

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, March 8, 1992, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

2 PETER 2:19

“...they are slaves of destructive habits — for a person is a slave of anything that has conquered him.” (Good News Bible)

HOW TO BREAK FREE **(3) HOW TO BREAK AN ADDICTION**

In the New York Times some months ago, there was an article that said, “Americans seem hooked on the idea of having addictions. These days almost anyone might have an addiction, if not to drugs or alcohol, then to food, cigarettes, exercise, relationships, sex, shopping, sports, work, or video games. Habits that were once called compulsions or just plain weaknesses, are now described as ‘addictions.’” There’s a new bimonthly magazine being published called Lifeline America that deals with addictions. It says that more than 200 different kinds of addictions are dealt with now by various groups in America.

How do you deal with addictions? Well, a couple of America’s favorite addictions are drinking and eating! Eighteen million Americans have a drinking problem; and so far as eating is concerned, Lifeline America tells us that Americans are 2.3 billion pounds overweight! Doesn’t that make your day?! “Forgive us this day our daily bread”! By the way, I heard of a new diet where you take potent tranquilizers; you don’t lose any weight, but you don’t care either!

Now this morning I want to look with you at how to break free from a habit. Everybody’s got a bad habit. And I want to give you nine steps from God’s Word on how to break a bad habit, and I want to use the acrostic:

B. R. E. A. K. F. R. E. E.

1. Begin today - not tomorrow, not next week or next month, but right now. Have you noticed that far more people are going on a diet tomorrow than today? Proverbs 27:1 (Good News Bible) says, “Never boast about tomorrow. You don’t know what will happen between now and then.” He’s saying, “Quit telling yourself, ‘one of these days’.” Stop procrastinating. Stop postponing. The truth is -- it’s going to be harder to start changing tomorrow than it is today. Delay always makes a problem worse. Begin today! Ecclesiastes 11:4 (Living Bible) says, “If you wait for perfect conditions, you will never get anything done.” How many of you have found that to be true? So, what’s your excuse? Why aren’t you working on that problem? You see, the person who really wants to change finds a way; the person who doesn’t really want to change finds an excuse. You begin today.

2. Refuse to blame others. Now this problem is as old as Adam and Eve. Adam sinned, and took it like a man and blamed his wife! He said, “Eve made me do it.” Indeed, he blamed God

too. He said, "The woman You gave me brought me the fruit and I ate it" (Genesis 3:12). "God, the fault is ultimately Yours for giving me a temptress for my wife." Proverbs 19:3 (Good News Bible) says, "Some people ruin themselves by their own stupid actions and then blame the Lord." Have you ever heard the mother of one of these young punks who has brutally killed someone say on TV, "My boy is really a good boy - he just took up with the wrong company!"

The truth is: I will never get better until I accept personal and complete responsibility for what I do. I've got to admit that it's my problem. Whom are you blaming for your bad problems -- your parents, your children, your husband, your wife, your teachers, your boss, or God? Or do you say, "The devil made me do it!"? You see, to break free I've got to assume responsibility for my life. So, stop excusing yourself and accusing other people. Don't pass the buck.

3. Examine your life. Take a personal inventory. Do an internal audit, a frank evaluation. Ask yourself, "What are my weaknesses? How long have I had this problem and where am I tempted most? What are my fears, and what are my frustrations?" A good and godly counselor can help you here. Lamentations 3:40 says, "Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord."

You see, to change, I've got to stop pretending. I can't cover up my faults. I've got to come face to face with what's wrong with me. Hiding a fault only intensifies it and makes it worse. Denial prevents healing. Notice Psalm 32:3-5 (Living Bible): "There was a time when I wouldn't admit what a sinner I was. But my dishonesty made me miserable and filled my days with frustration... until I finally admitted all my sins... and stopped trying to hide them... And (God) forgave me. All my guilt is gone." Isn't that a tremendous statement? God says, "Just admit it. You've got a problem, and I will forgive and wipe out the guilt in your life."

So, I do a healthy evaluation. And, by the way, this needs to be on a continuing basis. Healthy people are always evaluating themselves. "Am I slipping? Am I getting off course? Am I making it with the Lord?" You're honest with Him and with yourself.

4. Ask Christ to take over your life, because He's waiting to help. You need a power greater than yourself to help you change, and Christ is the source of power. Look at Romans 6:12,13 (Living Bible): "Do not let sin control your body any longer; do not give in to its sinful desires... but give yourself completely to God — every part of you... to be used for His good purposes." Now Paul is saying here that the solution to your addiction lies in choosing the right master. Every day you and I are controlled by something — other people, other time schedules, drugs, alcohol, food, and so on. But freedom comes from choosing the right master. And instead of having something else control my life, I'm going to let Christ be in complete control.

