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Finding Freedom and Transformation by Overcoming Attachments and Addictions

(April 2006 Tape / CD of the Month)

Romans 12:2

...be transformed by the renewing of your mind...

Our goal as Christians should be to become more like Jesus Christ, which means we've got a lot of changing to do. Therefore we must be *free* to change—to make godly choices and to govern our lives according to God's Word. Thus we must overcome anything and everything that hinders us from becoming like him. To overcome, we must first be *aware* of what might be limiting us. That is why we need to understand addictions and “attachments” as things that reduce our freedom to love God and our neighbor, and to be able to be “conformed to the image of his Son” (**Rom. 8:29-KJV**).

Definition of terms:

“Attachment”: the fixing of a desire (attraction) or a fear (aversion) onto a particular person, place, thing, idea, etc., limiting one's freedom to act in love without compulsion. Attachments are at the root of addictions, which represent a complete loss of control and freedom. Attachment, from the Old French word *attaché* means, **“nailed to.”** Attachment nails our desire to certain objects and creates addiction if not interrupted.

Healthy and unhealthy attachments

- It is healthy to be able to form attachments to appropriate people, and to form habits that serve our spiritual growth. But these attachments ought never to capture us to the point of becoming unable to love God first.
- **Attachment theory** asserts that we need to have quality bonds with those that love and nurture us or we will be more likely to develop unhealthy attachments to things that we hope will give us love. This is the root of idolatry. Since all of us have been loved imperfectly, part of our fallen condition is to be incomplete and to seek something to complete us. If we seek God, we are made whole. If we seek things other than God, we are disappointed and get in bondage (a state of limited freedom).
- If we have had healthy attachments to people in love as we were growing up, the easier it is to learn to let go of things to which we become attached that are not healthy. Those who have not been properly nurtured growing up, but who have experienced abuse, abandonment or neglect, will have more problems with attachments and addictions and have a harder time letting go of things.
- Attachments are inevitable; we cannot eliminate them but **we can become aware of them** so that we can act to maintain our freedom and walk in love. We can own the attachment without the attachment owning us, and we can interrupt the attachment before it becomes a full-blown addiction.

“Habit”: **1.a.** A recurrent, often unconscious pattern of behavior that is acquired through frequent repetition. **b.** An established disposition of the mind or character. It is in the nature of the human brain to reduce everything it can to habit.

“Addiction” may be defined as any behavior that is used to produce gratification, escape from internal discomfort and/or can be engaged in compulsively. Another term for this is addictive disorder. Three characteristic findings of any addictive disorder are the following:

- **Compulsivity**, that is, loss of the ability to choose freely whether to stop or to continue.
- **Continuation** of the behavior despite adverse consequences, such as loss of health, sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, poor school or job performance and compromised relationships.
- **Obsession** - the addict is obsessed with their addiction and generally places more importance on the addiction than they do on other areas of their lives.

Criteria for addictive disorder

If 3 or more of any of the following continue for more than 30 days, addiction is present.

1. Frequent engaging in a behavior to a greater extent or over a longer period than intended
2. Persistent desire for the behavior or one or more unsuccessful efforts to reduce or control the behavior
3. Much time spent in activities necessary for the behavior, engaging in the behavior, or recovering from its effects
4. Frequent preoccupation with the behavior or preparatory activities
5. Frequent engaging in the behavior when expected to fulfill occupational, academic, domestic, or social obligations
6. Giving up or limiting important social, occupational, or recreational activities because of the behavior
7. Continuation of the behavior despite knowledge of having a persistent or recurrent social, financial, psychological, or physical problem that is caused or exacerbated by the behavior
8. Need to increase the intensity or frequency of the behavior to achieve the desired effect, or diminished effect with continued behavior of the same intensity
9. Restlessness or irritability if unable to engage in the behavior

Addictions are characterized by tolerance, withdrawal symptoms, self-deception, loss of willpower, and distortion of attention. (May, *Addiction and Grace*)

Whether our addictions are to approval, gossip, television, video games, crossword puzzles, sex, drugs, or rock and roll, the process by which the brain supports and encourages the addiction is the same. To be free and find transformation, we must do as the Word says—renew our mind—“new up” our mind, establishing new habits of body and mind. To do this **we must first be aware that we are addicted**, and that we may need a lot of help from God and others to break the addiction. It will help to understand that it is in the nature of the brain to reduce everything it can to habit.

