

THE ATTRACTIVE SHEPHERD

FOR PEOPLE WHO WANT TO WANT JESUS MORE

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CHAPTER 1

FROM CALLOUS TO *KALOS*

Hi. My name is Dave, and I'm a cookie-aholic.

The severity of my addiction became apparent one evening at our home near Philadelphia when our children were very young. My inability to eat cookies in moderation had prompted a self-declared state of abstinence. My wife, Vanda, had agreed to be my sponsor to hold me accountable. Having tucked the kids in their beds, Vanda and I settled down on the couch in front of the TV to enjoy a couple of well-earned hours of relaxation.

It had been several weeks since my last cookie. I had become confident in my ability to conjure the self-control required to deny the pleasure and to once again defeat my confectionary nemesis. It was in that moment of arrogance that the attack came. Eventually, I was overcome by the desire to eat a cookie. But how was I to indulge with my loving wife so close by?

Addicts get what they want through deception. "Would you like something to drink?" I asked. Vanda took the bait, and the game was afoot. I carefully timed the opening of the fridge to coincide with the opening of the cupboard to cover up the sound from the cupboard's hinges. There was but one hurdle left: how to bypass the sound of the latch on the cookie jar. A well-placed, amply loud cough worked well in allowing the deactivation of the latch to go undetected.

And there they were. It had been so long. The mission had been completed without a hitch. I reached into the jar and began to partake of my plunder only to be halted mid-gorge by the words I had so dreaded. “You’re not eating a cookie, are you?” Vanda asked.

A second challenge presented itself just moments into experiencing the thrill of conquering the first. If I would answer “yes” then my winning streak over cookies would be officially over. Yet, if I answered “no,” I would be lying to my wife – an aspect of addiction that I didn’t want to introduce to my young marriage. What was I to do? How could I be dumb enough to get myself into such a big mess?

Seconds before my incriminating silence would have prompted Vanda’s intervention, I confidently said the words, “No, I’m not eating a cookie.” I had solved the crisis. No lying was involved and my weakness was not exposed. You see, she asked if I had eaten *a* cookie when, in fact, I had eaten two.

ATTRACTION AFFECTS ATTENTION

Wouldn’t life be a lot easier if we could choose the things that appeal to us?

My eight-year-old son, Zachary, loves tomatoes. I can’t stand them unless they’re on a cheeseburger or an ingredient in pizza sauce. It isn’t fair that my appetite is directed toward something unhealthy while Zach naturally enjoys something so good for him. As much as I try to like tomatoes, they just don’t appeal to me.

Attraction affects attention. Whatever, or whoever, appeals to me will be the center of my thoughts more frequently than

anything else. Since I can't choose what I desire, isn't it up to God to make himself attractive to me? After all, Christianity could be far more exciting for many of us if he did. Since spiritual attraction can be feeble beyond initial salvation some Christians end up having little interaction with Jesus.

Do you want to want Jesus more?

Church doesn't always appeal to everyone, and that's the only way you may know how to interact with him. You believe that Jesus is the Messiah but struggle with why that fact doesn't impact your life more significantly. When you're in that struggle for many years, it's easy to believe that abundant living isn't something God has made a possibility for you. You may have thought at one time or another, *If God really does love me, why doesn't he connect with me like he does with others?* It makes for a perplexing spiritual journey.

There's good news, my friend. Jesus came to clear up your confusion. He does want you to desire him as much as anybody else does. He wants you to have an exciting Christian experience. To help you identify your struggles let's take a quick look at two major categories of people in your situation.

UNDESIRABLE DESIRES

I wish that I didn't like cookies so much. Cookies aren't even the only food that I like, and they regularly function as a trigger for desiring other foods. Cookies are convenient and small so I easily succumb to the lie that eating one won't hurt. After significant breakdowns I often find myself wishing that I didn't like them at all. I desire them because of the pleasure I get from

them but I hate them because of the control they have over me. They exemplify my *undesirable desires*.

Undesirable desires are a perpetual source of temptation for even the best of Christians because they come from what we are naturally attracted to. The apostle Paul shared the struggle he had with his undesirable desire, though he doesn't specify what it is:

I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate. But if I know that what I am doing is wrong, this shows that I agree that the law is good. So I am not the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it. (Romans 7:15-17, NLT)

Everybody is addicted to something. Nobody I've read knows who this idea originated with but its truth has influenced many people. The apostle's description about his struggle proves that we're in good company. Everybody has experienced the conflict of undesirable desires. These things may not necessarily be bad in moderation, but addicts indulge to an extreme. In fact, the source of addictions is often an aspect of life that God designed for us to enjoy, but we try to make it play a bigger role in our happiness than God intended.

