

Helping Others Overcome Addictions

STEVE McVEY and
MIKE QUARLES



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*To my wife, Julia, who has always been there with unwavering love
in my journey to freedom in Christ.*

—Mike Quarles

*To my sons, Andrew and David, whose constant faith in all the highs
and lows of life has never been anything less than exemplary.*

—Steve McVey

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—*Mike Quarles*



My ministry has been a team effort since the day I left the pastorate in 1994. Much gratitude goes to the GraceWalk team, who are co-laborers together with me in spreading the wonderful message of our Father's redemptive and restorative love. From our GraceWalk group leaders to our staff members, each one encourages, impacts, and inspires me.

My wife, Melanie, has always been my greatest counselor, encourager, and example of Christlikeness. Add to that the unsurpassed qualities she possesses as a precious wife, and no man could be more blessed.

It was from Mike Quarles's personal story that I first heard the wonders of grace. What an honor to now be coauthoring a book with him!

Finally, I must acknowledge my heavenly Father and His loving grace. It is from Him that any good in my life has come.

—*Steve McVey*

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The Big Myth



It has been 15 years since I (Mike) coauthored *Freedom from Addiction* with Dr. Neil Anderson. I am more convinced than ever that Neil and I clearly presented the truth that sets people free from addiction in that book and its companion resources. But as I've directed a recovery ministry for the last 16 years, I've observed that it doesn't follow that people find freedom when they are confronted with the truth. There must be an encounter with Christ and a revelation of the Holy Spirit.

There are major obstacles to this that very few have any awareness of. The biggest is the myth that most Christians and the church at large have bought and propagated about the problem of addiction and its answer. We (Mike and Steve) address this myth in the first chapter. From there we proceed with the threefold purpose of this book:

1. To address the question of, first, why so few people find freedom from addiction and, second, what has to take place before this can happen in their lives and they can go to help others find freedom from addictive behavior.
2. To present the truth that God has already provided the answer for addiction, what that answer is, and how it can be experienced.
3. To show the way you can help those struggling with addictive behavior find freedom and, further, how you can

have a recovery ministry through which people can find true and lasting freedom in Christ.

I (Mike) normally get several calls a week from people looking for Christian treatment centers for themselves or loved ones. Not very many Christians, including pastors, are aware that there are many of them. We have accumulated a list of over 50, but not all of them incorporate the teaching a person needs to know to find freedom. Briefly, that teaching is

- an understanding of grace
- knowing who God is
- knowing what Christ accomplished on the cross and provided for us
- the truth that sets people free
- an understanding of our identity in Christ

Basically, it is comprehension of the finished work of Christ. Our goal here is to set forth what we believe is essential to finding freedom in Christ for the individual and how you can help others find freedom in Christ.

Between the two of us, Mike has nearly 40 years of full-time Christian ministry with more than 20 of it in recovery work; Steve has had over 40 years' experience in ministry. We are laying out our heartfelt passion and vision for those caught in the bondage of addiction and how we can help them.



As you get into this book you might start to think, *Why don't they tell me what to do?* Therein lies a major part of the problem. Pardon our Southern, but there are forty eleven dozen Christian programs and thousands and thousands of secular programs that will tell you what to do. However, no one ever got saved, freed, or sanctified by *doing* anything. No one ever will. Five hundred years ago Martin Luther declared

that nothing you *do* helps you spiritually.* Only the truth will set you free (John 8:32,36), and our response to the truth must be faith only.

If a program is not firmly founded on the truth you can work it until the cows come home or the Lord comes back, but you will not get free. You may change your behavior for a while and fool a few people (including yourself), but nothing really changes. It may be a valiant effort—religious, noble, and even spiritual—but it will all be in vain and totally futile. Only God can change us, and our part is to exercise faith—that is, to believe the truth of what He has done and what He says. We are saved by faith in Him alone and the Christian life is lived by faith in Him alone. We are also freed from addiction and sanctified by faith in Him alone. “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17).



In part 2 of this book and in the “Format for Freedom” appendix, we give you some practical ways to help those struggling with addictive behavior and to set up a recovery ministry for those who are interested. But we implore you to read part 1 first. No one will be able to really help a person until he or she has a biblical understanding of the problem and God’s answer for it. If we try to help others without this understanding, our efforts will most likely be counterproductive.

