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#117 I can't shake my sinful addiction

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom answers pastoral question from listeners about how to develop spiritual disciplines, escaping the cycle of besetting sin, and how to respond to homeless people with substance addiction and mental health problems.

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Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything Podcast Hi and welcome back to the show. I'm Justin Briely, Director of Premier Unbelievable and the show brought to you in partnership with SBCK and NT Wright Online. What links by the way to special deals from both our partners with today's show.

Today Tom is answering pastoral questions from listeners about how to develop spiritual disciplines, escaping the cycle of besetting sin and how to respond to homeless people with substance addiction and mental health problems. Thanks by the way to the quirks who left this review, saying this is such a fabulous podcast for anyone who wants to think about their grasp of theology and living a Christian life. I found challenged many of the things I grew up believing and found Tom's views make a much more coherent picture than I previously had.

His comments on creation and the temple have particularly inspired me. Well thank you

and if you can leave a rating in a review on your podcast provider it does help others to discover the show as well. And if you want more great podcast and video material from Premier Unbelievable, we've our brand spanking new much expanded website at premierunbelievable.com. Check out all our shows including our newest podcast Matters of Life and Death with bioethicist John Wyatt.

You'll also get a free ebook if you join our mailing list there and of course the link to ask your own question for this podcast. Again the podcast page, the show page, the place where you can get all things Premier Unbelievable is premierunbelievable.com. And this is your last call for our big conference in just two days time. It's time for Unbelievable 2022 at the British Library in London.

But you can join from anywhere in the world. We're learning to take God off mute, to speak with truth and grace into an often confused and divided world. We've got lots of great panel discussions and seminars.

You can be part of it throughout the whole day, interactive Q&A from wherever you are in the world. Guests include Alistair McGrath, John Wyatt, Lisa Fields, Glenn Scrivener, Calvin Robinson, Joseph DeSuser and more. And our big conversation of course with Sharon Dierichs and Ian McGill-Christ.

It's going to be a great day. Hope you can be with us. Unbelievable.live to book your place online or in person.

The links are with today's show. Well on today's show we're starting the first of two parts where we're going to be looking at some of your questions around well-being, mental health and those sorts of issues. And as ever, Tom, we're going to begin with a disclaimer which is that while we do want to try and help people with their pastoral questions on the show, we're certainly not the first place you should turn for these sorts of questions.

And we always encourage anyone who's going through difficult times to obviously seek out. Why is pastoral counsel perhaps from someone they know and trust who can help them through these things. But with that, having been said, we've got a number of questions here from people like Doug in Arkansas, Tom in Australia, Randall in Los Angeles.

And next time we're going to be concentrating on issues around medication and mental health as well. But for now, we've got a number of questions about how we develop good habits of discipleship, how we strive against some of the natural tendencies we have towards addiction and that sort of thing. So let's start with Doug in Arkansas who says, "I'm a person who loves intellectual pursuits."

I read a lot and I'm reasonably well informed about matters of faith. I can even teach

pretty well when asked. But when it comes to self-discipline and habit formation, I feel paralyzed.

Although I know what I should do, I struggle to find the physical motivation and consistency needed for growth in spiritual disciplines. I've been a believer for years, but my experience of Christianity has been primarily cerebral, not very effective. Do you have any pointers on developing a life of practical devotion and discipline while engaging the life of the mind? How does one move from idealistic head knowledge to practical growth and change?" And I'm sure that Doug is not alone in this.

In fact, I can sympathize myself. I know that even as someone who's been a Christian for really most of my adult life, I still don't struggle sometimes to get into that rhythm and habit of prayer and Bible reading and just giving that regular time to God. Even though I would think of myself as a fairly cerebral, well-thought-out in my theology, it doesn't always translate into the practical ways in which we actually live out that spiritual discipline.

So yeah, Tom, any suggestions for Doug? Yes. I mean, this is a very common situation and it's the reverse of what a lot of people in the Western world feel, which is that they enjoy being practical and getting out of the street and getting things done, but actually haven't really thought through what it all means. And in Britain particularly, that's a problem that we often have.

We have very anti-intellectual culture and many people are happy to say, "Well, I go to church. I say my prayers," and I then go and work in a homeless project or I volunteer for such and such and I do my best to love my neighbours, but I've never really figured out what that theology stuff's all about. And this is a matter of going on around the circle.

Jesus expanded or riffed on the Old Testament Deuteronomistic idea of loving God with your heart and mind and strength. Heart and mind and soul and strength is the quadrant that Jesus went round. And we have many people who seem to love God with their heart and strength, but the mind has yet to catch up and we're now faced with a question from Doug and there would be many others, as Justin has said, who would say, "Well, the mind seems to be on track.