Sex is God's idea – pornography and extramarital affairs aren't. God wants us to find purpose in our work but not to an extreme that keeps us from our families. Not only did Jesus drink alcohol, on one occasion he actually made it. But the Bible tells us avoid getting drunk.¹ Aspiring to an adventurous life is one of the reasons Jesus came to earth, but gamers artificially satisfy this need through video games and end up missing out on the real thing. Most women experience the thrill of the hunt when shopping

for the various necessities of life at the lowest prices, but some go shopping to fill a void and end up spending far more than they can afford.

We can't live without eating. That there are many feasts in the Bible indicates that God wants us to enjoy fellowship around the table. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, he told them to ask God for daily food. The early church was defined in part by their eating together on a regular basis. In Romans 14:2, Paul goes so far as to say that my ability to eat *everything* is a reflection of my good faith: "One person's faith allows them to eat everything, but another person, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. (NIV 1984)"

OK, I've overstated the last example – even to the point of proof-texting scripture. What can I say? I'm an addict. It may not seem as significant as other undesirable desires, but it's very real to me.

THE PROBLEM WITH LESSER EVILS

This account of my escapade with cookies is not meant to minimize the struggles of more serious addictions. As I write this chapter, Vanda is about a month away from celebrating her 15th anniversary of freedom from alcohol abuse. I'm quite aware that the consequences of being addicted to alcohol are far more disastrous than having an overactive sweet tooth.

What they have in common is the control each has over its victims, albeit to varying degrees. My cookie habit won't lead to getting my driver's license suspended, the destruction of my family life or the loss of my job. But, there is the important issue of my physical health, and also at stake is my relationship with God.

The thing we go to in order to get more control of our lives is the very thing that takes control from us. That's why Paul's sentiments noted earlier are so comforting to Christians struggling with undesirable desires. He puts to words what we've all experienced. Psychologist Michael J. Formica describes the mindset behind the more serious addictions:

. . . The behavior attached to an addictive process (drinking, drugging, etc.) is a symptom, and that, speaking psychosocially, addiction itself is a breakdown in impulse control and has something of an obsessive-compulsive dynamic . . . Addiction is a veil; it is a tangible mechanism of denial. If you engage in addictive behavior, you create a situation that demands that you ignore the rest of your life. As that life crashes and burns around you, you may finally get to a point where you say, "Enough." and get sober.ⁱⁱ

The disadvantage of lesser addictions is the absence of the crash and burn. People with undesirable desires that have less intense consequences don't easily reach the point where we can't stand it anymore, raise the white flag and enter a rehab to help deal with the problem. The Christian experience is then lived out as an attempt to co-exist with evil desires that we believe we are destined to tolerate.

Lesser evils don't destroy our lives but prevent us from experiencing the life God intended us to have. It's like an annoying cold that's not bad enough to justify staying home from work but keeps us from being our best. Lesser addictions are manageable dysfunctions that don't necessarily knock us off our feet as we

travel on our spiritual journey, but they certainly slow down and can even stop our progress.

The things that we wish we weren't attracted to only make up half of the struggle. There are things that we wish we were more attractive to us.

DESIRABLE DESIRES

The second type of struggle people have with interacting with God has to do with wanting a desire for things that are good.

Martin Luther had a puppy that made it a habit of begging for food from its master's table. Once when the dog was engaging in this activity during a meal, Luther said, "Oh, if I could only pray the way this dog watches the meat! All his thoughts are concentrated on the piece of meat. Otherwise he has no thought, wish, or hope."ⁱⁱⁱ

Do you ever get the feeling that there are people who were just meant to be closer to God than the rest of us? I've been a pastor for over 12 years and a Christian for many more. Many people whom I've crossed paths with love and serve God in effective ways, but there is a handful who really get God to the extent that they seem to always have him on their minds. Everything they do and say is a direct result of their deep interaction with God. They are focused on God like Luther's puppy was focused on the meat.

It makes me envious. I suppose a spiritual envy is fine with God. What would it take to get to know God like Henri Nouwen did? How can I be as close to God as Billy Graham, Bill Hybels, Mother Theresa or Francis Chan? There was a man in our first church in Rochester, N.Y., who was so close to God it made *me*

feel closer to God just being around him. His depth of love for God intrigued me. It makes me want to love God more than I do.

During my first year of college I lived with my grandparents in Boardman, Ohio. Every morning I would get up at 6 a.m. and pass by the small room where my grandma would be reading the Bible and praying. A day never went by when I wouldn't see her there, enjoying the company of her friend and Savior.

When it becomes evident that my love for God is left wanting, I find myself wondering what's wrong with me that I can't love him more. When God was forming grandma in great-grandma's womb, did he include this ingredient in her personality – the ability to find great pleasure in meeting with God in this way? I want to be like that.

