

“Take Back Your Life”

Romans 7:14-8:2

Series: Believe – Week 23. Self-Control

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My grandson Isaac is a little more than a year and a half old. He cannot say his name. He cannot read, write, spell or use the potty. Yet he knows how to wield a remote control. Every time he visits he goes right for the drawer, pulls out the TV, DVD, Cable, CD, and Surround Sound Remotes and starts pushing buttons – all the buttons. If I didn't stop him, he'd probably go on Amazon and order a BMW. He likes the power. He likes the supremacy. He likes the control. I think he will one day rule the world. You think I'm kidding. When my son Peter, his dad, gave me his one year old portrait last Christmas he said Isaac looks like a young Vladimir Putin.

In great and small ways, we all want control. The truth is: we have very little control. So much of life depends on the decisions of others. Even when we look within we feel we are at the mercy of desires, drives and impulses. Doesn't it seem, at times someone else has the remote control on you and they are pushing your buttons?

That's why this week's chapter in BELIEVE is Self-Control. The Key Question is “How does God free me from addictions and sinful habits?” and the Key Idea is “I have the power through Christ to control myself.” This comes from our Key Verse:

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. (Titus 2:11-13)

Many of us have compulsions beyond our control. Even when we hate it, we still can't stop it. What is a compulsion? The dictionary defines it as “an irresistible impulse to perform an irrational act.” Irresistible means you cannot resist the impulse. Irrational suggests you would not do this if you were in your right, rational, mind. A compulsion is neither rational nor logical. It builds up in you and controls you again and again. Some compulsions are insignificant. Others are overwhelming, addictive and destructive. There are abundant examples of compulsive people.

The TV show "Hoarders" features the true stories of those who can't let go of their "stuff." The show brings in loved ones, psychologists, and organizational experts to help the hoarders stop hoarding. For example, there's Phyllis whose house is cluttered with dolls and other belongings. Her place is so crammed with stuff she has to crawl over mounds of garbage to reach the recliner where she eats and sleeps. Phyllis's children, concerned for her health, threaten to contact Adult Protective Services. But Phyllis's

compulsions prevail to the point where she is willing to go without running water and heat. That's extreme. Yet here are some more common compulsions.

- The person who works 10-12 hour days, six-seven days a week and rarely takes a vacation or a day off. They complain about the hours. They say it's all for the family. They claim it's the way of the world. It's just business. "This is my busy time. I'll be able to cut back someday." And someday never comes.
- There's the person who enjoys a few drinks at the end of the day to relieve work stress and more drinks on the weekend. They drink to relax, drink to celebrate, drink when things go well, drink when times are bad. They know they should cut back. They promise to cut back but now it's hard to get started in the morning without it. Substitute drugs for drinks, especially opioids, and you have the same phenomenon.
- There's the person who seeks comfort in food when the world is too difficult to bear and, on the opposite side, the one who scrupulously controls the diet and constantly exercises because everything else is out of control.
- There's the person whose spending fills up multiple credit cards to the limit. There are gambling addicts who believe the next one will pay off.
- There are the teens who cut or hurt themselves or engage in reckless behavior.
- There is the person addicted to online pornography, multiple relationships or affairs. They cloak the whole thing in secrecy but it's getting hard to keep it hidden.

King David is described as "a man after God's heart." Yet he, who has everything, is drawn into lust when he surveys a woman named Bathsheba bathing on the roof of her home. Secretly, she is escorted into the palace where he sleeps with her. When she becomes pregnant, David attempts to cover up his sin. When that fails he arranges to have Bathsheba's husband killed. He thinks he is safe...until God exposes him through the prophet Nathan. Psalm 51 is his anguished cry of confession and repentance:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin (Psalm 51:1-2).

If you don't have any of these compulsions there may be someone you love who does. You've tried everything to get them to stop. It's your mission in life to fix them but you're failing. It's starting to dawn on you that your compulsion is trying to manage your compulsive person.

In his letter to the Roman, the Apostle Paul reveals the power of compulsion in his own heart:

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. 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. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. (Romans 7:14-20 selected verses)

Although we know what is right and we want to do what's right, the power of the compulsion, what the Bible calls sin, works against us *from the inside*. As a result, what we know is wrong, the very thing we don't want to do, we keep on doing. Paul continues:

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Romans 7:21-24)

Is there a way out of the prison of compulsion? Many of us try do-it-yourself fixes. Some *Just Say No*. "This is my last time. I'll quit tomorrow." Yet the more you indulge, the stronger it gets. Some *Tough It Out*. "I can handle this with will power. I've got it under control. I don't need to see a counselor or go to a support group." This method often leads to one of two results. Either will power caves in or the person stops one addiction and starts another. Some *Blame Others*. "I don't have the problem. You do. You're the one who's driving me to act this way." Some even try *Religion*. "All I need is a miracle. If I only pray more, read the Bible more, go to church more I won't have this problem." These are all forms of Denial. "Sure I drink, work, eat, lust, spend a little too much. But I can quit anytime. I'm not as bad as that person over there." Denial only looks at the outward compulsive behavior. It pull at the weed but doesn't reach the root. Paul says this is an inner problem which is waging war against your mind and will.

As I've listened to people describe their addictions, obsessions and compulsions they are three common interlocking spheres.