I love exploring the riches of God's truth, but what is this about the heart and the soul and the strength and the whole body thing?" And so on. And the answer is, you've got to go on round those tracks. How do you do that? Well, cultivating wise habits is absolutely paramount and certainly as Justin has hinted in the way he asked the question.

The regular daily habit of Bible reading and prayer is, in my view, irreplaceable. Without that, you lose the anchor and the ship can drift this way and that, even with the regular daily habit of Bible reading and prayer, which means setting aside time. For many people, it's first thing in the morning.

For some people, it's last thing at night. I've never found that helpful because as soon as I start to pray, I go to sleep if it's that late at night and so on. But that regular habit of prayer, whatever time of day it is, however you do it, that is the anchor, the thing that holds you steady.

And with that reading of Scripture, reading of the whole of Scripture, we are constantly being nudged and pushed towards the habits of life. Imagine if you were to read the book of Proverbs, a chapter every day you get through Proverbs in a month. And the Proverbs will nudge you to say, actually, when thoughts like this come into your mind, there is that garbage can that you have to go and dump them in.

And when possibilities like that appear before you and people say, well, come with us and we'll do this and that, the answer is no, you don't go with them because to take one step down that road will lead to other steps. And before you know what's happened, you will be in a bad and dark place, whether it's addiction or whether it's just a bad behavior of one's or another. And if that's Proverbs, well, the same is true of the Psalms.

And then the same is true, of course, of Scripture as a whole. And in the epistles particularly, there are many pointers towards how to reorder your life in a way which is focused on allegiance to Jesus, in a way which does involve the heart and does involve, if this is what is meant by the soul there, the kind of the whole person thing, but then the strength, where are the places in your world, down your street where you can actually use your literal physical energy to go and help people and to be present for them. And as you do those things, then other bits of the personality get involved involved in the work of God bringing hope and healing and justice and mercy to his world, which then fill out the intellectual paradigm which you're so used to.

And gradually the picture then becomes more whole, becomes more three or four dimensional, if you like. And you'll find as you do that, that actually the mind gets challenged as well, because it's very easy if you just live in the intellect to ignore certain questions which will come up if you start working on the heart and the soul and the strength as well. So that that's the beginning of what could be a much longer answer, but as Justin said, of course this all needs addressing within the ordinary pastoral care of the church, and indeed so many of these things take place within the life of the church.

If you're part of a Bible study group, there will be people who will be asking questions, but often you will discern that the intellectual questions they have are directly related to practical life questions and questions of lifestyle and self-discipline and so on, which we all face. But this is the holistic environment in which we can healthily address them. And I think in some ways harder than ever I think in the modern world with so many distractions, not least the phones we have in our hands, the social media that often seems to drag people into doom-scrolling, because it's sometimes called just getting lost in the next video or the next post.

I think discipline has always been difficult, but it's perhaps even harder in today's world. And that I suppose just means we need to take it all the more seriously that actually this is something we need to really address and ask, well what can I do? How do I make time for this? And that sometimes is just a very practical question as well as a thing. And I think a wise spiritual director or soul friend or whatever you call such a person to whom you can open your heart and explain your problem, will say, so how is it that you find yourself at that particular point which you realise you shouldn't have got to? And often it's three or four or five little steps back from that.

Well why not just don't take that first step because it will probably lead to step two, etc, etc, which may be quite okay and innocent in themselves, but your mind and your heart and your body will be lured to go somewhere that really you know you shouldn't be going. Which is quite relevant to our next question. This is Tom in Australia who says I'd love some guidance from Utahm about how to deal with addiction and repentance as a Christian.

Now it's a weird feeling. I want to be free of this thing that holds me captive but I feel stuck in a cycle of sin then ask for forgiveness then pray about it and try to live by the Spirit but then go and do the same sin again. It's a cycle that repeats itself and it makes me question the nature of true repentance whether I have in fact repented and surrendered my life to Jesus.

I've known him for decades and I love him and want to serve him. I also know that the Bible is very clear that known practiced sin is not a sign of someone who follows Jesus. If you realized you were addicted to something sinful and didn't know how to stop doing it what steps would you take to address it.

Now Tom doesn't tell us what this particular addiction is and I'm not saying this is the addiction that Tom is referring to but I know for a fact that many men especially many Christian men struggle in a modern age with pornography which is so readily accessible on the internet and I can imagine many people listening right now that's the addiction that is in their mind when Tom asks this question. So Tom yeah whether it's that or any other kind of addiction what would be your starting point for someone like Tom? Yes I mean I think this does follow on directly from Doug's question which we were talking about a moment ago that with with any addiction there are the signs the telltale signs when one is drawn into something that one knows actually this is not going to end well and the question is are you prepared to say no at the earliest stages of that the first signs of that it's very interesting in Colossians chapter three and I remember when I was writing in Comitry on Colossians 30 40 years ago reflecting on this that Paul talks about putting to death certain things and it's as though we've got these potentially wild animals in our back garden that keep on kind of snarling at us and biting at us and nipping us and and the temptation is to say well we just need to tame them a bit we just need to tell them to quieten down or we need to to put a leash around their neck or