While I'm throwing wishes around, I'd like to be more loving to my wife, and I wish I had more patience with my children. Why can't I be more concerned for the poor and have a bigger heart for people who don't know Jesus, too? These are good things that I wish God had put in me. These are my *desirable desires*.

Larry Osborne, in his book *A Contrarian's Approach to Knowing God*, argues convincingly that God interacts with each of his children in different ways because we are individuals who relate to him based on what makes us tick.^{iv} It begs the question: Are the Henri Nouwens of the world so in touch with God because there is something about their personal makeup that makes that intimacy possible? Maybe the experiences that helped form their personalities made them more susceptible to intimate relationships.

Just as there are Christians who settle for living with their undesirable desires, there are also those of us who settle for living

life without desirable desires. Many people exist in both worlds, both of which prevent them from really living.

God doesn't want you to settle for a life of mediocrity. He wants you to be attracted to his Son in a powerful way. The Apostle John proves it in the tenth chapter of his Gospel, where he records one way Jesus describes his relationship with us.

IS JESUS REALLY CALLING HIMSELF THE “GOOD” SHEPHERD?

Most versions of the Bible record that Jesus calls himself the *good* shepherd. The teaching is found in John 10 where Jesus describes the care he takes in guiding people in their lives with God. It was in contrast to the way the inauthentic religious leaders of the day performed the task. In his writings, the apostle John uses primarily two Greek words that are translated “good”: *agathos* and *kalos*. These words have similar meanings, but there is a notable difference. This difference can change your Christian experience forever.

Agathos had to do with the worth or excellence of a person or thing.^v In the centuries leading up to Jesus' incarnation, this term described the goodness and kindness of the gods. People would refer to the god from whom they expected to receive salvation as *agathos theos* or *good god*.^{vi} A person would be considered *agathos* if their lives matched up with the god they worshipped.

The New Testament writers commandeered *agathos* to represent the essential qualities of the God of Israel exclusively. This word was reserved to describe the wonderful and excellent attributes of God and the people and things that reflect his goodness. James said that every good (*agathé*) gift is from above

(James 1:17). He was teaching the early church that God cannot tempt people to sin because only good things are in his nature, and temptation is evil. He may allow temptation to happen, but it doesn't originate with him, only *agathos* things do.

In Matthew 12:35, Jesus, having been accused of partnering with Satan, tells the Pharisees that *agathos* things can only come from people who are of God: “A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. (NIV)”

In Mark 10, where a man called Jesus “good (*agathos*) teacher,” Jesus wanted the man to be clear about the implications of what he was saying. If Jesus is the *agathos* teacher then all that he teaches reveals the essence of God and it must be adhered to. Publicly stating that Jesus is the teacher who properly reflects the ways of God is risky business if you're not ready to live up to what he says.

However, as fitting as the word *agathos* is, John doesn't record that Jesus uses it to describe himself in John Chapter 10:11, 14.

The religious leaders in Jerusalem whose function it was to help people draw near to God had been doing just the opposite by their legalism and hypocrisy. Jesus, on the other hand, fascinated the people and drew large crowds wherever he went. There was something about him that made people curious. There was something about Jesus that satisfied them spiritually in a way the temple authorities couldn't.

The thrust of this chapter in John isn't just about the accurate reflection of God found in Jesus; otherwise he would have used *agathos*. Jesus' godly qualities are a major emphasis in John, but here he is emphasizing something in addition to it. In this

passage Jesus uses the word *kalos*, which means *attractive*. Jesus literally calls himself the *Attractive Shepherd*.^{vii}

Some scholars believe that John uses *agathos* and *kalos* interchangeably because of their similarity. Other scholars aren't sure enough to make a definitive statement either way. Dr. Leon Morris comments on the use of *kalos* in John 10:11 by noting the difference between the two words. He shares his partiality for an approach that treats the words as synonymous due to John's tendency to use both words to mean the same thing, but he doesn't rule out the validity of the opposing point of view.^{viii} That there are differences between the words is agreed upon by most, but traditionally preference is given to the notion that they be treated as synonymous.

But what if John, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, deliberately chose *kalos* because Jesus wants to be known as the Attractive Shepherd? When the understanding of these two words as used by John and his contemporaries is applied to passages where they appear in John we see a nuance of the fourth Gospel author.

APPEALING WINE

The use of *agathos* in John is consistent with the word as it was used in the Greek language. *Agathos is used of the godlike qualities of people – the excellence of their character.* John chooses this word to describe the deeds of those who had died and would be rewarded upon Christ's return (John 5:29). In John 7:12, some described Jesus as a "good man" – an opinion offered in opposition to those who saw Jesus as a deceiver. It is an estimation of his character. In the only other use of *agathos* in John (1:46), Nathaniel, before having met Jesus, expresses his pessimism about

the potential for the insignificant town of Nazareth to produce something capable of displaying the magnificent qualities of God. Throughout the New Testament, *agathos* is almost always translated as *good*.

