supernatural power to overcome.

The divine power combined with human effort will give to all perfect and entire victory. Every believing mind will be filled with conscious power. The language of the soul will be: I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me (*Signs of the Times*, February 14, 1878).

Today, I can praise God because He took my ice cream addiction away from me. It's been years since it's been a problem for me.

I even follow a plant-based diet now. Can you imagine that?

For years, I used rice milk, almond milk, and soy milk in my cereal and told everyone I was a vegetarian (and I was), but at night, I was a glutton when it came to dairy ice cream.

But you know what happened? When I finally went two weeks without eating ice cream, I could

breathe, really breathe, for the first time in my life. I didn't know I had an allergy to milk! My head cleared up. My sinuses cleared up. Once I realized how good it felt to breathe without snorting and coughing all the time, ice cream became even less of a temptation.

If you offered me ice cream today, I'd say, "No thanks! I like breathing."

I'm just so thankful that God gave me the victory in this department. (To be clear, I do occasionally eat oat or soy ice cream, but I'm not addicted to it.)

Saved FROM Sin, Not IN Sin

The dynamics of addiction that I struggled with can be much more serious.

Maybe you're not struggling with ice cream—maybe it's alcohol. Or shopping. Or some illicit drug. It might be pornography. Or social media. Or the news. There are a lot of different ways that addiction can play out.

The point of addiction is that you can't control it. You do it for comfort, but you know you shouldn't, so you hide it from others. It's like you live a secret life. You go to church and go through

the motions of being a Christian, but you have this hidden addiction.

Perhaps you have realized that sin has taken you further than you wanted to go, kept you longer than you wanted to stay, and cost you more than you wanted to pay. You are wanting freedom.

The Bible describes three types of sin:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the **lust of the flesh**, the **lust of the eyes**, and the **pride of life**—is not of the Father but is of the world (1 John 2:15, 16, my emphasis).

Almost any temptation or addiction falls into one of these three categories.

Here's the thing: Jesus didn't come to save you **IN** your sin; He came to save you **FROM** your sin. And He can!

When Jesus was in the wilderness, He was tempted three times. When you study His temptations, you will see that He was victorious in every one of the areas that tend to trip us up.

So if you ask Him, He will take His victory and make you victorious too.

And when He does, He'll give you peace and joy that's unlike anything you can imagine.

What Rules You?

Romans 6:12 says, "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body."

God didn't say that we will never stumble. That's why He promises, "If any man sin we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1 KJV).

What He does say, though, is that sin should not reign over you, "that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace" (Romans 6:12–14).

Instead of being slaves to sin, God wants us to become slaves of righteousness:

God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that

form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness (Romans 6:17–19).

That means that our desires for God and His ways are so strong that we willingly become His slaves. He becomes the Lord of our lives, and we choose obedience to Him. Righteousness (being right with God) becomes the motivating factor that controls our lives.

Overcome Evil With Good

When it comes to the battle with addiction, many make the mistake of focusing only on what they're trying not to do. That's not all bad. You have to start somewhere. You have to say, "Look, I'm saying no to alcohol," or "I'm saying no to pornography," or "I'm saying no to gambling"—whatever your issue is.

But beyond that, what are you saying “yes” to? When you’re tempted to look at that X-rated website or go to the liquor store, what are you going to do instead?

For me, I was saying yes to health and wellness.

God doesn’t merely want to rid our minds of bad things; He wants to fill our minds with positive things. He wants to help us replace the bad habits with something good. Memorizing Scripture and getting involved in Christian service are wonderful ways to replace addiction. So are exercise, positive friendships, prayer, and Bible study.

The Bible presents this strategy in this way: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21).

Fight the Battle

Let’s be honest: Overcoming an addiction is hard work. I had to put my mind to it and be persistent. God will be with you and help you in the battle, but you must also do your part.

Do you want to know God’s first advice on how to overcome sin? He gave it to Cain before he killed his brother Abel. This is what the Lord said:

If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it” (Genesis 4:7).

The Hebrew word used here for rule is *mâshal*, which means to “have dominion or power, to rule, to reign.” God is telling us that we must fight the battle against sin like a king would fight his worst enemy. We need to be brave and persistent.

Most of all, we must be determined to win.

Mary Magdalene was one of Jesus’ most ardent followers, but she had a sordid background. We don’t know precisely what her backstory is, but we do know that she was demon-possessed. In fact, Jesus had to cast the demons out of her seven times (Luke 8:2).