something and the answer is no sorry they actually need to be killed and that's that's tough because actually we quite like these animals and they reflect parts of us that seem to be important and as is I mean I remember when I'm reading C.S. Lewis writing about his brother who had occasional tendencies to sudden alcoholic binges that the question is what are the early signs what are the signs that somebody is going to suddenly go and have one of those binges and I guess it's the same with with pornography where it might be like a binge what is what is the beginning of that what is the moment when in the mind and the heart suddenly somebody is is playing with the thought of another drink with the thought of an attractive sexually attractive picture on online or whatever and at that point the answer is actually we're not going in that direction and of course the best way of stopping weeds growing in the garden is to plant flowers there instead easier said than done I know but at the moment when whatever it is is going to be taking hold the real question ought to be what should I be doing at that point because with every temptation there is the sense that actually God wants to be doing something in and through your life right now it may not feel like that this may feel a very cold and and dry thing rather than the rich welcoming drink whatever it is that's going to attract you but but actually there are some new things God wants to be doing in your life and if you're not sure what those might be well pray about it and as we've said talk to a spiritual director a wise pastor what could I be doing with my life that would be the reality the fruitful reality of which this addiction is a pretty ghastly parody right now I mean one of the reasons we're doing this recording in Lent one of the reasons that we many Christians give up something for Lent something which we normally do and enjoy doing whether it's classics like eating chocolate or drinking glass of wine or whatever it is is so that we learn the habit of saying no to something which in itself may be perfectly all right but that habit of fasting that habit of saying no is built into early Christian discipline one of the earliest post New Testament writings discusses which days of the week you should fast on it takes it for granted that you'll do that and those disciplines we in the modern western not so good at occupying at saying saying no to things that are perfectly good in order to get into practice for saying no to the things that are not so good and that will in fact lead us down the wrong path so this is a difficult area and it is for many I think a lifelong struggle but there are ways through there are ways of saying no early on and we should we should address in just a moment the question of whether Tom has truly repented if he goes back and does these things which is the second part of his question but but just before that I mean everything everything you said has also reminded me that there is a sort of physical nature to addiction very often whether it be alcoholism I mean I remember when I gave up coffee for Lent once and I literally for the first few days got headaches because I was obviously quite addicted to coffee likewise pornography actually increasingly studies are showing that the brain sort of especially in the younger generation that's increasingly exposed to that stuff it kind of gets rewired to want those dopamine hits and and that has all kinds of you know unfortunate repercussions for people later on in life but the fact is it's not you know so I can imagine someone saying that's that's great Tom to say what you should do is you know at the

moment where that the first thought comes up you know deal with it then but if there's a very strong physical drive almost driving us towards that where where do you go in that moment when when it's almost you know that's why I suppose addiction is such a you know a strong thing isn't it yeah this is this is the difference between virtue and vice and I'm not saying I'm hugely virtuous and have no vices because that wouldn't be true but the virtue and vice are both about the formation of habits the difference is that with virtue it requires a constant choice certainly in the development of particular good life habits which are not coming naturally whether it's courage or patience or whatever it may be or humility these are not things which occur to people naturally we are not like that by nature we have to make the decision which is difficult but we pray for the Holy Spirit to guide us and to keep us and to repent yes again and again that's why in the Lord's Prayer we are told to say forgive us our trespasses and I don't think Jesus meant go on saying that until after six weeks you've properly repented then you can drop that clause I think Jesus expects his followers to have to go on saying forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those etc these are all habits to be learned and that that daily repentance is why in the book of common prayer in my own tradition there is a daily confession of sin it's assumed that that's going to be necessary although as we go on of course there are things which grow out of the New Testament to do with particular levels and kinds of sin etc but so I think repentance is something which yeah as we get older as we are more self-aware as we are more opened in our minds to see what's actually going on in our heads and our hearts then we have to lay that too in front of God and say Lord have mercy on me a sinner and yes absolutely it is about mental patterns and the the wiring of the brain and we we know a lot now as you said about how our brains are wired and how we can help them be rewired in helpful ways or we can go with the flow that's the difference between virtue and vice virtue says I need to choose the hard decision now to do X and not Y vice says just go with the flow and the habit will follow naturally naturally so that we will get to the point where we don't remember it being any different and yes whether it's a dopamine hit or whatever I don't know all about all the chemical stuff but that that is definitely going on and part of fasting is to say I could go and get that hit now from whatever it is but I am actually choosing not to and the point where we find then that that choice becomes impossible is certainly the point we should probably have reached it earlier where we should go and seek spiritual help and and pastoral guidance and to be able to pray down into whatever it is that's going on yeah and I would say just as you've recommended the you know pastoral help spiritual counseling spiritual directors and so on in forming healthy spiritual habits there's there's absolutely no shame in seeking the kind of counseling that helps to deal with some of these things that may have a more physiological sort of you know attraction on this and just as an alcoholic may find a great help in going to alcoholics anonymous and having that kind of support around them if it's a different kind of addiction if it's pornography or pornographic whatever there are people who can help with with sort of putting things in place practical things very often that actually will help you to sort of start to to kind of you know not simply go down those same paths again and again but thank you very