It is not that there isn’t a widespread acknowledgment of the addiction problem. There are more programs available and more money thrown at the problem than ever before. Is it getting any better? No, it is worse than it has ever been. It is an epidemic here in America and all over the rest of the world. There is a saying in Alcoholics Anonymous that is said to have come from Albert Einstein: Insanity is continuing to do the same thing and expecting different results. Maybe AA, treatment centers, the church, recovery ministries, and rescue missions need to heed this wisdom, because what most are doing is not working.

So we encourage you to do yourself a favor—and do a favor to those you would like to see experience freedom from addictive behavior:

* See Martin Luther, *Christian Liberty* (Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1957), p. 8.

Read this book with an open mind. In order to get free a person will have to change what they believe and what they think, because addiction exists only because the person has been deceived and is believing a lie.

Pray that God will give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him (see Ephesians 1:17). That's the only way anyone finds freedom—in Him (Christ). He is the *way* and the *truth* and the *life* (John 14:6). He didn't come to show us a better way. He is *the Way*. He didn't come to give us truth so we could follow principles, steps, or any program to live life and get our act together. He is *the Truth*. He didn't come to give us a better life. He is *the Life*, and He came to give us His Life, which is eternal, abundant, and victorious. Can that really be true? Yes—that is the gospel, and it is true.


Part 1

The Truth We Need to Help People Find Freedom from Addictive Behavior



The Lie the Church Believes About Addiction

And how it keeps so many from finding freedom in Christ



(Steve) was a pastor of local churches for 21 years. I saw my share of people enslaved in the bondage of addiction. When I first met Mike Quarles and heard him speak, I sat in stunned silence. I wondered if Mike was an anomaly, one of those modern-day miracles you hear about but almost never see in person. After all, here was a man who also had been a pastor; he had been to seminary; he had enjoyed a successful career; he had enjoyed a wonderful marriage—and had then seen it all go away because of an addiction to alcohol. I had heard of stories similar to this—it was nothing new. Men who lose it all because of poor choices they have made aren't that unusual. I had heard of those, but I'd never met anybody who had sunk to the depths Mike had seen, lost it all, and then, despite the stigma and shame of such a fall, had come back to a place of effective ministry.

As Mike described how he had literally become a falling-down drunk and then continued on to tell how understanding who he is in Christ transformed him, I sat transfixed. At that time I didn't know my own identity in Christ. I had my own struggles with the flesh and couldn't shake off the bad habits I saw in my life. Some might think them mild in comparison to Mike's drinking binges, but the truth was that my sins were as reprehensible as his, despite the opinion of the church world to the contrary.

I had earned a postgraduate degree with a focus on biblical counseling, but my pastoral counseling ministry fit the description Mike gave of legalistic counseling. Through the years I'd told countless addicted people the religious things they needed to do to bring them freedom. Now Mike was telling our group that everything I had told these people wasn't the answer. What could I say? The proof was in front of me. I'd seen little success in helping people find lasting freedom from addictions. On the other hand, here was a man who had found that freedom and who was so comfortable in it that he now spoke openly about a past that many would have been ashamed to admit. (That's one of the great things grace produces in a person—transparency.)

In the days ahead, I would come to understand the truths Mike introduced to me in the teaching I heard on that day in the autumn of 1990. My life too would be transformed as I found freedom from my own addiction—the insatiable need to find love, acceptance, and value from others through success as a pastor, which I described in my first book, *Grace Walk*.



Here we are now, almost 20 years later, working as colleagues in the same ministry, pointing many to the Freedom we have both found to be validated by what we've seen of His effect in our own lives. (Freedom has a name—Christ.) Our desire is to see churches become the clarion voice of freedom to all who find themselves enslaved. To be that voice, though, it is important that we get it right when it comes to the message we share. The sad fact is that while the church talks about Jesus Christ being the answer, an outsider could understandably come to a different conclusion by watching the way we usually try to help people with addictions.

I (Mike) read an article in *Christianity Today* that said that nearly every Christian recovery ministry is based on the 12 Steps. Why is that? Why does the church go to the secular to find an answer? Is the problem of addiction too hard for God? It would seem that way. Admittedly, any addictive behavior—from sex, drugs, alcohol, and gambling to

workaholism, materialism, and codependency—appears all but impossible to get free from. A Christian counselor once said that most people never change. He is right. In our combined years of ministry—more than 70 years—that has been our observation. Most don't. But some do. That's why we are both still in ministry.

