

# **RETHINK Addiction: A Five Week Curriculum**

*by Pastor Donald Kirschner*

## **RETHINK Addiction Week 1: The Often Unrecognized and Underestimated Power of Habits Underlying All Addiction**

Objective: Help participants enter into the frustrating world of addicts and to understand the complexities underlying addiction.

Materials Needed:

- Bibles
- Computer with Powerpoint presentation

### **I. Opening**

A. Prayer

B. Introductory question: Have you ever found yourself doing something you never intended or desired to do, but still wound up doing? Do you remember how you were feeling after-the-fact? Frustrated? Guilty? Self-critical?

C. *Introduce theme with first slide:* As much as we hate to admit it, our human tendency is to do what we've always done. Too often the same is the case for addicts who seem stuck in past patterns of habitual behaviors.

1. No matter how specific our goals may be, no matter how good our intentions, no matter how strong our values or resolute our willpower, it seems as though we are creatures of habit who are plagued to repeat past negative actions, however undesirable we may perceive those actions to be.

a. Intentions vs. Addiction (slide #3)

i. Like the Power Puff girls going against the Avengers. That's just not going to end well.

b. Goals vs. Addiction (slide #4)

ii. Like trying to score a goal on the Avengers. It's just not going to happen.

2. This is not to say goals, intentions, values, and self-control do not have power to promote positive change. In fact, they can work in complex and complementary ways with habits to bring about desired outcomes. But the answer to dealing with the underlying habits of addiction is difficult. After all, habits are the driving force behind all our actions a past upon which our future is influenced to a largely unthinking degree.

### **II. Bible lesson: Romans 7:14-24**

A. What's going on here and how can we relate this to the struggle of those who are addicted, whether it be alcohol, drugs, pornography, etc?

"Failures to change do not necessarily indicate poor willpower or insufficient understanding of health issues but instead the power of situations to trigger past responses. Habits keep us doing what we have always done, despite our best intentions to act otherwise" (Neal, Wood, and Quinn 201-202).

B. Within Romans 7:14-25, we witness a frustrating powerlessness in Paul that is hard for him to accept or understand. This frustrating powerlessness is the same feeling people who are trying to “turn over a new leaf” face in today’s society. Whether someone wants to quit drinking or stop looking at pornography, many are always surprised at how quickly their resolutions falter at the mercy of past negative habits.

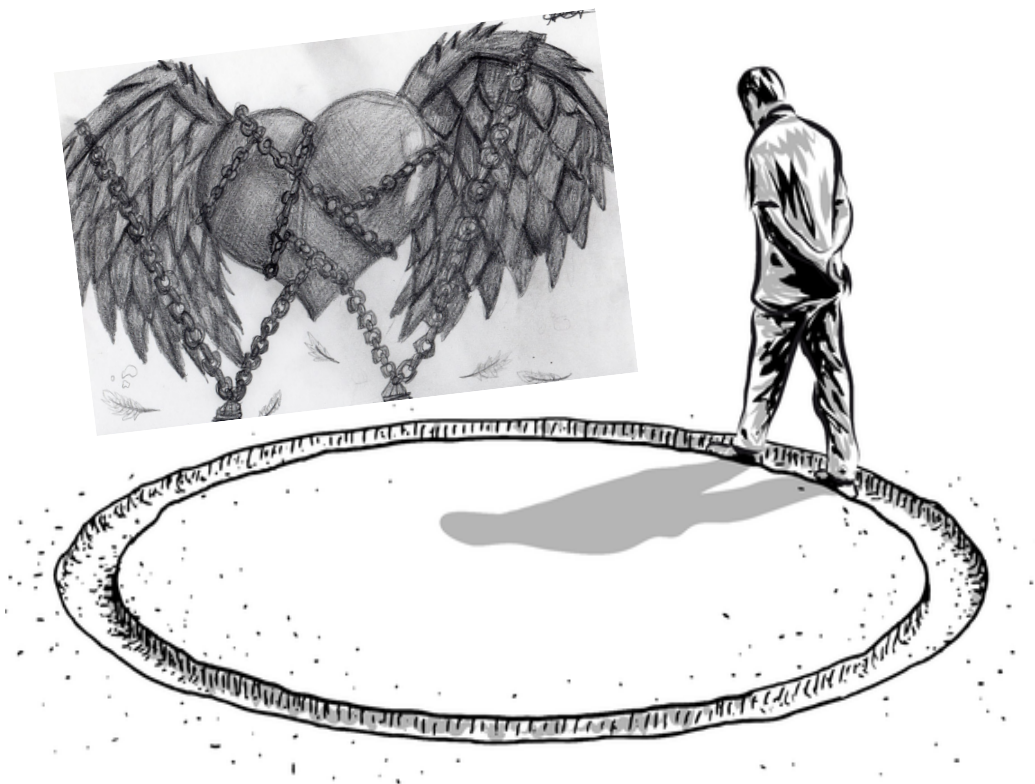
C. Play You Tube video of Ignite’s drama skit performed to Casting Crowns “Set Me Free”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0w39vErgIMM>.

