Chapter 11
Worship, Contentment and Addiction

After all, don't we have the ability to take the initiative to frame our own future? Aren't we in charge of our own destiny? Can't we become anyone we want, do anything we want, go anywhere we want? Independence and autonomy are the watchwords of our day, not dependence and submission
—Gary Beebe[1]

In my teens and twenties I wrote hundreds of songs and produced self-financed recording projects. I led worship in my own church, mostly as a volunteer, and I occasionally did concerts in other churches. I didn't earn income from my music, but I was happy to be using my gifts wherever I could.

In the late 1980's and 1990's I took on more responsibility as a senior pastor of a local church and then as a worship pastor in a mega-church. I wrote several worship songs that became popular across a broad spectrum of church denominations. After ten years of learning the craft of songwriting and using those songs mostly in my own local church, all of a sudden my songs were being published.

At the same time I began to travel widely to lead worship in large conferences, both in the U.S. and internationally. I was frequently ministering in front of large crowds of people. After many years of using my worship gifts in relative obscurity, all of a sudden I had opportunities to lead worship for large numbers of people and make worship recordings that were widely distributed.

Why the résumé? Because in the midst of the excitement that surrounded these big things that God was doing, I battled to keep my motives pure. Ironically, the fruit of intimacy with God—my songs and musical gifts—made me vulnerable to self-promotion. The same gifts that I practiced in obscurity in my first ten years of ministry had now led me to a place of tension, with righteous ambition and selfish ambition on either side.

Though I was doing my best to serve God with a pure heart, I enjoyed the admiration and recognition that came from writing popular songs. Having tasted success, I found it to be an intoxicating wine, and eventually I learned to fight fiercely against serving my own agenda. As the Proverbs says, "the crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but man is tested by the praise he receives" (Prov 27:21).

The Search for Significance

I suppose that it won't come as a surprise to read that all this was about my own insecurities. The root of my vulnerability to the lust for prominence was a search for significance. I wanted to be someone important, to have real value. Because of this, my music ministry threatened to enslave me, to become an addiction.

Our culture teaches us to find our self-worth through our accomplishments. We live in an age in which pursuing personal goals at all costs is celebrated. In his book "A Long Obedience in the Same Direction," Eugene Peterson says that *ambition* in America:

> … has been made into a monument, gilded with bronze and bathed in decorative lights. It has become an object of veneration … Our culture encourages and rewards ambition without qualification. We are surrounded by a way of life in which betterment is understood as expansion, as acquisition, as fame. Everyone wants to get more. To be on top, no matter what it is the top of, is admired.[2]

In ancient times, selfish ambition was seen as a vice, today it is seen as a virtue.

Moreover, North America is the land of opportunity in every sector of the marketplace. It's where people come from hundreds of other countries to find their fortune, to climb their way up the ladder of success. It's the home of big business and huge Christian ministries, with pastors and singer-songwriters who are household names. These kinds of opportunities are a set-up for addiction. Gifted individuals who are looking for significance through a career, a cause or a ministry may find their connection to God supplanted by another attachment. The waters become muddied and the motives even more mixed.

Addictions

In his book "12 Steps With Jesus," Don Williams explains that every single one of us struggles with addiction. "We medicate the emptiness, loneliness and pain in our lives through [addictions]. *We use them to find our self-worth, justify our lives and validate what we do and even who we are*. They [addictions] become functional idols—the real objects of our worship."[3]

Gerald May describes the pervasive reach of addiction:

> 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."[4] … "Addiction exists wherever persons are internally compelled to give energy to things that are not their true desires. To define it directly, addiction is a state of compulsion, obsession, or preoccupation that enslaves a person's will and desire. Addiction sidetracks and eclipses the energy of our deepest, truest desire for love and goodness. We succumb because the energy of our desire becomes attached, nailed to, specific behaviors, objects or people.

Don Williams shares his story of addiction in his early years of ministry:

> I became addicted to people, their opinions, their views of me and their acceptance … Along with my addiction to people and ministry, I became addicted to crisis. It elevated my mood. It gave me a purpose

> larger than myself. It threw me into action … I could problem solve, reach out to people and, again, receive the validation I so desperately needed … I was addicted to my adrenaline. I was also addicted to caffeine and sugar. My drugs of choice were legal stimulants that kept me going.[5]

Ministry is a good thing, but addiction to ministry is a bad thing. At this point in Don's life, it was an escape. It had power over him, and it displaced God's authority. Being successful, even by the world's definition of success, isn't necessarily a bad thing. Making a lot of money in your job isn't necessarily a bad thing. Thank God for devoted Christians in every sector of business and industry who generously support Kingdom endeavors. God gifts some people with great intelligence, vision and ability in these areas. But God has a better plan for us than to be devoured by our attachment to an occupation, a recreational activity or a relationship.