Notice how Paul says, "Give yourself completely to God." Often, we only want to give God the problem. We say, "God, I'll give You this problem, but let me control the rest of my life." But God says, "No. If you want Me to work on your problem, you've got to give me every area of your life." And you turn the management of your whole life over to Him. And that produces incredible power to change.

Why don't most people make this total commitment? Because they're afraid they'll

become fanatics! “If I give God all there is of me, I’ll lose my fun, I’ll lose my freedom, and I’ll become a fanatic!” But the good news is that Jesus said, “I have come that you might have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). The good news is that God has a purpose for your life, and His plans for you are perfect. So, you relax, and you let God take control of your life, and He gives you the needed power.

5. Keep away from the temptation. Now this is just plain common sense. If you don’t want to get stung by the bees, you stay away from the beehive. You need to avoid the situations where you are tempted.

One of my favorite verses is Romans 13:14 (Phillips): “Let us be Christ’s people from head to foot and give no chances to the flesh to have its fling.” Isn’t that a great verse?! Paul is saying, “Don’t put yourself in compromising situations.” If I have a problem with lust, I don’t go to those newsstands that carry that garbage. If I have a problem with overeating, I don’t stand outside a fast food place, and savor the aroma of the French fries! I don’t stockpile my home with junk food. I stay away from the very things that cause me problems. I sometimes wish that they would invent a refrigerator that every time you open the door it would weigh you! Wouldn’t that be great?

Look at Proverbs 4:26, 27 (Good News Bible): “Plan carefully what you do.... Avoid evil and walk straight ahead. Don’t go one step off the right way.” He says, “Plan to avoid temptation.” The key to overcoming temptation is to decide in advance, to have a game plan. You don’t wait, teenagers, until you’re in the back seat of a parked car to say, “Do I want to stay pure?” You decide to avoid it in advance. If teenagers don’t want to get involved sexually before marriage, what do you do? You plan your dates, because as someone has said, “You’ll either go by your plans or your glands.” One of them will win out. If you don’t have plans, there go the glands.

One man who stopped smoking was asked how he did it, and he said, “I wet my matches!” Isn’t that good? He planned in advance. The Bible says in Ephesians 4:27, “Don’t give the devil a foothold!” The Bible says in many places that we are to flee from temptation. Now most of us when we flee from temptation - we leave a forwarding address! So, do the smart thing and stay away from tempting and compromising situations that could cause your downfall.

Now here are some positive things:

6. Focus on something better. Look at Proverbs 4:23 (Good News Bible): “Be careful how you think; your life is shaped by your thoughts.” The Bible says that the spiritual battle against sin is fought in the mind. Whatever captures my attention captures me. I go into the restaurant, and I say, “I don’t want that hot, thick, juicy apple pie, with the lovely flaky crust, and smelling of cinnamon, and simply dripping with ice cream!” - and you’re drooling. Has it got your attention? Yes, and it will get you!

Now the most important thing to remember here is this: The key to resisting temptation is not to resist it. You simply refocus your attention. You don’t say, “No, no, no, no, I don’t want to give in to this temptation!” And yet, every hormone in your body is screaming, “Yes!” You don’t

resist the temptation. If you try to, you're going to lose. You refocus your attention. You mentally change channels. When temptation calls you on the phone, you hang up! You don't try to argue. You refocus your attention on something else because what you concentrate on gets you. You concentrate on a diet, and what do you think about all the time? — food! You know, "Hey, it's only 15 minutes to another carrot stick!" That's not the way to break a habit. The key is to focus on something better.

What do you focus on? Look at Philippians 4:8 (Good News Bible): "Fill your mind with those things that are good and that deserve praise: things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely and honorable. Now this is the principle of replacement. You replace the bad with the good. Vacuums do not exist in the world. They are artificially created. You create a vacuum, and something fills it. My gas tank is never empty; it's always filled either with gas or with air. Now you may think your mind is empty (I often think mine is, especially when I sit down to write a sermon!). You say, "I'm going to get rid of this thought!" But it's going to come right back, unless you replace it with another and a better thought. That's why Romans 12:2 says, "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Focus on the positive; focus on something better.

7. Restore broken relationships. Why is that important? Because anything that's out of control in your life is hurting somebody else. You have only to think of an addiction like a bad temper to realize how true that is. Addictions cause grief to ourselves and to others, so you need to make those things right. You need to go to those people who have been hurt and restore those relationships. Romans 12:18 (Phillips) says, "As far as your responsibility goes, live at peace with everyone." You make a list of people that your habit has harmed, and you go to those people, and you ask forgiveness, and you offer restitution, and you do as much as your responsibility calls for to make things right.