- 1. Inner Powerlessness** – There is an inner desire or hunger which the person cannot stop or refuse.
- 2. Outer Stimulus** – There is an external thing which triggers or fuels the compulsion: drugs, drink, gambling, porn, spending, etc...
- 3. Secrecy** – The compulsion needs the cover of secrecy to flourish.

You see these three spheres operating in David's sin with Bathsheba. His inner desire is triggered by an outer vision. The whole act is played out in secrecy and attempted cover up. When someone tries to stop they usually avoid the Outer Stimulus. We say, "I won't drink, smoke, take drugs." Yet the Inner Powerlessness is never addressed. It simply waits for the next opportunity of Secrecy to indulge the Stimulus.

Compulsions point to a deeper problem, a pain buried inside. It could be grief or sadness over a loss, anger, shame, abandonment, abuse. The compulsion, the drug of choice, is medicating and covering up the pain. The Bible doesn't actually recommend self-control. There are two words in Greek. The first refers to "strength from within." The

second describes a “sound, sober, sane or saved mind.” It’s not self-control. It’s God control. Letting God free you from the compulsion is a long and difficult, often painful process. But it does work. For those who take this journey of recovery there is a life of freedom from the compulsion and there is joy. It’s time to take back your life.

Replace Inner Powerlessness with God’s Power. You must go from wishing you could change to wanting change, from denial to admitting there is a problem, from self-help to complete surrender. Having tried multiple times to stop the compulsion, you recognize it is more powerful than you and your life is beyond your control. No more quick fixes, no more blaming, no more denial. Recovery begins when you put control of your self in God’s hands. Three thousand ago David wrote,

You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (Psalm 51:16-17).

Paul puts it this way:

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death (Romans 7:24-8:2).

It all begins with surrender. But it doesn’t stop there. After looking to God we must look into our selves.

Replace Secrecy with Accountability. You may stop the addiction for a time and think you are cured. In reality, you’ve only touched the surface, the tip of the iceberg. The problems and pain which cause the compulsion still lie hidden and untreated. You need to uncover, discover and discard the garbage within. It’s important to write out a complete history of your addiction or compulsion – how, when and why it started and developed and all the people it affects. It is best to be specific and to get it all down on paper. Once you see it in black and white you recognize the depth of the problems and the damage it has done.

Once it’s all written down, tell God, yourself, and, most importantly, another person. This should be someone you trust, who is understanding, non-judgmental and confidential. It’s best if it is someone outside your family and who may be recovering from the same problem you face. In 12 Step programs they call this person a Sponsor. Accountability breaks the power of secrecy. Ask that person to help you work on the

weaknesses which cause you to get into trouble. King David knew the importance of this self-examination:

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. (Psalm 51:3-4,6,10).

Finally, **Replace Outer Stimulus with Restored Relationships**. No one lives in a vacuum. David's sin hurt Bathsheba, killed her husband and threatened to destroy the nation. Our compulsions affect family, coworkers and friends. Many leave a trail of wrecked relationships in their path. To truly recover, we need to specifically ask forgiveness and restore these relationships. Make a list of those you've hurt. Go to them. Seek forgiveness. Make amends. This is not easy. Yet healing and restoring a relationship brings great freedom from the compulsion.

This is not a once and done process. It's a daily journey. To ensure you don't slip back into the old way of life it's vital to do these three circles every day – draw in God's power through prayer, break the silence by staying accountable, avoid the stimulus by restoring relationships. Once you find a measure of freedom from your compulsion, reach out and help someone else. You can't keep what you don't give away. The more you share your hope and healing with others, the stronger it grows in you. Even David said,

Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you. (Psalm 51: 12-13).

Two final words of caution. This process will not work if you attempt to do it on your own. Find a group of other people who are recovering from the same problem you face. There is a 12 step group for almost every type of compulsion. I am glad to help you locate one. Find a sponsor in that group who can personally guide you through your recovery. Second, don't put this off for another day. Put aside your pride and fear and take the first step. There is a wonderful life waiting for you – the abundant life Jesus wants to give you.

In his book, *Searching for God Knows What*, Donald Miller shares a story about a friend whose life was being destroyed by alcoholism:

Last year, I pulled a friend out of his closet. His marriage was falling apart because of his inability to stop drinking. This man is a kind and brilliant human being, touched with many gifts from God, but addicted to alcohol, and being taken down in the fight. He was suicidal, we thought, and the kids had been sent away. We sat together on his back deck and talked for hours, deep into the night. I didn't think he was going to make it. I worried about him as I boarded my flight back to Portland, and he checked himself into rehab.

Two months later he picked me up from the same airport, having gone several weeks without a drink. As he told me the story of the beginnings of his painful recovery process, he said a single incident was giving him the strength to continue. His father had flown in to attend a recovery meeting with him, and in the meeting my friend had to confess all his issues and weaknesses. When he finished, his father stood up to address the group of addicts. He looked at his son and said, "I have never loved my son as much as I do at this moment. I love him. I want all of you to know I love him." My friend said at that moment, for the first time in his life, he was able to believe God loved him, too. He believed if God, his father, and his wife all loved him, he could fight the addiction, and he believed he might make it.¹

God and many people in your life love you. It's time to take back your life.

¹ Donald Miller, "Searching for God Knows What" (Thomas Nelson, 2004), p. 130-131