Idolatry—A Good Thing Taken Too Far

Addiction and idolatry are closely related. They both involve attaching ourselves to an object, person or activity in an unhealthy way. It is true that idolatry—defined as "excessive or blind adoration, reverence, and devotion"—takes many forms.

To keep from becoming overly attached to other "gods," I've found N.T. Wright's five points of idolatry[6] to be very helpful. Wright uses Romans 1:18-25 as a basis for this teaching. The people described in Romans 1 don't acknowledge God or thank him, therefore their minds were blinded to the truth and they became enslaved to the worship of created things. Though the people Paul is describing in this chapter are not Christians, the dynamics of idolatry work the same way for Christians.

Point One: Perversion of The Good

Wright's first point is this: idolatry is a perversion of the good. Don Williams picks up on this:

> As Tom Wright says, an idol is, first of all, a perversion of God's good creation. Sex is good. Sexual abuse, pornography, incest, adultery and deviancy pervert it. Chemicals are good. Drug abuse perverts them. Love of country is good. Fanatical patriotism—"My country right or wrong"—perverts it.[7]

In Isaiah 44, we see the making of a meal morph into idol worship. The man in this story uses wood and fire for its God-intended purpose, but takes it way too far when he fashions an idol and looks to that carving for salvation.

> It [the wood from a fallen tree] is man's fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it. Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he

> roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, "Ah! I am warm; I see the fire." From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, "*Save me; you are my god*" (Isa 44:15-17, emphasis added).

Recreation is a healthy pursuit. Whether you choose golf, skiing, basketball, going to the rodeo or the dog show, they can all be a good way of resting and relaxing … just as long as your life is not consumed with any of these things, and as long as you are not addicted to these things.

But recreation can be a religion. Something as tame as sports can become a consuming passion that eclipses the higher priorities of eternity. Just look at soccer, whose fans will riot, trample and even—in the case of Colombian footballer Andres Escobar who scored on his own goal in the 1994 World Cup—murder in their misplaced devotion to the game. In the U.S. basketball, football and baseball reign supreme, with the most rabid of fans clearly worshipping their stars.

If you are an over-the-top sports fan, you know every statistic of your team's players. You spend *all* of your free time thinking about the upcoming game. If your team loses, you suffer real agony that bleeds into your mood and close relationships. If your team has a losing season, you are depressed. If your team wins, you are ecstatic. Your identity is intertwined with your team and your heroes. Wearing a jersey of your favorite team is OK, but does that loyalty define and prioritize the way you use the majority of your discretionary time, energy and money?

Love of sport is one of a myriad of lower loves that can consume us. Any of a thousand different hobbies could be the focus of our attention. For example, the preservation and restoration of the environment is a worthy cause, but like anything else, it can become an object of worship.

In Romans 1, Paul describes how they: " … exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles" (Rom 1:23). In the absence of worshipping God, we must worship something else. We exchange the glory of God for the glory of a Harley motorcycle or the glory of an awesome wardrobe or the glory of a successful career as a musician or worship leader.

When God is not our focal point, our bodies and feelings become paramount. Our ultimate reference point becomes our feelings, appetites, and emotions. Here is the progression described in Romans 1:

> So God abandoned them to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. As a result, they did vile and degrading things with each other's bodies. They traded the truth about God for a lie. So they worshiped and served the things God created instead of the Creator himself, who is worthy of eternal praise! Amen (Rom 1:24-25 NLT).

The human body in today's culture has become central. This is expressed in slavish devotion to physical fitness and physical beauty. This preoccupation with appearance is sometimes accompanied and supported by eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia.

Dallas Willard has a great way of helping avoid this trap of finding our identity in our body-image. He explains: "We are, all of us, never-ceasing spiritual beings with a unique eternal calling to count for good in God's great universe."[8] You are not *your body*, you are a spirit-person who temporarily occupies a human body. So don't invest too much energy beautifying a body that's not going to last very long.

Sexual addictions are another fruit of being driven by our appetites and feelings. All you have to do is turn on the TV to see that "sex sells." Hundreds of millions of advertising dollars are spent in prime time television hours to advertise sex-enhancing drugs.

Being driven by our feelings also leads to statements like: "I don't feel like staying married to this person," "I don't feel like going to work today," "I don't feel like being honest about my taxes," or "I don't feel God's presence, therefore I don't feel like worshiping."