The *“human will”* resides in the neocortex tissue of the brain. Here lies a series of brain cells connected to each other by synapses. These connections disconnect and reconnect over time depending on one's experiences. With repetition, one's choices, behavior, and actions create links and defined routes (or *“ruts”*) that become embedded in the tissues actually making the pathways easier and easier to follow. It's sort of like a hiking trail that gets worn through the woods and easier to follow the more times it's used. Satinover: *“A specific behavior, whether good or bad, becomes increasingly strengthened through repetition. Physically altering the brain tissue to create new and better pathways is a difficult task and takes persistent repetitious new behavior.”* (Source: <http://www.teenpaths.org>)

If you continue to do what you have always done, you'll continue to get what you have always gotten!

From Gerald May's *Addiction and Grace*:

Addiction is the real hijacker of desire, bonding and enslaving the energy of desire and **attaching it** to certain specific behaviors, things, or people. These objects of desire then become preoccupations and obsessions, and rule our lives (and loves).

The psychological, neurological, and spiritual dynamics of full-fledged addiction are actively at work within every human being. The same processes that are responsible for addiction to alcohol and narcotics are also responsible for addiction to ideas, work, relationships, power, moods, fantasies, and an endless variety of other things. We are all addicts in every sense of the word. Addiction makes idolaters of us all, because it forces us to worship these objects of attachment, thereby preventing us from truly, freely loving God and one another. Addiction breeds willfulness within us, yet, paradoxically, it erodes our free will and eats away at our dignity. Yet, in another paradox, our addictions can lead us to a deep appreciation of grace. They can bring us to our knees.

Our approach to attachments and addictions will be to recognize that they are a part of our fallen human condition and for which we need God's grace and mercy to help us overcome their binding and limiting influences.

From "Our View of Christian Spirituality"

"As we grow up in Christ we learn to identify and interrupt unhealthy attachments to things, ideas, people, emotions, etc. that interfere with our ability to love God completely and our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus often addresses the idea of attachment, whether to riches, in religious ideas, relationships, or any other thing that might hinder wholehearted devotion to God. Attachments are at the root of addictions and idolatry, so it is imperative that we deal with whatever we might have in our lives that limits our freedom to love and be loved."

Buddhism and Attachments

Buddhism teaches its adherents to embrace dharma, or total appreciation of impermanence and change. It supposes that all human suffering comes from attachments of various kinds; therefore the way to alleviate suffering is to detach. But without healthy attachments, life is not worth living—we are made to bond to God and others. The problem arises when these bonds become more important than the bond we are supposed to develop to God our Creator. Buddhist views on attachments do provide insight into Judeo-Christian teaching on the same subject, insight we may have missed unless we engage in some interfaith dialogue. Sometimes a shift of perspective yields insights.

For instance, Buddhist's teach that desire and fear are two sides of the same coin; what we have a strong desire for we may also have a strong fear of losing or not getting. In fact, the desire may be fueled by fear. In Genesis 3 we see desire and fear occurring together as two faces of the sin that entered the world. Attachments appear as attractions (desires) or aversions (fears). See Appendices A and B.

The Biblical Evidence of "Attachment"

Ephesians 2:3 (KJV)

We are captivated by, or become attached to "...fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind..."

Galatians 5:22 and 23

One fruit of the spirit is "self-control," which is probably the key to freely manifesting the other fruit--like love, peace, joy, etc.

1 Corinthians 6:12 (KJV)

All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.

Genesis 3:6-10

Adam and Eve. Humans were captured by their desire, or lust, for more than they had or even needed—wisdom, knowledge of evil, equality with God. Their desire raged like a river spilling over its banks. This unfulfilled desire quickly turned to fear.

Genesis 25:29-34

Esau. Attachment to physical comfort; man should not live by bread alone, but by every word of God (Matt. 4:4). Cp. Hebrews 12:16, which calls Esau a profane person because he was so afraid of starving that he despised his birthright.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

There is a time for everything, so don't get too attached to circumstances. Jewish tradition—that all things have their time and place.

Matthew 4:1ff

The wilderness temptations served to rid Jesus of any worldly attachments right at the outset of his ministry--food and drink, physical comfort, recognition, power, etc. (cp. **John 4:27-34**)

Matthew 5:44-48

“Love your enemies.” That is, don't be so attached to what they say or do that you are reactive, desire revenge, or let them define you.

Matthew 6:24-34

“No one can serve two masters...You cannot serve both God and Money. Not fearful of not being taken care of; not attached to material things.

Matthew 8:24

Attachment to physical life; fear of death. (cp. Heb. 2:14). Matthew 10:38 and 39: “and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (cp. Matt. 16:24 and 25).