much to those really really helpful thoughts on on all of that one final question here which is a bit broader from Randall in Los Angeles who says we have a huge problem with mentally ill and substance-addicted homeless folk in our community I'd be fascinated to hear Bishop Wright's pastoral approach on a Christian way to lovingly address this challenge and ways to address those who tend to dehumanize these people as well and any thoughts on that bigger sort of social issue there Tom yeah yeah I think the dehumanization is really born of fear that we tend to like being surrounded with people who are similar to us and think and speak similarly to how we do and have a similar social context because there are not too many surprises there and we will enjoy their company etc when people react in quite different ways to how we have been taught to react then that's a bit of a shock and it's a bit worrying and and we're not quite sure what they're going to do next and so that there is there is a lot of fear and I think it's only then when people are able to meet and get to know people who are from very different backgrounds different social backgrounds different subcultural backgrounds that then you can see that fear dissipating and realize actually these are human beings too and I know from years ago when I first saw somebody who I really respect working with homeless people with people sitting on the corner of the street drinking meths and so on and seeing this friend who I deeply respected sitting down and chatting with them and realizing he's not afraid he doesn't mind this and then well maybe maybe I could do that too and not that I'm very good at it but it is a matter of overcoming that original fear of course there is a wisdom about that as well if you have a home full of young children then you probably aren't about to invite somebody with a very dodgy background and strange habits into that home because it may be very bad for the kids but there are ways say volunteering at a homeless shelter or whatever it is in which one can overcome the fear and one can actually learn to love people and I think particularly the challenge of people who are mentally ill in a sense the very phrase mentally ill is not one we should say these people over here are mentally ill and those people over there aren't at all there is a continuum we are all messed up in one way or another we have all done things which leave bad imprints in our brains as we were saying before our brains have been hardwired to do certain things which we need to work our way out of and so when we meet other people who have a more obvious problem then of course you only have to read the gospels to see these are precisely the sort of people who Jesus is reaching out to celebrating with praying with and for assuring of God's love and forgiveness and the church as a whole not necessarily every one of us as individuals but the church as a whole has to be able to do precisely that reaching out and my favorite example of this is with the whole community and it is now a community of people who have Down syndrome and I have seen in certain churches a welcome given to young people with Down syndrome which is actually a most amazing sign of the gospel when in a church family as a whole such people are welcomed made much of given tasks to do whether it's helping dish out coffee or whatever and accepted for the apparently quirky people that they are and there's a sense of love and joy about that and there are of course different types of mental mental mental illness and mental differences which one has to

learn how to handle those differences but the church family as a whole ought to be always not just in certain special cases always a place where such people are welcomed and looked after people who are homeless of course that's a particular social problem which afflicts particularly some urban areas and churches that find that they're in that place that constitutes a vocation to say what are we doing along with the social agencies in our area to help them to see how this comes about and what can be done to help so and I know some people including actually this question comes from Los Angeles I know a former student of mine who's working in California precisely with people like this and has a great ministry and there's all sorts of ways in which the church can reach out in order to affirm and welcome and encourage people who need that special help well thank you very much for the questions and thanks for your responses Tom I hope they've been helpful Doug and Tom and Randall and also will be continuing in the theme of pastoral questions specifically on the issues around mental health and medication on next week's show so look out for that as we continue this theme but for now Tom thank you very much for being with me and we'll see you next time thank you for being with us on today's program next time mental health issues does taking anti-depressant medication mean I'm failing to trust God someone says I was told to read the Bible to cure my eating disorder how do we educate the church better and how do I reconcile the biblical commands do not be anxious with chronic anxiety Tom's answering listener questions about mental health next time and a final reminder as we conclude today's show if you aren't yet booked in do join us for unbelievable the conference 2022 it's this Saturday the 14th of May chance to ask the kinds of questions we tackle every week on this show and to really engage a confident faith in today's world with 10 great speakers a live discussion event with leading brain psychologist Ian McGill-Christ and Christian neuroscientist Sharon Dyrx and you can attend from anywhere in the world at unbelievable dot live we are launching our premier unbelievable ministry on a whole new footing as well at the conference it's going to be a great day still not too late to book your place online unbelievable dot live see you next time