There's nothing wrong with feelings. We were created to sense, to intuit, to relate and respond. But, as Wright says, that great ability to feel can easily be perverted, placing idols at the center of our lives.

Point Two: Idols and Identity

The second fact about idolatry is that your identity is determined by the idol, as Don Williams makes clear:

> "Idols make us feel 10 feet tall. They enhance our lives. A sexual predator seduces women and feels invincible and alive. A wallflower does a few lines of coke and is the life of the party. A student joins a pro-gay or peace movement and feels powerful and important for the first time.[9]

In May of 2004 an article appeared in *Time Magazine* called "My Wheels, My Self." It was all about defining who you are by the car you drive. A caricature of this choice of idols can be seen at a beach that I sometimes visit with my family. A parking lot next to this beach town is the hangout for a group of muscle men who like to sit on the bumpers of their "muscle cars" (vintage cars restored to perfection). You can tell these guys devote a lot of time to developing their big muscles and their hot cars. It's who they are.

Perhaps cars aren't your thing. Perhaps it's your home. You are a faithful disciple of Martha Stewart, and you wake up every morning thinking about your next home decorating project. You say "I won't be happy until my house looks like *this."*

In my early teens I went through a phase in which I really wanted to have a motorcycle. I yearned after them, coveting the motorcycles I saw, envying those who drove them and dreaming about riding one. I was depressed because I didn't have one. At this point the desire to own a motorcycle *owned* a part of me. The same thing happened later on with girls; I thought I would be fulfilled if I had a girlfriend who was devoted to me. My desire to have a romantic partner *owned* a part of me.

I'm amazed at the worship-like quality of popular love songs I hear on the radio. The would-be lover has the ultimate power. In pursuit of romance, the pop star sings, "You are my everything" … "I can't live without you." That's worship. Ultimate worth is attributed to the prized girlfriend. The heartsick singer (and listener who buys the message) is under the illusion that this elusive relationship is the key that will deliver complete satisfaction. Obsession with a would-be lover is idol worship.

Point Three: Sacrifice

Third, idols demand sacrifice. "We offer them our time and money. Little by little, we give up our freedom, individuality, family, friends, honesty, present and future."[10] If drugs are your master, the cost is big money, and if taken to extremes you will lose your family, friends and health. If a romantic relationship is your main goal, you may sacrifice all your waking thoughts, your sexual purity and all your discretionary income to obtain your prize. Over and over, this allegiance is turned to a human idea, ideology or person.

In a message on worship, Don Williams describes how the affections of Germany were stolen from worshipping the living God and turned toward the dark power of the Nazi regime. The rise of Hitler's regime is called by some, "the black miracle of Germany." In a dramatic night time ceremony:

> Hitler amassed 100,000 storm troopers for this ceremony. A huge backdrop with swastikas was designed, lit up with torches in the dark of night. It was designed for maximum psychological impact. Hitler made his grand entrance, walking alone, with his lieutenants alone in this vast stadium.
>
> The people would effectively say to Hitler "strength, honor, power to you!" It cost us 60 million dead. If you give yourself to anything aside from Jesus Christ, you'll pay the consequences.[11]

Another way of saying this is "you become like the thing you worship." The devoted followers of Hitler shared his zeal to purge the world of "inferior races." In worshiping Jesus, the goal is to become more like him. But if I worship the lifestyles of the fabulously wealthy, I will sacrifice godliness for selfish gain. My heart will be set on material gain.

Point Four: Justification

And then there's this truth:

> Fourth, we justify our idols philosophically. Hugh Hefner blatantly set out to create an empire built on liberating male lust. To do so he buried himself in the Playboy mansion in Chicago and wrote his "Playboy philosophy," a dull, rambling, shallow justification for his assault on traditional morality. The drug culture creates its own ideological defense of addiction and tries to take down a generation with it. The legalization of street drugs is continually justified by political, economic, legal and medical arguments.[12]

We look at the people around us and excuse ourselves by saying "everybody else is doing it." "I have freedom to do what I want," twisting the biblical definition of freedom to mean license to pursue whatever you want instead being freed to act for the good.

Point Five: It Never Ends Well

Don Williams explains the fifth and final aspect of idolatry:

Fifth, our idols finally kill us. We think we have captured them; they capture us ... Sexual liberation breeds sexual addiction, abortions and venereal diseases with AIDS as the extreme outcome. Street drugs breed addiction, gangs, violence, and huge criminal cartels that corrupt whole cities and even countries.[13] 'There is a way that seems right to man, but in the end leads to death" (Prov 14:12).

