

ADDICTIONS CAN BEDEVIL THE CHRISTIAN



Photo credit: Billy Graham Evangelistic Association

BY DAVID JULEN, DMIN

Growing up in 1960s and 70s, I can vividly recall my parents and grandparents watching the Billy Graham Crusades. I confess, I remember not being all that excited, but I do remember that it seemed to me more interesting when Johnny Cash was on the program. Cash was a star, had a variety show on television, a checkered past and always seemed to bring something exciting and interesting to the stage. As I remember, Cash would talk about his struggles with drugs in the past and how his conversion or his rededication to Christ had turned his life around and helped him overcome drug addiction. The struggles always seemed to be in the past tense.

The reality was that Cash struggled with substance use issues for much of the rest of his life. His condition led to at least four documented times returning to residential recovery centers, one where he met Betty Ford, President Gerald Ford's wife. Cash, his wife June Carter, and their son John Carter all struggled with substance use issues. At the same time, Cash's Christian faith led him to be a tireless advocate for prison reform, Native American justice, (neither popular at the time) and Christian evangelism.

After his conversion to Christ, William Wilberforce, a member of

Parliament, led a long and costly struggle for Great Britain to outlaw slavery. Wilberforce, after having been prescribed morphine for his poor health became addicted and began a lifelong struggle with dealing with the effects of his abuse. His biographers tended to downplay his substance use issues, but his daily intake of morphine grew from 5 to 12 grams per day toward the end of his life. In the words of biographer Edward Pollack, Wilberforce, was described as "untidy, indolent (lazy)... absent minded...his eyesight declined due to slow opium poisoning. (it) affected his mental health, worsening a period of depression."

For both men, Cash and Wilberforce, the popular narrative has been they overcame or masterfully managed their drug problem. This narrative persists in part because of the assumption that a person struggling with addiction would not desire or be able to do significant work for the Lord. Concerning Wilberforce, Timothy McMahan King wrote in the Wall Street Journal, "The logic behind this and other dismissals of Wilberforce's addiction is simple, pervasive, and wrong. The first misconception seems to be that Wilberforce showed great moral courage in one area of his life and therefore could not have experienced addiction. A stalwartly moral person, the logic runs, would not succumb to such a weakness." This line of reasoning also seems to be the popular narrative concerning Johnny Cash's life, that after his conversion, he "beat his addiction." The evidence suggests otherwise.

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We can gather some lessons from the lives of these two men. One is that Christians can struggle with addiction, even with an authentic and true faith. Thankfully, some conversions result in an immediate relief from the struggles of addiction. For most, the struggles continue. If you believe those that struggle with addiction are not Christians, ask yourself, as a Christian have you left behind the sin of lust (Matt.5:28,1 John 2:16), worry (Matt. 6:25-31), anger (1 Tim. 2:8, James 1:20), or envy (Gal.5:21)?

We also need to see the person struggling as not wholly defined by their addiction. Few would define William Wilberforce or Johnny Cash simply as people struggling with substance use issues. The impact Wilberforce had on Great Britain (and the world) is staggering. His efforts to eradicate slavery freed, by some estimates, over 800,000 people. He worked tirelessly for the poor, facilitating care for orphans, enacting child labor laws, promoting education, debtor prison reform, and even helped to start the first Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Those that struggle with an addiction are a sum greater than their parts. They are created in God's image, of value and worthy of our efforts to support them and help bring about redemption.

This should lead us to examine our language and how we describe someone struggling with an addiction. To describe them simply as an "addict" or a "junkie" may cause us to begin to believe that their addiction is all that defines them. The person struggling may begin to see themselves the same way. Revisiting how our language can cause us to label people is something that should be a priority in regard to addiction.

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