

**A Testimony Celebrating Recovery from
Food Addiction, Codependency, and Depression
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I celebrate recovery not just for “those people,” but as one who needs recovery himself. I am one of “those people,” an active participant in Celebrate Recovery who is experiencing God’s healing and transforming grace is real. This is my personal testimony of recovery.

I grew up in a wonderful Christian home and accepted Jesus as my Savior at the age of six. I surrendered my life fully to the Lord for His sanctifying grace during my freshman year at Olivet. That same year I accepted God’s clear call in my life to a lifetime of ministry. I have had an incredible life-journey serving 33 years as pastor of the Middletown Church of the Nazarene. But not everything in me is as you might expect it to be.

Let me introduce myself in the Celebrate Recovery way: I am a very grateful believer in Jesus Christ who is experiencing recovery in my struggles with food addiction, codependency, and depression. My name is Phil.

Ok, now you’ve heard it. I am an addict. And I abuse food. You may think the word addict is too harsh, but that’s what I am, an addict. I am also a codependent, maybe a new term for you. I will explain this one later. And for most of my life I have struggled with depression. I have felt insecure, worthless, discouraged, fearful, and angry. And this combination of food addiction, codependency, and depression has made me miserable. But today I am celebrating my journey to recovery.

I begin with food addiction. I have always struggled with my weight and body image. The inability to control my weight and my abuse of food has also contributed to my depression. Trying to “medicate” depression by eating always made the depression worse. I have lived in a never-ending, downward spiral of discouragement and defeat abusing food by eating more than my body needed.

My journey to recovery began two years ago when I was led to preach on “The Seven Deadly Sins.” Perhaps you’ve heard of them: greed, lust, envy, sloth, pride, gluttony, and anger. Oops, did you hear it? One of the deadly sins is gluttony. Not something a fat preacher wants to preach about. In fact that’s the real reason I had never preached on these sins before. Gluttony was a sin for which I was obviously guilty.

In the sermon on gluttony I chose to be brutally honest and confess that I was, indeed, a glutton, an abuser of food. I also declared a desire to stop this addictive behavior. I even invited others who thought themselves food addicts to join me at Celebrate Recovery that night.

But my recovery from food addiction did not begin then. Only two men joined me at CR, and one of them never came back. I did continue to participate in CR confessing almost weekly in open share group my ongoing struggle with food. Yet nothing really changed and I continued to abuse food by eating too much.

But Celebrate Recovery and open share groups have been huge for me. Open share is the part of celebrate recovery when we talk about what is really going on in our lives without fear of judgment or condemnation. This is where I found acceptance, unconditional love, and a safe place to be honest. And even though I was doing nothing, God was doing something. I now know he was preparing me for the dramatic change He was going to work in my life.

Like all addicts, I rationalized my abuse of food. Here were my favorites:
Rationalization #1: Food addicts have it hard because we still have to eat. Drug addicts and alcoholics actually have it easier because they can just stop altogether. Food addicts can’t do that. Rationalization #2: The church is terrible for food addicts. Whenever we meet we have food. How can I recover when food is being shoved in my face all the time? Rationalization #3: No one really takes food addiction seriously and usually joke about it. People who love you even encourage your destructive behavior. “Here, have a piece of your favorite pie. You’ll hurt my feelings if you don’t eat it!” Eating is a part of ministry. Rationalization #4: Food addicts are everywhere. We are a nation of food

addicts and no one can be realistically expected to recover. People go on diets, lose weight, and almost always gain it back. What's the purpose in even trying?

Pretty good, huh? You see that's the problem with us addicts. We make excuses, issue denials, blame others, and refuse to face the fact that our lives have become unmanageable. Food addicts are no different than other addicts. We just happen to be addicted to something that is more socially and morally acceptable, especially in the church. But it is no less destructive, and no less sinful.

I knew my health was deteriorating. I had very little energy, no motivation, and just didn't feel well. I needed medication to control my blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Food addiction was compromising my Christian witness and damaging my ministry. Sometime near the end of 2010 I began to "hit bottom" in my struggle with food.

One Sunday morning I stopped Drew and Sue Cooper as they left the church. Both of them had lost significant weight earlier that year and I was curious to know the secret of their success. Drew's response was, "Well, I got an "app" for my phone called Sparkpeople and we use it to count calories. We just stayed in our calorie count every day and we lost weight." This was not the magic solution for which I was hoping. I gave them a sweet pastoral smile and probably said something about being really glad for them. But to myself, I thought: "That will never work for me," and "No way am I ever doing that."