Who are the ones who change? That's what this book is about. It's the ones who don't accept and believe the lie most Christians believe about addiction. Because as long as one believes the lie, their chances of getting free from anything are as good as those a snowball has of not melting in hell.

Is Christ Insufficient?

What is the lie? Glad you asked. The lie the church believes is this: *Addiction is so difficult to get free from that we need more than what God has provided in Christ—and it is up to us to do what we need to do.**

We know that no self-respecting Christian would ever put it that way, but our actions demonstrate that this is our actual belief. This is the ultimate deception that keeps us from experiencing the freedom Christ purchased for us on the cross, which is our inheritance and our birthright as a child of God. Many believe you need Christ, but you also need something else, such as a program (a 12-Step one, preferably), a treatment center (usually secular), regular attendance at meetings (daily is recommended), and so on.

If we focus on observing principles or
following steps, we focus on self to change
our behavior and shape ourselves up.

Most of the treatment centers and the meetings (secular or Christian) use the 12 Steps. What's wrong with them? Absolutely nothing. We believe that anyone who works the 12 Steps will improve the quality of their life. However, the Steps will not set you free.[†] Only Christ can

* For further discussion, see "The Ultimate Deception" in the Resources at the back of this book.

† For more on this point see "What's Wrong with the 12 Steps?" in the Resources section.

do that, and when He sets you free you are free indeed (John 8:36). No number of steps can lead to freedom unless Jesus Christ is the source from which that freedom is derived.

You can study *Alcoholics Anonymous* (usually called “The Big Book”), the history of AA, and the autobiography of Bill Wilson (one of the two founders of AA) and find nothing in any of them to point you to the person of Christ and His finished work on the cross. What they do point you to is the 12 Steps and what you must do. Here’s a truth that would keep us from wandering away: If the message and ministry don’t point to Christ and His finished work, consider them good advice at best and error at worst. There is a multitude of very good advice and recommendations out there, but as Paul said in Colossians 2:23, “they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.”

Likewise, there is nothing wrong with the Celebrate Recovery program’s Eight Recovery Principles, which are based on the beatitudes. But there are no principles, steps, rules, laws, methods, or programs that will free you from addiction. The only way to change behavior is by faith in what Christ has already done. What we need to do is know what He accomplished on the cross—and who we are and what we have as a result of that. If we focus on observing principles or following steps, we focus on self to change our behavior and shape ourselves up—“to overcome hurts, habits and hang-ups,” as Celebrate Recovery puts it.

The Effects of the Lie

When I (Mike) was struggling with alcoholism, I was a member of the largest church in its denomination. It was probably the most evangelistic and most respected evangelical church in the state. Their initial counsel to me was to go to AA meetings. Later, after I was brought before their discipline committee because of my drunkenness, they sent me to a secular treatment center. I believe that what they did was motivated by love for me and that they truly wanted to help me. If that was so, why do I call their actions “spiritual malpractice”? Why did they not help me? Why would that excellent church send me to a secular treatment center that, because of its cost and my precarious

financial condition due to my addiction, almost bankrupted me—and still didn't help the problem? Because they believed the lie that I needed something more than what God had provided.

When I (Steve) counseled people who were addicted, I often gave them the same kind of advice. I was sincere, and my counsel was based on the knowledge I had, but I seldom saw any lasting transformation in the life of anyone who was deeply entrenched in addiction. Most pastors and churches seem to find themselves in the same place I was. They aren't intentionally giving bad advice. They're just telling people what they believe to be true, despite the fact that it does little more than put a Band-Aid on the problem.