Mary had been looked upon as a great sinner, but Christ knew the circumstances that had shaped her life. He might have extinguished every spark of hope in her soul, but He did not. It was He who had lifted her from despair and ruin. Seven times she had heard His rebuke of the demons that controlled her heart and mind. She had heard His

strong cries to the Father in her behalf. She knew how offensive is sin to His unsullied purity, and in His strength she had overcome (*Desire of Ages*, p. 568).

Mary fell back into her old patterns seven times. But seven times she came back to Jesus and was forgiven. We can do the same thing.

The Bible says, “For a righteous man may fall seven times and rise again” (Proverbs 24:16). We can come running back to Jesus every time we sin. And we should pay attention to where we’ve fallen so we know what traps to avoid.

We shall often fail in our efforts to copy the divine pattern; we shall often have to bow down to weep at the feet of Jesus, because of our short-comings and mistakes; but we must not be discouraged; pray more fervently, believe more fully, and then, with greater steadfastness, abide in Christ and grow into the likeness of our Lord. As we distrust our own power, we shall trust the power of our Redeemer, and render praise to God, who is the health of our countenance (*Bible Echo*, April 15, 1893).

God doesn't forsake you when you make a mistake. "Do not rejoice over me, my enemy; when I fall, I will arise; when I sit in darkness, the LORD will be a light to me" (Micah 7:8).

In the Presence of God

I believe that one of the most helpful ways to overcome sin is to maintain an awareness that God is not only with you, but also in you.

Not only did I struggle with ice cream, but I also struggled with smoking as a kid. I started at 13, but my dad used to tell me, "I better never catch you smoking," even though he smoked. I found it was really easy to resist the temptation to smoke when my dad was there. Just knowing he was around helped me resist the temptation.

The same is true with our heavenly Father. Knowing that He is with us gives us the motivation to overcome sin. But we must be intentional about staying connected with Him. "Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth" (Colossians 3:2).

Live as if you're in the presence of God, and nurture only those things that strengthen your spiritual life. And ask yourself, even if you never became addicted to a certain thing, is it deepening

your love for Jesus? Anything that causes you to feel shame or prevents transparency is suspect in your life and should be guarded against.

The Poison Oak Vine

We have some nice-looking trees up in the hills near our cabin. One day, I was walking through the forest and saw a little poison oak vine beginning to climb up a rather picturesque oak tree. I didn't think much of it because poison oak usually just grows along the ground and doesn't get very big.

But if the vines are unencumbered, they continue to grow and can get massive.

A few years later, I walked by that majestic oak tree and noticed that the poison vine had wrapped around and was going up the tree. It was creating a lot of weight on the branches, taking over the entire lower half of the tree. Normally, the oak would be strong, but I realized that when the snow came, the weight of the poison oak vine could take the tree down.

All it took was a chainsaw and one small surgical cut to kill the vine. The vine was still hanging there, but I wasn't worried anymore because I knew it was going to die. Sure enough, as time

went by, the vine rotted, dried up, and blew out of the tree. The oak tree continued to flourish.

Do you have tendrils growing in your life? They may start small, but if you leave them, they'll continue to grow and wrap themselves around your entire life. They will sap your strength, limit your fruitfulness, take up all of your energy, and steal your time from what God wants you to do.

Addicted to God

I believe we're created to be addicted to God.

There are none of the typical bad addiction consequences when God is our addiction. If we plan our life around Him, and we can't get enough of Him, and we'd sell everything we have to get more of Him, to hunger and thirst for His righteousness—that would be a good thing!

God desires us to find our pleasure in Him, not in the things of this world. Sometimes, we think that if you're a Christian, you're not supposed to do anything pleasurable. But that's not true. God created us to enjoy pleasure. But our greatest joy should be from Him. "In Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures for evermore" (Psalm 16:11).

But if you are not in love with God and finding your pleasure in Him, you'll be obsessed with something else. Without God filling our lives, fallen human nature craves other things to take His place.

Is the Holy Spirit speaking to you about something in your life that has gotten out of balance, that may be taking the place of God in your heart?

It may be something as outwardly harmless as ice cream, or it may be something more serious, like substance abuse or an unhealthy practice or relationship. Whatever it is, you need to say, "Lord, I can't do this without Your help."

You can come to Jesus and confess that you need supernatural intervention. The Lord will give you victory, and then you will rejoice. It's wonderful to know that something isn't controlling and defining your life anymore, and God wants you to have that experience of freedom. Then you'll be able to look back and say, "Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, I'm free at last."

"Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36).