Two weeks later I reluctantly downloaded the "Sparkpeople" app but refused to open it immediately. When I did, to my horror it required me to set up an account, enter my current weight and set goals. No way!! Click. I shut it down. A few days later, I decided to at least check it out. I shamefully entered 260 pounds, remembered from my last embarrassing trip to the doctor. I put in a rather conservative target weight, 200 pounds, and chose my birthday as the date to reach my goal, still 11 months away. Then, click, up came this message: "To reach your goal may eat between 1740 and 2040 calories each day." Ooookay. Something to think about, but not do anything about, at least not yet. Click. I shut it down and did not open it again for weeks.

In early February, 2011, I made a secret promise to myself. When I came home from our mission trip to Mexico I would give calorie counting a try. And Celebrate Recovery had taught me the need for an objective, measurable way to define sobriety as a food addict. I decided that being sober meant to stay under my calorie count each day. To remain sober, I would have to do it every day, just like any other addict does. No days off. No binges. No cheating. No rationalizing. One day at a time. I knew I had to take my food addiction seriously. I couldn't treat this as a diet that would someday end. I would need to stay sober, every day, for the rest of my life. I believe this definition of sobriety is the key to my long-term recovery from food addiction.

On Monday, February 21, we came home from Mexico and I started recording the calories I eat on my phone. That first day was not easy, but I learned I could do it. The next day, I did it again. Sober, two whole days. Wohoo. After one week I fearfully got on the scales: 255 pounds. Humm. Maybe this is actually working. So I kept counting and staying sober, one day at a time. After two weeks I announced to my open share group that I had completed two weeks of sobriety. I had now made myself accountable. Very important. I also told my wife. More accountability. After one month I got my 30 day sobriety chip. Amazingly, I continued to lose weight. I continued to count. I learned good foods to eat when counting calories. And I was actually beginning to feel better. I continued to stay sober. I even exercised some. One day at a time. 60 days. Another chip. More weight lost. People noticed and asked what I was doing. I told them. I knew what they were thinking. "That would never work for me." and "No way am I ever doing that." 90 days and another chip. Still sober. And the weight continued to drop, much faster than I expected.

On August 21 I received my six month sobriety chip and reached the upper limit of my "healthy" target weight, 183 pounds. I was officially no longer overweight. Since transitioning to maintenance, I have stabilized at healthy weight for my height of 168-170 pounds having lost a total of 90 pounds. Some of you who have known me as obese and overweight tell me I look too thin, but let me assure you, I am the healthiest I have been in my entire adult life. And, no, I am not still losing weight!

I have been surprised to learn I really do enjoy eating this way. I now eat mostly good food, not junk. I love being able to eat guilt-free when I eat, always knowing where I stand for the day. I look forward to each time I get to eat, usually four times a day. And I have fun making sure I get my full ration of calories every day.

I am looking forward to getting my one year chip in February. But one year is not long compared to more than 50 years of abuse. Losing weight has been the easy part. Maintaining a healthy weight and continuing to eat well is my real challenge. I will be a food addict the rest of my life, but I by God's grace I will no longer abuse food. I must guard against being an abuser who eats too little as well as one being one who eats too much. I will remain committed to a daily journey of recovery. Stay sober. Stay in recovery. Stay accountable. Stay trusting in God for each day.

My story of recovery is not just about food addiction. I am also being set free from another addiction, codependency. This is the story of how God has worked a spiritual transformation and an emotional healing in me I consider nothing short of miraculous.

In Celebrate Recovery we learn much about codependency. A codependent is dependent on the dependent behaviors of other people, thus we are "codependent." Codependents feel responsible to control bad behaviors of others, yet blame others for what is wrong in our lives. We are people pleasers, believing that our value comes in the ability to make others happy and to fix their problems. Codependents cannot be happy unless everyone around us is happy. If everyone else would just straighten up, our lives could be good. Codependents try very hard to do and be the right thing for everyone around them, and we will do about anything to keep peace and avoid conflict. Codependents are worriers, fearful, insecure, and usually angry and frustrated with ourselves, others, and life in general. Codependents live as though everything depends on us and yet resent feeling as though everything depends on us. I could go on, but I think you get the picture. I am definitely a codependent.