We understand that perspective because we believed it for many years. My (Mike's) thinking went like this: *I have been struggling with addiction for eight long, miserable years. I am destroying everything in my life that is good. I've been a Christian for 18 years, I'm a seminary graduate and a former pastor, and I've tried everything I know and everything anybody has suggested. And nothing helps. It seems that the gospel works for my wife. She's a good person and is able to trust God and do the right thing. But I'm too messed up, and my problem is too bad and too deep for it to work for me. I need something different. I need more. I need to go to meetings every night. I need to go to an expensive treatment center.**

All of the counseling I received told me the same thing. Not exactly in those terms, but I was told that because of my problem I needed something drastic. In recommending I attend AA, one of the pastors of the church said, "You need to do whatever it takes. Gouge out your eye. Cut off your hand." The message came across loud and clear. The answer was for me to do whatever was necessary to become something I wasn't (righteous) and to get something I didn't have (freedom). These are two of the biggest lies Christians believe, and although those who promote them may be sincere, they are incredibly effective in keeping those who are addicted from experiencing the truth that would set them free.

When I checked into my second treatment center I had completely

* See "Thirty Things Mike Tried to Get Free from Addictive Behavior" in the Resources section.

bought the lie. I'd given up all hope of being a good Christian. I just wanted to be a normal person. If God had said to me, "I'll let you be a normal person—show up for your job, come home at night, and be a decent husband," I would have accepted it in a heartbeat.

At the intake interview for this Christian treatment center, its director told me, "Maybe one day you could go back into ministry." It sounded like a cruel joke at the time. It was so far-fetched I couldn't even consider it. Not me. The ministry was for people who had it together and didn't mess up like me. I was so ashamed that I begged the director not to tell the other guys in the program I was a former pastor. I believed I had fallen so far and failed so badly that there was no possibility God would ever use or bless me again.

The tragic reality was that as long as I believed that lie, I would wallow in my self-pity and be of no use to anyone. Lies keep people in bondage.

A number of years ago I encountered a prime example of how widespread this lie is among those who are in recovery ministry. I conducted a "Freedom from Addiction" workshop at a meeting of the International Union of Gospel Missions. At one of the luncheons I was seated next to the director of all the rescue missions in a certain overseas country. When he learned the story of my struggle with addiction, he asked me, "What is your personal program to stay free and not drink?" I responded, "In all likelihood, it is essentially the same as yours. That is, to know I'm dead to sin and freed from it, and to trust Christ as my life and live by faith."

The man was incredulous. I didn't have a program of what I did every day to keep me on track and not drink. He believed I was an alcoholic and would always be one. He was certain I was one step away, or one drink away, from plunging back into the throes of addiction. He said it was up to me and what I did to not get drunk. Because he believed so strongly in this, all the rescue missions in his country gave everyone a program of what they should do to stay sober and clean.

The question in my mind was, *Is anyone finding freedom in Christ?* Most likely some were. God is not limited, and He can work in anybody anywhere in any program He chooses. But as Oswald Chambers said, the only valid ministry anyone has is to point people to Christ.

Moving Toward Reality

In Romans 7:24, the apostle Paul directs us to the ultimate answer for freedom. He asks, “*Who will set me free?*” It is significant that he didn’t ask “What will set me free?” What you do, follow, or observe will not set you free from addiction. Only a Person can do this. We may find that wise steps can strengthen healthy behavior and indeed be helpful, but anytime we think we need anything else to be a good Christian, a good spouse, a good parent, or a good minister, or to get free or be sanctified, we have bought the lie that we need something more than Christ. We are complete in Him, and you cannot get any more complete than that.

If we look to Him and focus on what He has done, we believe the truth that we don’t need to shape ourselves up and get our act together. Why? Because the old self was crucified with Christ. It is dead and buried and is no more (Galatians 2:20). Martyn Lloyd-Jones put it this way:

Understand that the old man is not there. The only way to stop living as if he were still there is to realize that he is not there. That is the New Testament method of teaching sanctification. The whole trouble with us, says the New Testament, is that we do not realize what we are, that we still go on thinking we are the old man, and go on trying to do things to the old man. That has been done; the old man was crucified with Christ. He is non-existent; he is no longer there. If we but saw this as we should, we would really begin to live as Christians in this life.*

In other words, if we try to shape up the old person who is not there, this is nothing but trying to shape up and improve the flesh, which cannot be shaped up (see John 6:63). There was nothing in the old person that you were that could be shaped up. There is nothing in our flesh that can be improved. So God took care of the problem, and we can say with Paul, “We know that our old self was crucified with him so

* D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: Exposition of Chapter 6, The New Man* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1992).