D. Scripture Focus: “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing...it is sin living in me that does it.”

### III. Developing Empathy, Promoting Compassion, Extending Grace

A. Paul is now under the dominion of Christ. However, just because Paul has been given a new identity through Christ’s death and resurrection does not mean he won’t struggle with sin. Thus, this passage speaks to the need to give both ourselves and others grace when we do those things we do not wish to do.

1. How might you use Paul’s life testimony here as a reminder and challenge to extend grace to others suffering from addiction?
2. How does this insight from our discussion opening the door to compassion and empathy for those suffering from addiction?
3. Just as AA insists, let us remember that a Higher Power (the person we know to be as God) does for addicts what addicts cannot do on their own volition.



## RETHINK Addiction Week 2: The brain behind the addiction. Now that's dope!

Objective: Help participants gain a basic understanding of the neurology underlying addiction. Show them that it's not necessarily the fault of the addict, that the issue at hand is much more complex than we might originally think it to be.

### Materials Needed:

- Print-outs of selected segments of Bill's story from the Big Book.
  - Other stories can be used, whether stories like "He Lived Only to Drink" or "Empty on the Inside" in the back of the "Big Book." Or a different book or website could be used to acquire stories. Could be related to any addiction, not just alcohol.

### I. Opening

#### A. Prayer

B. Introductory question: Who do you think is most susceptible to addiction and why?

C. Well, what we have learned from organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous within the countless and varied stories shared is that:

*"Alcoholism (and addiction in general) has respect for nobody; neither rich nor poor, learned nor unlettered. All found themselves headed for the same destruction, and it seemed they could do nothing whatever to stop it." (Adapted from Big Book p. 435).*

### II. Group Exercise & Discussion

A. Hand out Bill's story and read (pp. 5-6), encouraging people to highlight or underline parts as leader reads. Have them be on the look-out for things that determine:

1. Why does he turn to drinking in different instances? Does he know why? Can he explain his actions?
2. Do the consequences of his drinking impact his decision-making?
3. What do you think is driving him to drink?

#### B. Questions

1. Is Bill to blame?
  - a. If so, why?
  - b. If not, who or what is to blame?
2. How much of Bill's actions is Bill responsible for? Should he be held responsible for his actions? To what extent?

### III. Main Teaching: Neurology 101

A. What are addicts after?: Dopamine & Cravings Underlying Addiction

1. What is dopamine? (Buzzed 43-44)
  - a. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that underlies the reward system in our brain. It serves as a pleasure chemical in the brain. As humans, our bodies desire pleasure. Dopamine is released when we eat food, when we have sex, when we drink alcohol, etc.
  - b. How does this happen in alcoholics?

i. Explanation: After one takes their first drink, the pleasure circuits in the brain turn on. However, this “dopamine rush” ends shortly after, which may motivate the individual to consume more alcohol to start the pleasure sequence again. This is what we would call “chasing the high.”

ii. Problem: The main problem with this reward system of our brain is that when the dopamine rush has ended, our brains tell us we need more, even when there is still plenty of alcohol in the body.

iii. “Crave for a thing, you will get it. Renounce the craving, the object will follow you by itself” –Swami Sivananda (Manejwala 47)

1. What is a craving? (Manejwala 13-15)

a. Simply defined, cravings are “intense desires that produce unpleasant mental and physical symptoms if not satisfied”

b. Interest → Desire → Craving

i. Not all craving may be addiction, but these intense cravings underlie all addictions.

ii. Use → Overuse → Abuse → Addiction

B. In What Ways is Addiction Genetic?

1. From what we know from science, alcoholism is partly genetic, but this does not account for all of one’s addiction (Buzzed 54).

2. Studies reveal that alcoholism can be traced through families. People who have a history of alcoholism in their families are at double the risk of developing an addiction to the substance (Buzzed 54).

