

Gloria Park

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Addiction and Grace Report

In *Addiction and Grace*, Dr. Gerald May presents a stunning account of the qualities of both addiction and grace, respectively, and how the two are ultimately inextricably intertwined. That is, addiction is “what turns us away from love—away from love for ourselves, away from love for one another, and away from love for God” (2). On the other hand, it is also what enables us to *receive* grace by bringing us to our knees in a sense of utter failure and helplessness. In other words, it creates within us a kind of “spiritual openness” which is essential to receiving grace (10). The three points which most stood out to me from May’s work were: (1) true freedom is found in detachment rather than attachment, 2) the physical, spiritual, and psychological nature of addiction, and (3) addiction as the very means of receiving grace.

Beginning with the first point, that is true freedom as detachment, May defines detachment as freedom “of desire,” contrary to how it is commonly understood to be, that is freedom “from desire” (14). True detachment “devalues neither desire nor the objects of desire” but rather “a liberation of desire” (15). Thus, detachment “uncovers our basic desire for God and sets it free” (ibid.). In other words, true freedom is not found in Freud’s pleasure principle, that is gaining what one wants when one wants it, but rather trusting one’s desires to be fulfilled in God alone, which ultimately always involves a risk of faith. In particular, the author’s illustration of the common addiction of security deeply convicted me. The Bible calls us to trust God with all of our needs and desires, trusting that He will provide according to His good will once we seek His kingdom first and foremost. Yet, in practice, I often find myself relying on my own means

and efforts to provide for my needs and wants, rather than relying on God. This too can easily become and is very much an addiction, as I begin to idolize security, particularly financial security. Another area in which I often find myself seeking security is human relationships, which I also realize ultimately cannot fulfill my desire for God. Yet, this is much easier said than done. As indicated in my previous papers, I have identified within myself a fear of rejection and vice versa desire for acceptance, often from other human beings, that manifests itself in people-pleasing or codependency.

The author describes at length the roles of the body, spirit, and mind on the nature of addiction. While I had, of course, been previously cognizant of the inability of sheer willpower to overcome addiction, I had hitherto never been unable to pinpoint exactly how and why addiction was self-defeating in nature. After reading Chapters 3 to 5, however, it made complete sense. Psychologically speaking, addiction occurs through a complex web of self-deception, including such defense mechanisms as denial and repression. Interestingly, the author notes that even the “I can handle it” rhetoric proves to be self-destructive to the addict who, in fact, cannot handle it. This is directly related to the chemical imbalances and neurological rewiring of the brain which occurs in response to addictive behavior, which as the author illustrates, is “permanent” (). That is to say, once one becomes addicted, one may very well “recover,” but one can never truly “overcome” one’s addiction and must remain vigilant, lest they relapse (90). Spiritual speaking, addiction is as aforesaid the antithesis of that which we were created for: to love and be loved by God and others. The author refers to addiction as essentially the “displacement of [our] desire for God” (93).

This brings us to our last point, and the author’s basic premise, which is that addiction is the very means of receiving grace. While I was initially convinced of the author’s reasoning that

grace is a necessity in dealing with addiction, I was rather skeptical as to whether the vice versa were true, that is addiction was necessary in experiencing grace. After reading *Addiction and Grace*, however, I have come to agree wholeheartedly with the author that we indeed are all addicts to a degree, and if this addiction is equated with sin, or that which renders us unable to love and be loved by God, then indeed addiction is what makes grace not only necessary, but possible. As to why this is the case, the author presents the following case: if God were to reveal Himself to us with no other potential for attachment to other objects, then we would mandatorily “fix our desires upon this Divine Object, try to grasp and possess it, addict ourselves to it” (94). As the author repeatedly states throughout his work, however, addiction renders love impossible and true love and freedom is not found in attachment, but detachment. Out of God’s deep desire to be in loving relationship with us, His creatures, He enables us to freely choose Him and by extension, other objects of desire.

However, in our sinful nature, we naturally attach ourselves to other objects aside from Himself, but upon doing so, we find ourselves becoming addicted and increasingly less able to experience love and the abundant life which we were created for. Throughout this book, I was reminded of John 10:10, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” May’s work helped me to realize the universal nature of addiction, including my own dysfunctional attachments, which will undoubtedly affect my ministry moving forward. It also helps me to have compassion towards those who may struggle with more extreme or external chemical addictions, which are often stigmatized, especially within the church context. In terms of Soul Care, I hope to put into practice the author’s suggestions in not relying on willpower but rather God’s grace and maintaining a “spiritual openness” to allow God to meet us in those very areas of weakness and helplessness.

With integrity, I have read this book

Quickly but Completely— 80%

Rhoni Poll