that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been set free from sin” (Romans 6:6-7). We were raised up with Christ and are new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17). The new person we are is dead to sin and is holy, righteous, and blameless. We are in Christ, Christ is in us, and Christ is our life. Freedom is our birthright as a child of God (Galatians 5:1). It is not something we have to work for, but something we need to believe is our rightful inheritance. *It is finished!**

The Question of Identity

If a Christian recovery ministry uses the 12 Steps, which most do, then most of them have a person identify themselves as an alcoholic or addict. Is that true? Is a born-again believer, who is a new creation in Christ and one with Him, an alcoholic or addict at the core of their identity? Second Corinthians 5:17 says, “If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come; the old has gone, the new is here!” No addiction defines a person’s true identity. In Christ, we are a new creation and are defined by His Life, not our bad behavior!

The apostle Paul had the best idea when he said, “From now on, let’s not know anybody by his or her flesh” (2 Corinthians 5:16, paraphrased). Let’s renounce the lie that Christ doesn’t completely deliver people from addiction and the lie that Christians are still sin-loving sinners. In chapter 4, we’ll take an in-depth look at our identity in Christ. You’ll see that what you believe about yourself determines your behavior. And if a person believes they are an addict, they will never be free.

Why are so many Christians unwilling to change their approach? After all, they are committed to Christ and sincerely want to follow Him and help others. The evidence indicates that they are unwilling to change if that change is not in accord with their beliefs. I (Mike) was a prime example. As a full-time Christian worker, a seminary graduate, and a former pastor, I wanted my life to count for Christ. As I struggled with my addiction and my life spiraled out of control, I believed

* For a fuller treatment, see “The Finished Work of Christ” in the Resources section.

with all my heart that my problem was that I couldn't do what I knew was right. I believed with all my heart I knew what to do (pray, read the Bible, trust Christ, and so on), but I just couldn't do it. The problem was, I had bought the lie—if I could just do the right things I would get free. I had to change my beliefs (my theology) before I could experience freedom.

Both of us used to think that having a quiet time would make us strong and enable us to do what is right.

I recently talked to a man who directs a large recovery ministry for both men and women. We were discussing why some people who seemed to be free returned to their addiction. I shared what I believed. The man seemed to agree with me, but at the end of the conversation he said he believed their fall happened because they didn't continue to do what his ministry taught them, such as reading their Bible, praying, having a daily quiet time, and so on. This man, who is a very godly, gifted minister, believes it is up to the person to do the right things to stay free.

We don't believe that. We highly value our time spent with the Lord in the Scriptures and prayer, but it is not what we do that helps us. Rather, it is our faith in Christ. Behaving in a way that is constructive and not destructive is the *product* of freedom, not the pathway toward it.

There were many times I (Mike) would have an hour and sometimes a two-hour quiet time and yet be drunk that evening. Now, we are not advocating giving up a quiet time. But we know that doing it, in and of itself, will not set us free or keep us free. Both of us used to think that having a quiet time would make us strong and enable us to do what is right. We now know that is not true. If I don't believe that apart from Christ I can do nothing and trust Him to be my life, it won't make any difference how long my quiet time is. If what we believe (our theology) is true, we will be free, because truth sets us free and Jesus Christ is the Truth.

Finally—Good News

Most Christians have no idea about how Satan works in the area of unbelief. He is the father of lies and the deceiver, and if he can get you to believe a simple lie, he can keep you from experiencing what is yours in Christ. He can make your life a living hell even though heaven is your destination. Hardly a day passes that we don't hear from a Christian who is going through this kind of hell on earth. No one has ever told them, just as no one ever told Mike, "The problem is not you. There is nothing wrong with you. The problem is in the lies you believe." Nobody has ever told them, "The answer is not what you do, but what Jesus has done and He has done everything for you to be free."

That is *good news*. The gospel is not an announcement that we must do something. It is an announcement of what has been done. The gospel is not an announcement to do or die, or to try your best. It is an announcement that it has all been done. Jesus said,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed (Luke 4:18 NASB).

Did Jesus accomplish what He came for? As He was dying on the cross, He said, "*It is finished*"! And you and I are the recipients of what He accomplished. He came to set the captives free and free those who are oppressed, and He has done it. There is nothing we can add to that. All that we can do is share the great, grand, and glorious news that His finished work on the cross has done everything necessary for us to live in peace, freedom, and joy.