Why? Because a clear conscience is essential for change. If you don't maintain a clear conscience, I don't offer you much hope for lasting change. This step, where you restore broken relationships, may be the hardest step of all for most people -- to admit that "my problem caused you a problem; my habit caused you grief." But by doing this, you get God's power in your life to keep on keeping on.

Now the eighth biblical principle in breaking free is, you

8. Enlist in a support group, because we all need reinforcement. You remember Ecclesiastes 4:9,10 (Good News Bible)? "Two are better off than one, because together they can work more effectively. If one of them falls down, the other can help him up. But if someone is alone and falls, it's just too bad, because there is no one to help him up." That makes sense. What he's talking about here is the law of diminishing intent, and it goes like this: As time passes, the best intentions fade. Would you agree with that? We start off with intentions we just know we're going to put into practice! In humility you say, "God, I'm not making it. I need Your help." And "God gives grace to the humble." We saw that last week. God gives us the power to change when we're humble. But after about six months you start thinking, "I'm making it! I'm doing real well!" And you get full of pride, and "pride leads to a fall" and you're back to square one.

Now how do you handle that? How do you break that cycle? You need support. You need

friends who will pray for you and care for you and encourage you and keep you on track. We all need people to spur us on. Notice what James 5:16 says: “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.”

Now I don't particularly like that verse because it can be so terribly abused. Back in the 1930's and 40's “The Oxford Group” used to have these “house parties” where they would have “confession binges,” with each person vying with the others as to who was the biggest, juiciest sinner in the bunch! They let it all hang out. I don't like that kind of nonsense.

But here you are in a small group with other believers whom you respect and trust, and you know they care about you and want to encourage you. You say, “You know, this week I had a tough time with my children. I just don't think I'm making it as a parent.” And all of a sudden everybody else says, “None of us thinks we're making it either!” And there's a feeling of freedom from knowing that everybody is in the same boat. And maybe that's the spark that starts a positive discussion, and everyone shares insights on how God has helped them to be faithful in raising their children for the Lord. We all have problems, and when you are with Christian friends who say to you, “I know what you're going through; I've been there, and by the grace of God I made it through,” that gives you encouragement and the motivation to break out of the cycle of starting and stopping.

Someone has said that “revealing your feeling is the beginning of healing.” If you can't admit your problem to someone, you can't work on it. So, get involved in a small group with other believers.

And then finally I

9. Extend myself to others. Read with me 2 Corinthians 1:4 (Good News Bible): “[Christ] helps us in all our troubles, so that we are able to help others who have all kinds of troubles, using the same help that we ourselves have received from God.” Paul is saying that God allows me to go through problems, even the ones I've brought on myself, and He helps me through those problems so that then I can turn around and help other people with the same comfort that I have been given. God wants to take your greatest weakness, and He wants to help you overcome it, and then give you a ministry of helping other people who have the exact same problems. God never wastes a hurt.

Folks, this is the ultimate “high” — to be used by God to help other people. What does God use in your life? Not your strengths alone, He uses your weaknesses too! He wants to take your addictions and habits and hurts and failures, and He wants to turn them around in your life and give you a ministry to someone else. Isn't Alcoholics Anonymous a beautiful example of what we're talking about?

This next verse is my dream for Faith Church, Galatians 6:1, 2 (Living Bible): “If a person is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help him back onto the right path, remembering that next time it might be one of you who is in the wrong. Share each other's troubles and problems, and so obey our Lord's command.” Do you want to be like Jesus and have His love in your life? Then carry each other's burdens. When you share a

burden, it's only half as heavy, because someone else is carrying it with you.

Now that's what I think God wants our church to be -- a place where we carry each other's burdens. We've all got burdens, but we're struggling with them together. After all, we're just a bunch of sinners saved by grace! That's exactly what we are, and so we extend ourselves to other people.

Now when you take these nine steps, look at God's promise - 1 Corinthians 10:13 (Good News Bible): "God...will not allow you to be tested beyond your power to remain firm; at the time you are put to the test, He will give you the strength to endure it, and so provide you with a way out." But you can claim that promise only when you follow these nine principles that we've outlined.

And it all starts when you make Jesus Christ the Lord and Master of your life. Remember — real freedom comes when you serve the right Master! These nine steps really work -- but it starts with a commitment -- to crown Christ Lord of all!

AMEN.