Matthew 9:13

‘...I desire mercy, not sacrifice...’ (cp. Hosea 6:6). Attachment to religious self-sacrifice more than showing mercy to others, often leading to judgment and condemnation of others who are not making the same sacrifices.

Matthew 10:19 and 20

Attachment to saying the right thing and over preparing; fear of not knowing what to say, and so remaining silent.

Matthew 10:35-39

Attachment to relationships and family—must *leave* father and mother to *cleave* as an adult to spouse and personal goals and desires. It's good to be attached to family, but that can become an unhealthy attachment that keeps us from becoming bonded to God as our first love.

Matthew 15:1-9

Attachment to tradition, giving the appearance of obedience; attached to looking good to others rather than to God; attaching to the letter of the law and not the heart.

Matthew 19:21-24

Attachment to money. Jesus addresses the young man's attachment to money. Cp. Joseph of Arimathea who was rich, but used his wealth to further the purposes of God, not for his own enjoyment. **1 Timothy 6:7-10** the love of money is a root of many evils: not money itself but the attachment to money.

Matthew 20:1-16

Parable of the “unfair” landowner. Attachment to one’s own idea of fairness; fearful of not being treated fairly by the world.

Matthew 20:25-28

Attachment to rulership, leadership, influence, being served and taken care of; disciples often argued over who should be the foremost among them (**Mark 9:34, Luke 9:46-48**).

Matthew 25:24 and 25

Attachment to fear; not free to risk (Parable of 10 talents). Need to have freedom to risk, to acknowledge the existence of fear but go ahead and do what you know to do anyway. Many times faith is expressed in acting against fear. Courage is not the absence of fear, but acting in its presence.

Matthew 26:6-13

Attachment to good works, helping the poor, not wasting things. He placed higher value on her expression of faith and respect for him.

Matthew 26:38-40

Gethsemane interrupted Jesus’ attachment to his idea of how the redemption of the world could be accomplished. It is not a sin to have attachments. It may be sin to act upon them, however.

Luke 4:18 and 19

Jesus announces his intention to free “the prisoners” and to “release the oppressed” (cp. Isaiah 61:1 and 2a).

Romans 12:15-19

“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.” Not attached to our own emotional state but able to adapt to that of others for edification. Verse 16 says: “...be willing to associate with people of low position...” Not attached to social position.

Romans 14:1-7

Not attached to judging and criticizing others concerning “disputable matters.” Not attached to special days, or no special days. The one with the most scruples, the more attachments, has the less faith. The more faith, the more freedom and flexibility, and the less investment in things appearing a certain way.

Romans 14:15-21

Not attached to customs and habits of eating and drinking; attached to Christ and what is in the interest of not offending your brother.

1 Corinthians 3:5-9

Not attached to a particular minister more than the Lord Jesus. Not attached to our own significance and importance as ministers. We only plant and water as God's fellow workers, but He does the hard part—cause the growth.

1 Corinthians 9:15

Not attached to our rights as ministers, but to do what is best for the church. Not attached to being supported by the church—willing to be a tent-maker.

1 Corinthians 13:1ff (KJV)

Attachment to sacrificing one’s life as a religious act, but outside of the will of God—not doing it in the love of God (“...though I give my body to be burned...”). Paul was attached to religious sacrifice, and thought of his life as expendable [Cp. **Acts 20:24** Paul going to Jerusalem, but outside the will of God. Jesus had already told him that they would not hear him, but hate him and want to kill him (**Acts 22:17-21**). Compare to Jesus, who did not throw his life away but waited for the right time (**John 7:1-6**)].

1 Corinthians 16:15 (KJV)

“...they have addicted themselves to the ministry...” Addicted is the Greek word *tasso*, “to appoint oneself or take responsibility for.” Not truly “addicted.” It is possible to become addicted to the gratifying aspects of successful ministry.

2 Corinthians 2:7

Not attached to reproof, judgment, punishment, but forgiving; forgiving is about letting go of attachments. Unforgiveness is one of Satan's devices. Not remaining attached to the offense or the offender, locked in a dance of death with those who have hurt you. You have to open the door and let yourself go.

Philippians 3:7-10

Not attached to our past accomplishments, relationships, or struggles to the point these blind us to present opportunities or blessings. Paul was attached to the Jews, his ancestral people; he was attached to telling his story to the Jews, even after Jesus told him to get off it and get out of Jerusalem.