3. As big of an influencer as this may be—typically 40-60% of alcoholism is thought to be genetic—it is just one aspect of many (Manejwala).

#### IV. Developing Empathy, Promoting Compassion, Extending Grace

A. Introduce quote: “First the man takes a drink, then the drink takes a drink, then the drink takes the man” –a Japanese proverb (Manejwala 4).

1. Is it an addict’s fault that they are addicted?

2. Does knowing the science behind what’s going on in their brains justify their actions?

3. When do we hold people accountable for their actions? Can we?

B. Read Romans 3:23: *All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*

1. Remind participants, that even though we may be tempted to point to addicts as bad people, even though we may be tempted to compare ourselves with them, we are sinners just as much as they are. Not only did we deserve condemnation as much as they did, but God’s grace was extended to them just as much as it was extended to us.

2. Just as addiction has no respect for anyone, whether rich or poor, educated or uneducated, neither does God’s grace have respect for anyone; it is extended to all who are desiring to get well. No one is beyond the reach of God’s love and grace, no matter how deep the addiction goes.

## RETHINK Addiction Week 3: Addiction: Is it a Disease, Sin, or Both?

Objective: Give participants an understanding on the various views of addiction and help them to see why talking about addiction as disease can open the door to healing and wholeness for addicts.

### Materials Needed:

- Hand-outs with the five perspectives on addiction listed.
- Bibles
- Computer to play song

### I. Opening

A. Prayer

B. When you think of addiction, are you more inclined to think of it as sin, a disease, or both? Why?

C. Play Janis Joplin's "What Good Can Drinkin' Do"

D. Pass out hand-out with potential perspectives (taken from James Nelson's *Thirst: God and the Alcoholic Experience* (42):

1. *"It's purely sin."* Addiction is caused by personal failings that become habituated in a stubborn sinful pattern. It is voluntary, personally chosen sin, not disease.
2. *"It begins as sin and becomes disease."* Chemical addiction begins as personal sin, then gradually develops into an obsessive-compulsive disease process.
3. *"Addiction is sin and disease all mixed together."* Moral failures contribute to the mental obsession with drinking and purely biological factors result in abnormal physical responses to alcohol. The elements converge.
4. *"Addiction is disease resulting from sin, but that sin is outside a person's responsibility."* Addictions do result from powerful forms of *social* sin—abusive family systems, sexism, racism, poverty, the alcohol and drug-soaked culture in which we live—but sinful social systems are beyond the individual's control. The person is largely a victim.
5. *"Addiction is purely disease; sin is not a factor."* It is not wrong to drink alcohol as such, but a certain percentage of those who do are biologically programmed to develop the disease of alcoholism. Sin is not in the picture. It is a matter of disease pure and simple.

### II. Discussion to set the tone for the Bible Lesson

A. Introduce quote: "I did not become an alcoholic because I drank too much. It was the other way around. I drank too much because I was an alcoholic" (Nelson 74).

1. What do you think about this quote?
2. Do you agree/disagree? What do you like about it or what do you have problems with?

B. What if I phrase this quote in a different way, substituting sin for drinking and our sin nature (i.e. being a sinner) with being addicted: I did not become a sinner because I sinned. It was the other way around. I sinned because I was a sinner.

C. Pose question: Can we understand addicts and their addictions better by understanding our sinful nature as humans?

### III. Bible Lesson: Genesis 3:1-11, 21-24

A. Read Genesis 3:1-11, 21-24

B. Discuss Bible Lesson and its Implications.

1. Words of Deception and Our Tendency to Rationalize and Justify Actions

a. Craftiness of serpent vs. craftiness of addiction

b. The serpent told Eve that her eyes would be opened if she ate the fruit.

i. In what way is this experience similar to addicts?

i. Just as the fruit was desirable for Eve and she took it, so addicts may have seen their addiction as something that was good for taking and pleasing to the eye.

c. When their eyes are opened in verse 7, they do not experience what they expected. They are naked and vulnerable; ashamed for what they've done, as addicts often find themselves after taking, once again, that which was pleasing to the eye, the thing they which thought would fill them.

2. Do you have voices that conflict in your head? Talk about how we often rationalize and justify our decisions, whether it be buying something at a fast food place or shopping mall.

### IV. Developing Empathy, Promoting Compassion, Extending Grace

A. Play "Animal I Have Become" by Three Days Grace. Their entire album (One-X) from which this song is from is dedicated to people struggling with addiction.