Success has been my struggle, my idol, yet no matter what idol may tempt you, these principles are signposts to help steer you away from false substitutes for fulfillment and back towards God.

The Greatness of a Child

One way I fought against an addiction to success in worship leading was by immersing myself in God's definition of success. I strove to see "greatness" through God's eyes. When Jesus' disciples argued about which of them would be the greatest, Jesus cut right to the heart of the matter, confronting their selfish ambition. Jesus said, "You wanna be great? Become like a little child; if you don't, you won't even get into heaven." What is Jesus' definition of "being the greatest?" He says, "humble yourself just like this little child."

One of the lessons we can learn from children is found in Psalm 131, a wonderful prayer that presents a happy child as a model of contentment for us to emulate:

> Lord, my heart is not proud; my eyes are not haughty. I don't concern myself with matters too great or too awesome for me to grasp. Instead, I have calmed and quieted myself, like a weaned child who no longer cries for its mother's milk. Yes, like a weaned child is my soul within me (Ps 131:1-2 NLT).

This psalm is attributed to David—a king and warrior who conquered armies and ruled a nation. From the heart of this world leader comes the prayer of genuine humility and weakness. Here is a man who was endowed with a wide array of gifts—from music, to governing a nation, to military prowess.

David knew his limits; he knew where his strength came from. He didn't boast in his gifts nor did he trust his own strength, wisdom, or abilities. Yet David struggled to glory in God's strength rather than his own. Near the end of his life he ordered that a census be taken of the fighting men of Israel. This action seems to have been motivated either by pride in the size of the empire he had built or by reliance for his security on the size of his army. At the time of the census there was no immediate threat of war. It seems that David was reveling in his own power rather than God's. The penalty for this was severe, as 70,000 died in a punishing plague.

For a songwriter like me the equivalent of "numbering the army" would be "numbering my songs." I might idly wonder how many good songs I've written in the last year, and as I do so I'll be feeding some part of me that finds the parallels between my own life and the career of some well-known secular musician. But returning to the picture of a contented child with his mother helps me reject the temptation to strive for fame and fortune and cuts the comparisons short.

Eugene Petersen helpfully points out the difference between "ambition" and "aspiration:"

> Ambition is aspiration gone crazy. Aspiration is the channeled, creative energy that moves us to growth in Christ, shaping goals in the Spirit. Ambition takes these same energies for growth and development and uses them to make something tawdry and cheap … [14]

Perhaps Psalm 131 came near the end of David's life, when he could look back and see his life with clear perspective. He saw his mistakes; he saw his selfish ambition. In the end he knew that God is not pleased with a proud, haughty heart.

The literal translation of the Hebrew in the 2nd verse of Psalm 131 is found in the King James Version: "Surely I have behaved and quieted myself, as a child that is weaned of his mother: my soul is even as a weaned child" (Ps 131:2, KJV).

What a self-effacing prayer this is, coming from a powerful king. The psalmist realizes that many projects and issues in life are outside his reach, and that it would be self-serving to venture into such endeavors. He has chosen not to strive for unreachable goals, but to be like a small child who is content to be at his mother's side.

As I look back over three decades of ministry, I see lots of high and low points—seasons of great productivity and visible outpourings of God's favor. I also remember times of depression and disappointment. There have been times of exciting opportunities

in music ministry fueled by new inspiration from heaven, and seasons of silence from God. There have been times of plenty and periods of economic strain.

Viewed within the frame of God's sovereignty, these ups and downs produce Godly results: I hope in the Lord, not in myself. I don't glory in my own strength, because I know how limited it is. Being battered by the trials of life produces a humility that results in a sustaining hope in God. As Paul wrote, "… suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character, and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Rom 5:3-5).

Like a Weaned Child

My last child is named Elizabeth. Lizzie is a joy to our whole family and her older siblings love to dote on her. When she was little Lizzie was the most content little child I've ever seen. She would hang around her mom all day, so happy to just go with the flow. She helped mom in the kitchen, and did all kinds of arts and crafts—coloring, painting, and working on puzzles. She fit the description of Psalm 131—a small child content to be near her mother.

She didn't have to be *doing* anything to be happy; she was satisfied to just *be*. Little children don't have to be doing anything productive to be happy. It's that blissful time of life when everything is totally flexible because they don't have responsibilities.