Philippians 4:11-13 (KJV)

“Content” in Greek is *autarkes*, which means self-governing, balanced (cp. **Prov. 30:8 and 9**). Not attached to poverty or riches, comfort or discomfort; we accept whatever circumstances happen in service to the Lord.

Colossians 3:1

Not attached to the things of this world, but things above that pertain to Christ.

1 Thessalonians 4

Attachment to grief without hope; we let go of our grief in the light of the Hope in order to keep on serving. Conversely, we're not attached to not grieving—to deny the reality of death and grief in order to be “positive.”

Holding on and letting go: a metaphor for the Christian life

Things to hold on to: “instruction” (**Prov. 4:13**); “the good” (**1 Thess. 5:21**), “...the teachings we passed on to you...” (**2 Thess. 2:15**); “the trustworthy message” (**Titus 1:9**).

Things to let go of: judgment of others, offenses, condemning ourselves for past mistakes, materialism, etc., etc.

Attachment to being “positive,” “believing,” or false optimism

Record of Israel is a record of their attachments. “Stiff-necked.” They were stuck in Egypt, thinking about vegetables. They refused to listen to God and repent of their idolatry and were taken into captivity into Babylon; then the false prophets told them to repent when at that time they needed to accept that they were going to be in captivity for 70 years.

Jeremiah 29:1-11

We become too attached to the idea that we will be supernaturally delivered in every situation. We become presumptuous of God's mercy and grace (**Dan. 3:16-18 and 28**).

Peter and Paul knew they were going to die and not be delivered

Peter and Paul were told they were going to die (**2 Pet. 1:12-15 and 2 Tim. 4:6-13**).

Conclusion: the Bible is full of examples of the idea of attachment, and honestly addressing the issue will help us be transformed. Unhealthy attachments suck the life out of us, plus limit our relationships with God and others, and from walking by the spirit.

Appendix A: Attraction, Attachments or Addictions

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|---------------------|-----------------|----------------------|------------------|
| Anger | Drinking | Jealousy | Responsibility |
| Approval | Drugs | Knowledge | Revenge |
| Art | Eating | Lying | Scab picking |
| Attractiveness | Envy | Marriage | Seductiveness |
| Being good | Exercise | Meeting expectations | Self-image |
| Being helpful | Fame | Memories | Self-improvement |
| Being loved | Family | Messiness | Sex |
| Being nice | Fantasies | Money | Shoplifting |
| Being right | Finger drumming | Movies | Sleeping |
| Being taken care of | Fishing | Music | Soft drinks |
| Calendars | Food | Nail biting | Sports |
| Candy | Friends | Neatness | Status |
| Cars | Furniture | Parents | Stock market |
| Causes | Gamboling | Performance | Stress |
| Chewing gum | Gardening | Pets | Sunbathing |
| Children | Golf | Pimple squeezing | Suspiciousness |
| Chocolate | Gossiping | Pistachio nuts | Talking |
| Cleanliness | Groups | Pizza | Television |
| Coffee | Guilt | Politics | Time |
| Comparisons | Hair twisting | Popcorn | Tobacco |
| Competence | Happiness | Popularity | Weight |
| Competition | Housekeeping | Potato chips | Winning |
| Computers | Humor | Power | Work |
| Contests | Hunting | Psychotherapy | Worthiness |
| Death | Ice cream | Punctuality | |
| Depression | Images of God | Reading | |
| Dreams | Intimacy | Relationships | |

Appendix B is on back.

Appendix B: Aversion Addictions

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|------------------|---------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| Airplanes | Commitment | Loneliness | Public speaking |
| Anchovies | Conflict | Mice | Rats |
| Anger | Crowds | Needles | Rejection |
| Animals | Darkness | Open spaces | Responsibility |
| Being: | Death | Pain | Sex |
| Abnormal | Dentists | People of different: | Sharp instruments |
| Alone | Dependence | Beliefs | Slimy creatures |
| Discounted | Dirt | Class | Snakes |
| Fat | Disapproval | Culture | Spiders |
| Judged | Doctors | Politics | Storms |
| Overwhelmed | Embarrassment | Race | Strangers |
| Thin | Evil spirits | Religion | Success |
| Tricked | Failure | Sex | Tests |
| Birds | Fire | People who are: | Traffic |
| Blood | Germs | Addicted | Tunnels |
| Boredom | Guilt | Competent | Vulnerability |
| Bridges | High places | Fat/Thin | Water |
| Bugs | Illness | Ignorant | Writing |
| Cats | Independence | Neat/Messy | |
| Closed-in-spaces | Intimacy | Rich/Poor | |