B. Although we are tempted to label addiction as a moral failing of the individual, by referring to addictions like alcoholism as a disease, we lift addicts up from the paralyzing shame and guilt they would otherwise experience when in the trenches of an addiction that is so hard and difficult to shake, due to the power of habits underlying their addiction and the way their brain has been wired as a result of this addiction (Nelson 43).

1. By not seeing addiction as "moral depravity or willful misconduct," addicts are given hope for recovery.

2. To understand one is "not willfully bad or weak, but rather dealing with a serious-but-manageable disease" comes as a huge relief to individuals experiencing addiction.

C. Why is it that all people in AA, regardless of how long they have been sober, still refer to themselves as an alcoholic?

1. Can we learn something from the way they identify themselves?

2. Should we think of ourselves less as saints who are saved and more as sinners?

D. Other thoughts and potential points of discussion

1. "If we are persuaded that alcoholism is more adequately understood as disease than as moral failure, we are dealing with something quite different than we had thought" (Nelson 50).

2. "While the disease concept is not sufficient by itself, I find it still utterly necessary to a whole-person approach" (53).

3. See if people still have the same view of addiction when given the option between 1-5 again. Remind them that it's okay to disagree and to have a different opinion.

## RETHINK Addiction Week 4: Thirsting for God

Objective: Help participants to see addiction as a spiritual issue at its core. Help participants to see addicts as people who are thirsting after God, even if they do not realize this for themselves

Materials Needed:

- Bibles
- Computer to play song and skit

### I. Opening

A. Prayer

B. Introductory exercise: Put various slogan's from soda or beer companies in a hat and have individuals pick one each and read to the rest of the group. Examples include:

1. Sprite: Obey your thirst
2. Coke: Open Happiness
3. Bud: Where there's life, there's Bud

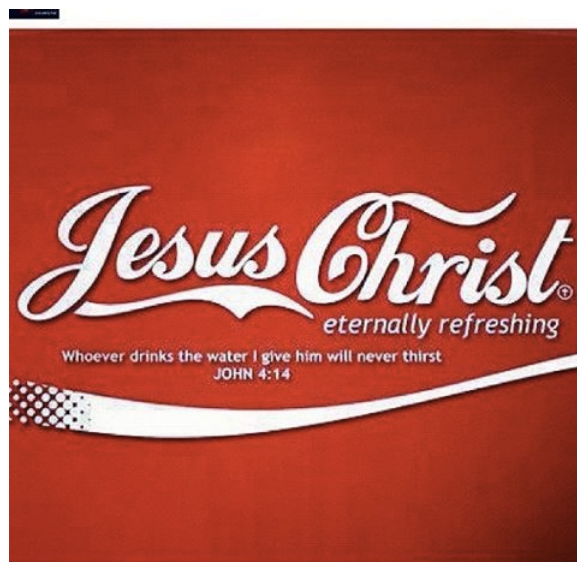
C. Questions

1. What are these companies trying to sell you on? What is their marketing strategy?
2. Do their slogans embody what one experiences when drinking them?

D. Although different companies will try to convince us that they have the answer to our deepest desires, only one thing can satisfy our thirst: Jesus Christ

E. Play "Love is Here" by Tenth Avenue North, focusing on the following lines after:

1. Come to the waters you who thirst and you'll thirst no more
2. Come to the treasure you who want and you'll want no more



### II. Discussion to set the tone for the Bible Lesson

A. Augustine says, "Our hearts are restless until they find rest in God" (Nelson 23).

1. How does this relate to the addict's experience in their quest to find that which will quench their thirst?
2. Read chorus of "God-Shaped Hole" by Plumb  
*There's a God-shaped hole in all of us. And the restless soul is searching  
 There's a God-shaped hole in all of us. And it's a void only He can fill.*
3. What do you think of this idea depicted in the song? How does it relate to your life and how can it relate to an addict's life?
  - a. Truth: Over and above all else, we were created for God.
  - b. Problem: We have filled the thing which only God can fill with something less substantive, a false god which can never satisfy the deepest longings of our soul (Nelson 23).
4. Desperate for God
  - a. Play "Everything" skit:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLPy\\_h8IzQg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLPy_h8IzQg)
  - b. Read Psalm 42:1-2
    - i. Describe a time when you were absolutely desperate to satisfy a longing you had.
    - ii. Use example of a swimmer under water who is desperate to get back up for air.
  - b. Behind every addict's craving for that next drink or fix, there exists a deeper craving for God, even if they can't name that longing themselves.
  - c. Often times, the thing we fill our God-shaped hole with is actually a false god, and idol we have put in place of the pearl of great price.