Little children don't have their own agenda except to enjoy life as they follow the lead of their parents. I would invite Liz into the garden to "help me" or into my office to color while I worked and she'd quickly say "yes." Her carefree attitude reminded me to take time to smell the flowers and enjoy life. If we can't enjoy life, what good are great accomplishments?

I find it takes a lot of discipline to still and quiet myself "just as a small child is quiet with its mother." As a first-born high achiever, my jets are turning at a thousand revolutions per minute. Eugene Peterson writes: "It's no easy thing to quiet yourself: sooner may a person calm the sea or rule the wind or tame a tiger, than quiet oneself. It is a pitched battle."[15]

One of our goals should be to enjoy the simple pleasures of each day. Don't let your joy be choked off by your own hard-driving work ethic.

I've watched my wife wean all of my eight kids off breastfeeding. In those first few years, our kids were in food heaven. Anytime they were hungry, they buried their face in mommy's soft, warm breast and got a tummy full of sweet milk—better than hot chocolate, or the richest ice cream! I can remember my babies being in a drunken-like state after breast-feeding. Those silly, giggling babies were intoxicated with their mother's sweet milk. But after a few years of heavenly milk comes the time for weaning.

You want to see anger? Just watch a baby who is being told "no, you can't have mommy's milk whenever you want it. You have to wait until bedtime." Red-faced, sweating and trembling, they shriek and wail as if to say "I want my milk and I want it *right now!*"

During weaning, the child is graduating from infantile dependency to a beginning level of independence. A weaned child is a picture of someone who has learned through painful surrender that comfort can be found another way.

Letting go of our co-dependent attachment to our work or our hobby can be just as hard as a baby's weaning process. If our sense of self is totally bound up in the "fix" that our work provides, it's a painful separation. If we're addicted to that "sweet milk" of our own advancement and can't be happy without it, we need to find contentment in simply being a child of God. The content, weaned child is a picture of the Christian who is secure in the Father's love and affirmation. The love of God really has been poured into your heart through the Holy Spirit; *he* will satisfy you and sustain you.

Whether your struggle with idols and addictions is work related or having to do with sexual issues, materialism or whatever, there is healing and freedom to be found in Jesus. The pathway to freedom from idols and addictions is found within accountable relationships in a strong Christian community, and in the spiritual disciplines that have been helpful to saints throughout the ages.

Just Like A Child

Several years ago when I saw how close I was to the slippery slope of self-serving ambition and pride, I wrote a song expressing my desire to return to innocence, to be untainted and pure.

> Just Like A Child[16]
>
> Oh let me return to the innocence, the first blush of my love for You
> When I was smitten by your loveliness, and all that I wanted was You
>
> I want to be just like a child again
> I want to be just like a child again
>
> Don't let me be tainted by my own success, or think that I've finally arrived
> For what do I have that I did not receive? It's all a gift for this child
>
> I don't want to work for the praises of men, for then I would have my reward
> I'd rather seek after the treasure of heaven, and for that I must be like a child
>
> Dancing and spinning in a field of flowers, singing and praising for hours and hours; I want to be, I want to be just like a child again.

If this is your heart's cry—to be as innocent as a child—you'll be safeguarded from having a proud heart and haughty eyes. You'll be saved from the agony of getting yourself into big messes because you concerned yourself with "matters too great or awesome." You won't look at your neighbor's station in life and say "why didn't he take me along that nice road?" You'll have the joy of being content, like a small child is content at his mother's side.

Your Father has good plans for you. You can take his hand and trust him, and he will lead you in a way that is designed just for you, to bear fruit and live peacefully. "O Israel, put your hope in the Lord—now and always" (Ps 131:3 NLT).

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1. Beebe, *Longing for God, Seven Paths of Christian Devotion, 118.*
2. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 146
3. Don Williams, *12 Steps with Jesus* (Ventura, CA: Regal Publishing, 2004), 9-10
4. Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1988), 4
5. Don Williams, *12 Steps with Jesus,* 15-17 From Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy.*
6. Tom Wright, *Bringing the Church to the World* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1992), 44-52.
7. Williams, *12 Steps with Jesus,* 26-27. Don quotes Wright, *Bringing the Church to the World*, 44-52.
8. Quoted by John Eldredge, *The Journey of Desire,* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), 154. From Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy.*
9. Williams, *12 Steps with Jesus*, 26.
10. Ibid., 27.
11. Williams, "Worship." 2002.
12. Ibid.
13. Williams, *12 Steps with Jesus*, 26-27
14. Petersen, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction, 149*
15. Ibid
16. Andy Park, "Just Like A Child," Vineyard Songs Canada, Mercy / Vineyard Publishing, 1999.