Kalos is used in situations where the subject is appealing to those interacting with it. The first miracle Jesus performed, recorded in John 2, was at a wedding feast. He did it in response to his mother's observation that the wine had run out. Jesus had the servants fill six large stone jars with water and take the water to the master of the banquet. At some point during the servants' trip from the jars to their boss's pallet, Jesus changed the water into wine.

The master of the banquet wasn't privy to the source of the wine. Perplexed, he explains the common practice of using the *kalos* wine first followed by the wine of lower preference when the people were less able to tell the difference. The majority of translators use *good* here, but many offer other words like *best*, *better*, *fine*, *finest*, or my favorite: *choice* (NIV, TNIV). *Agathos* isn't used here because the godlike qualities of the wine are not the subject of the story either by the master of the banquet or by the author of the Gospel of John.

A BETTER WAY TO RELATE TO GOD

The story within the story is a comment on the attractiveness of the new way of having a relationship with God that Jesus brought (the wine) compared with the old way of rituals and rules (the water in the stone jars). The stone jars were for ceremonial washing, a practice instituted by religious leaders. All Jews who entered a Jewish feast wash their hands with the water in those jars. It was symbolism for washing away the impurities of

the world as they entered a Jewish gathering. It may have been a nice little reminder of their status as God's chosen people, but in effect it did nothing to bring them closer to God.

Jesus changed the water in these stone jars from being an outward symbol to being an inward experience. The miracle had less to do with the need to have good booze at a party than it did with declaring that Jesus' arrival introduced a new way of being in relationship with God that was appealing to people. God could now relate to them internally rather than externally through rituals.

What is being emphasized is not the godlike excellence of the wine but the appeal of the wine to the party-goers. The word *agathos* is a factual description denoting the godlike essence of someone or something; *kalos* is the agreeable effect the subject has on others.

Everything Jesus did was certainly *agathos* – reflecting the goodness and excellence of God. But here John is emphasizing the attractive aspect of Jesus' work in the world. In fact, the purpose of the book of John as stated in John 20:30-31 is to get people's attention so that they can better decipher who he is and what that could mean for us:

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (NIV)

GUILT-FREE LIVING

Think about something that you like that is actually good for you. As far as desirable desires go, I also love milk, which without cookies is a pretty healthy way to go. Moms usually have to urge their kids to drink more milk. My mom had to tell me to save some for everybody else. I also like ironing and eating lima beans. Not at the same time, mind you (though I've never actually tried it). If it weren't for my love of playing basketball I'd be wearing clothes a few sizes bigger. Life would be much easier if we could just love the things that are good for us and hate the things that aren't.

What if God put something in our personalities that match his; another way to relate to him that is meaningful to us? Does God have spiritual lima beans I have yet to discover?

What cannot be denied is the existence of pleasure and its power to motivate us. The tendency is to be so overwhelmed by the dark side of pleasure that we can't see its bright side. The point of this book is to share a perspective about Jesus Christ that will do more than free you to feel okay with wanting more from your faith in him. It is my hope that this outlook on Jesus' words in John 10 will catapult you into the pulsating life with God that was finagled from you at the Fall. The Holy Spirit longs to make it right with your cooperation so that you can delight in the wonders of the Attractive Shepherd.

Many would be offended by the idea that God has even the faintest inkling to act on our consumerist tendencies, to prey on the crude instincts of people so that he gets what he wants. If you are one of those people, please keep reading. Open your heart to hear a refreshing message about the God who loves you.

Don't feel guilty about wanting to enjoy Jesus. He wants you to be attracted to him as well. In fact, he's counting on it.

Notes

ⁱ Ephesians 5:18

ⁱⁱ Michael J Formica, "Understanding the Continuum of Addiction and the Addictive Personality," *Psychology Today* (2008), accessed June 15, 2011, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/enlightened-living/200806/understanding-the-continuum-addiction-and-the-addictive-personality>

ⁱⁱⁱ Luther's Tabletalk, May 18, 1532.

^{iv} Larry Osborne. *A Contrarian's Approach To Knowing God*.

^v Gerhard Kittle, editor, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids:Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 10.

^{vi} Kittle, *TDNT* Vol. 1, 12-13.

^{vii} R.V.G. Tasker, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: John*, Vol. 4, (Grand Rapids:Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 132.

^{viii} Leon Morris, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: John*, (Grand Rapids:Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 509.