### III. Bible Lesson: John 4:1-14

#### A. Read John 4:1-14

#### B. Discuss

1. Verse 10: Do we realize what Jesus offers us?
2. How does verse 13 relate to an addict's experience: "Everyone who drinks this water (i.e. the water from the well) will be thirsty again."

### IV. Developing Empathy, Promoting Compassion, Extending Grace

A. Jews often avoided going through Samaria and did not associate with Samaritans. In fact, Jews would be considered ceremonially unclean if they used a drinking vessel handled by a Samaritan.

1. Considering Jesus not only went through Samaria, but talked with this Samaritan woman and even asked her for a drink, how might we walk where we don't normally walk and talk to those we don't normally talk to?
2. Have we been guilty of treating addicts much like Jews treated Samaritans in Jesus' day?
3. Addicts should never be characterized as the "other" or as outcasts or people who are less valuable than others.
4. The story of the Samaritan woman challenges us to view everyone, addicts included, with love and compassion, extending grace and the promises of God to even them.



## RETHINK Addiction Week 5: RETHINK Church

Objective: Now that we have been rethinking addiction for several weeks, participants will rethink about what it means to be the church in general and, more specifically, how we can best be the church to those who are addicted. Participants will see the ways in which AA embodies what church should be and will be challenged to see how we, as Christians, might learn from AA.

Materials Needed:

- Clip-outs with AA meeting perspectives
- Computer for Skyping capabilities

### I. Opening

A. Prayer

B. Opening Question: Do recovery programs need to be Christian?

C. Difficulty in defining addiction

1. There are lots of programs out there with lots of different focuses and foundations.

a. What are some programs, whether Christian or not, that you have heard of or experienced?

e.g. AA, America Keswick, Celebrate Recovery

2. The variance in these approaches speaks to the complexity of the issue of addiction, even if we may already have our own preconceived notions of what addiction is or who addicted individuals are.

3. Regardless of these differences, God transforms lives through secular as well as Christian recovery programs.

a. Whether such programs take a disease model, sin model, or try to integrate both, can we discount any program if people are being helped and impacted through it?

b. Regardless of what flaws may lie in any given model, do we not believe God works in and through what humans have established to bring hope and healing to those who are broken and suffering.

### II. Alcoholics Anonymous as a Model and Example to the Church

A. Explain Alcoholics Anonymous: the first and most well-known of recovery programs. Their Twelve Steps have been adopted by other addicts, including Narcotics Anonymous and others.

B. Exercise involving seminarians perspectives from attending an AA meeting. Pass around hat with the following clips of statements. Each person or pair is to pick one and then read aloud to the group.

1. "This is what the Church should be: a place where we can be honest and vulnerable about all of the sins of our lives and a place where genuine support can be found."

2. "The experience of walking into those church offices and asking where the AA meeting was and getting met with blank and slightly judgmental stares definitely gave me a taste of the stigma that most alcoholics face."

3. “Walking home, after I shook off the awkwardness of maintaining my role in the room, I realized that these people have come closer to God than I ever have been. The way they openly discussed honesty and dishonesty, anger and tranquility, drunkenness and sobriety, were not just informational, but absolutely beautiful.”

4. “I felt sad thinking that many of these people probably would not feel comfortable attending the average church; and yet, their attentiveness, openness, supportiveness, welcoming manner, candor, and willingness to show vulnerability are what is all too often lacking in our worshipping communities.”

C. Responding to Exercise

1. What are you thinking? What are you feeling after hearing those statements?

2. As sad as it may be to hear this truth, people in recovery believe Christianity is the last place they should go for help. The church has been stigmatized with the idea that we don’t deal with real issues well and that we need to learn how to welcome people better.

D. Personal Testimony from someone who has been through AA and is now sober

1. Use Tom from the church and/or Skype in Don Harrison from AZ.

2. Open it up to Q & A, allowing Tom and/or Don to not ask questions they don’t want to, but answering whatever they feel led.

\*Different individuals with different stories may be used.

### III. Developing Empathy, Promoting Compassion, Extending Grace, & Now Doing Something with What You’ve Learned

A. Reflections on the past five weeks

1. What have you learned? How are you better as a result of your engagement with this curriculum?

2. In what ways have you rethought and reconsidered your perspective on addiction and those who suffer from addiction?

B. Called to be sent and do something with what we’ve learned

1. How might we take what we now know and use it to impact others?

2. What should our next step be as a church?

## Works Cited

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