I am an exceptionally "good" codependent; a very dependable codependent. As a codependent I care, so much it hurts. So much it can make me miserable. If anyone has

a problem, it becomes my problem. I own it and feel responsible to fix it. If anyone is unhappy with the church, someone in the church, or especially with me, then I have to be unhappy too. If someone is dealing with a crisis, then I am required to be in crisis also. It is very hard to feel good anytime when anything wrong means you are not allowed to feel good. There is always something wrong!

Please don't misunderstand. I am grateful that God has used me in ministry and our church has grown in amazing ways. There is no way for me to look back on the last 33 years of ministry without giving thanks to God for his faithfulness and blessings. I can declare without hesitation, "To God be the glory, great things He has done" right here in the Middletown Church of the Nazarene.

I also know I am a blessed man. I have been given a great place to serve a lifetime of ministry. I am married to a wonderful woman, a treasure to be cherished. My children are outstanding young adults committed to serve and honor the Lord. All my financial needs are met I and have wonderful friends both in and outside the church. And I have a fishing boat that has been recently refurbished!

Given all that, one would think I would be one of the happiest men alive. But as much as I knew I should be joyful, I have not felt joyful. Even though I was faithful to serve God, I have rarely had peace and contentment within. Depression has been a persistent presence in my life.

I have learned much about depression. No one really chooses to be depressed, but we do things that contribute to it. We try to just "snap out of it" and pull ourselves up by the bootstraps but are not able to do so. Depression often has a genetic component and usually runs in families. My father and two of my siblings have also struggled with depression. Some, if not most depression, is caused by chemical imbalances in the brain. Anti-depressant medication can be a very helpful treatment and no one should be ashamed to take it. Most importantly, one can be depressed and still be a good Christian. In fact, we who struggle with depression know what it means to "live by faith" and not by feeling or emotions.

The last few years have been difficult, especially since the completion of our new building. The last six years have been my toughest years in ministry. Our church has experienced discontentment and discouragement. A large debt, an economic recession, and a downturn in giving have reduced financial resources for ministry and staff. Some people have chosen to leave the church, causing even more discouragement. The resignation of two associate pastors has left gaping holes in leadership.

My codependency really kicked in. I was convinced everything wrong was my responsibility and my failure. Because people were unhappy, I was unhappy. I believed my entire future and significance depended on what happened in this church. If it failed, I failed. I lost confidence in the effectiveness of my leadership. I began to hope God would call me someplace else. Anywhere else. I did not want to carry this burden any longer and couldn't imagine doing it much longer. To be completely honest, I wanted out. I wanted to quit.

The first step of recovery always requires us to "hit bottom" and recognize our own helplessness. I was there and I needed a miracle. And God was about to perform a miracle in me. In our monthly meeting, I poured out my heart to the church board. I shared my concern that I was no longer an effective leader and that it might be time for me to go. We were all open, honest, and loving, just as the body of Christ should be. We did not solve our problems, but we agreed to share the burden and seek God's will, guidance, and provisions for the future of OUR church, which is actually His church. I learned I was not alone and I did not carry the burden by myself. We wept together and we prayed together. God was in that room. And God was preparing me for what would happen the next day.

Tuesday afternoon, October 18 Sherry and I left Middletown to attend the annual district minister and mates retreat in northern Indiana. I was relieved to get away but dreaded putting on "happy face" and be around a bunch of preachers for three days. Physically and emotionally exhausted, I asked Sherry to drive. I settled into the passenger seat and began to reflect on just how ready I was to just "let it all go."

Somewhere along Interstate 69, traveling north near mile marker 55 God worked a miracle in my life. St. Paul's words appeared in my mind, "And now these three remain, faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love." These familiar words suddenly seemed new and profound. I understood them as I had never known them before. But more than understanding them, I was fully experiencing them: faith, hope and love. I mean really experiencing them. They were more than just truths, or ideas, or principles. They were alive, life itself. I really knew what they meant, to own them, to truly live them.

First I understood FAITH, not as something I was supposed to have, or needed to have, but as something I was invited to live. Faith in my Lord was no longer an obligation or a duty, but a privilege. For the first time in my Christian life I knew that faith really meant I could let it all go and really give it all to Him. I really didn't need to carry all my burdens, feel all the responsibility, own all the problems. I could give them all to Him, completely, fully. Faith meant doing what I most wanted to do, and that was to let it all go. I could lay it all down at the foot of the cross, hand it all over, give it all up. Faith meant knowing that I not only *should* trust God, but that I *could* trust Him. And not only could I trust Him, I could also totally, fully, and completely depend on Him. I could depend on Him to handle it. It was no longer my church, my problems, my family, my life. It was all His. And faith meant giving it all up every day, everything, in every way. Do you know what that really meant? I was free. Totally free. The burden was lifted, the load was gone. Wow!!!

And then I understood HOPE. As never before I knew what it meant to hope. Not just have hope, but to be truly hopeful, to be filled with hope. I had hope that knows God's plans and purposes for me are completely secure and certain. I've always believed this to be true, but I've never actually known it as an experience. Hope was more than just a principle to be believed, it was an experience to be treasured. Hope no longer depends on what anyone else does. I do not believe God causes everything that happens, I know that no thing or person can frustrate God's ultimate will for my life. My future is not tied to what happens in this church, how anyone responds to me, or any bad thing that happens. And God's plan and purpose for me is always good, pleasing and perfect, and

by faith, will be done in my life and for His glory. I am totally safe. No need to worry, fret, or anguish over the things and people I cannot control. I am not only free to let it all go, but I now have inner peace, knowing the God I serve has already overcome the world. Wow. Faith and hope as I have never lived them before.

And then, the best, most joyful part of my experience exploded in my understanding. It was just as Paul said, “The greatest of these is LOVE.” I have always known that as a Christian I am supposed to love. I know love is a behavior, not an emotion and that I am to love both friend and enemy by blessing them, doing good to them, and praying for them. But this new love was more than something I should do, or might even feel, it became something I WAS. Since by faith that could give it all to God, and in hope my future was secure, I could now love without fear or conditions. I could love my God, with all my heart, soul, mind and strength. And I could love for others free of the dysfunctions of codependency. I could love with no conditions or expectations of a response. I could love without being dependent on the object of my love. It was a crazy kind of love that knew even if it was rejected, love was still free. I wanted to love. I could love. And with that love came joy. Pure joy. Joy more complete than I have ever experienced in my life.

I now practice a new daily spiritual discipline. Every morning I consciously choose to live in faith, hope and love. Each day I give it all up to him. I leave it all on the altar every day. I trust God with everything and determine to depend fully in Him for that day. I remind myself my hope that is absolutely, entirely secure in Him. No matter what happens, regardless of what anyone does, God has a plan and purpose not only for my long-term future, but for that very day. I, therefore approach each day with optimism and confidence. Each day is an adventurous discovery of what God will accomplish in and through me. And more than anything, I look forward to the chance to love someone with the unconditional love of Jesus. Love is where the joy is, and it brings peace that is nothing like anything else in this world.

And my depression, it’s gone! I have had some “bad” days since October 18, but even the bad days have been full of joy and peace. I cannot find words to adequately

describe what it is like to be free of the sadness. But it is real, and it is something I cherish each and every day. The cloud of depression has lifted and the light shines bright in my life.

And here's the really neat part. Remember how much I wanted to quit? God has given me a greater commitment, more excitement, and deeper passion for ministry than I ever remember feeling in my life. I am no longer looking for a way out, I am thrilled to be in, all the way in, right here, as pastor of the Middletown Church of the Nazarene. What a wonderful place to live in faith, hope, and love.

I am not sure why it took me so long to be set free, and I wish I had happened much sooner. But even with all the years of struggle it worth the wait. The years of misery help me cherish the joy now even more. I am sure that without the ministry of Celebrate Recovery I would still be living in bondage to my addictions and depression. But Celebrate Recovery did not free me, God did, and it is to Him I give all the praise and all the glory.

Celebrate Recovery will remain very much a part of my life. Working the steps, taking off masks, admitting my faults, finding a safe place, and being accountable are all necessary for my continued journey toward recovery. Celebrate Recovery ministry works when I work it, and praise God, I know I'm worth it. I serve a God who sets me free, heals my hurts, and brings me to wholeness.

I continue to live this new life one day at a time. I AM celebrating recovery and pray that what He has done in me will be done in each and every person who struggles with one of life's hurts, habits, or hang-ups. But most of all, I choose to live each day with faith that lets go, with hope that looks up, and with love that reaches out.

Thank you for allowing me to share.