



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: The Battle Against Mental Illness and Addiction

Guest(s): Rick Amato

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Dr. Dobson: Well, hello everyone. I'm James Dobson, and you're listening to Family Talk, a listener-supported ministry. In fact, thank you so much for being part of that support for James Dobson Family Institute.

Roger Marsh: Welcome everyone to Family Talk, a production of the James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh. Thanks so much for tuning in today. Before we get to our program, I want to take a moment and acknowledge the solemnness of this day. It seems hard to believe that it's been 19 years since terrorists hijacked and crashed planes across the East Coast. New York City, Washington, DC and Pennsylvania were all sites for this tragic day in our history. Nearly 3,000 people lost their lives on September 11, 2001. Join us now in remembering those who lost their lives and continue to pray for their families.

With that, let's get to today's broadcast right now. In the 15th chapter of the Gospel of Luke, we read that heaven rejoices when even just one sinner repents. In just a moment you're going to hear the testimony of a man who had a radical salvation experience. His name is Rick Amato. Rick will be talking about his important decision to follow Jesus, but he'll also share the deep struggles and trials he's endured as a Christian, as well. I don't want to take anything away from his testimony, so let's get started. Here is our host for today's broadcast, Dr. Tim Clinton, to introduce his guest.

Dr. Clinton: Rick, thank you for joining us on this edition of Family Talk. I have so looked forward to this particular broadcast. You've got a story, in my mind like none other, but it's a story in some ways that's highly reflective of what's happening everywhere. Rick, take us back. Boy growing up in Detroit, Michigan.

Rick Amato: South Detroit. Lincoln Park, right on the border of Detroit. I grew up grandson of an Italian immigrant. My grandfather was a made man. If I need to explain that, then I can't. But he was a made man in the family. That's my father's father. My mother's father worked in the coal mines from West Virginia. They moved to Detroit in the industry boom up there. I was one of seven children, the middle child. At a very early age, I learned that I could choose, but I couldn't choose the consequences of my choices.

One of the choices I made was at 11 years old. With a group of other Sicilian boys, I chose to go out one night after a football game. I played football, baseball, I wrestled. Normal kid. And I drank. We all got a 40 ounce jumbo of beer, and I drank half of it with all of them. They all hid their half for the next Friday night, but the next morning I could still see the yellow phone, Tim, and the rotary dial. I called every one of them to ask what they did with their half. What 11-year-old kid does-

Dr. Clinton: 11-year-old boy.

Rick Amato: Right. So I was already, the first time I drank alcohol, I had a predisposition. Now is it genetic? I don't know. But I know my ancestors were either teetotalers, didn't drink at all, or alcoholics. There was nobody that drank moderately. So, that continued in my life. I just started experimenting with everything. I played sports, but by the time I was 14, I really was a confused, drug-using rebel. I was noticed because I was like a rebel without a cause. I was a gifted speaker, very gifted. I was a savant as a kid. I could read.

Dr. Clinton: Like a prodigy type kid.

Rick Amato: Right.

Dr. Clinton: Crazy stuff.

Rick Amato: Right. They used to put me on the table, my dad would bet his friends \$5, at four years old, I could read the Encyclopedia Britannica. My brothers and sisters have all told me I did it. I have vague memories of it. But the bottom line is one of my friend's father, Bill Hall, God rest his soul, he was a Protestant lay minister at a Baptist church. His son, Marty, was encouraged by him to take me to the church. So the son asked me, "Will you go to church with me? My dad's making me go." I was like, "No way. What kind of church?" He said "Baptist." I said, "No way, never. If I go to Baptist church I'll go to Hell. Never." He said, "Well, I got two joints of Colombian. We can smoke them, marijuana, and go laugh at the preacher." So a gang of five of us went there for the first time in my life. 14 years old. October 20, 1974.

I heard the evangelical gospel that Jesus Christ was Christianity. That it wasn't rules and regulations and dogmas and my denomination. It was Christ. That He really was a human that died. That He really did rise from the dead. I'll never forget they were singing. It was the first time I was exposed to evangelical emotionalism. They were singing Just As I Am Without One Plea. I remember thinking to myself, "This is just Baptist emotionalism." I was a very intelligent kid. Studied evolution, Darwin, de Vries, Lamarck. By the time I was 15, I already knew those theories. But I remember he spun around, Irwin Robertson from Lansing, Michigan, he said, "You might be here and think it's the music calling you to be saved." He said, "It's not. It's the spirit of Jesus Christ. He's alive." I had

on a crushed velvet black blazer, a black sweater, black pants, a big afro.
Remember the big afros?

Dr. Clinton: Oh yeah.

Rick Amato: And high-heeled orange platform-

Dr. Clinton: Come on.

Rick Amato: Tim, they were glow-in-the-dark orange. They really were glow-in-the-dark orange shoes. I said "Excuse me, Marty. Excuse me, Stosh. Excuse me, Bear. I'm going down." I went down the altar. That was my first profession and faith in Jesus Christ. I can't tell you how my life was transformed.

Dr. Clinton: Yeah. What happened, Rick?

Rick Amato: I caught onto this idea that Jesus was alive. And then I read where he said, "If you keep my sayings, I will make myself known to you. I'll manifest." So I used to run home from football, baseball, and wrestling. I would lock my closet. I'd pray for an hour. Memorize Matthew for an hour. Pray for an hour. Memorize Mark. Until eventually I memorized every single word Jesus Christ ever said. Eventually I memorized the whole New Testament because it was a gift. I already had that gift with words and memory.

But I decided if he was alive, there was no more important news. And if he was the Lord, his teachings, the read words must have the answers to life. So I began to memorize all of them. I decided I was going to go reach the world for God. I was going to go save the world. Since the world was on a verge of a nuclear war between Russia and America, I decided to go save Russia first. I thought, "I'm going to go over there, and I'll tell that Russian President about Jesus. And I'll tell all the Russian people about Jesus." So I wasn't going to-

Dr. Clinton: Was that Mikhail Gorbachev?

Rick Amato: At the time it was Brezhnev. Leo Brezhnev. Leonid Brezhnev. By the way, at the time he was executing Christians, he was imprisoning them. There was a purge on the Christian Church. I can remember in high school, when I graduated from Lincoln park, I was voted most talkative.

Dr. Clinton: You're kidding.

Rick Amato: No, yeah right. I remember them saying, "What are you going to do? What are you going to do when you grow up?" I said, "I'm going to Russia. I'm going to win the President to Jesus. I'm going to give them all Bibles and get all them people out of jail. I'm going to let them Jews go home." One kid said to me, "Man, you should have quit drugs sooner than you did, Rick. You're hallucinating." So anyway, I ended up-

Dr. Clinton: God took you.

Rick Amato: He did. He really did. I ended up attending Liberty University. I remember there was no buildings on the mountain. Nothing. And I remember, I was like, "I want to go to Russia. I'm going to save Russia. I want to give them Jesus. If they get what I got, then there'll be peace on earth. There won't be a nuclear war." I can remember flunking evangelism because I was so vocal about that I was going to go to Russia. I remember when I finally, I nearly died in 1986, I got sick. I had a peritonitis. I had a colostomy to save my life. They put a colostomy ... But then it was healed. Miraculously reversed. So when it was reversed, I thought, "I may not have long to live. I better get to Russia." So some leaders from Liberty and 35 students, we smuggled 10,000 New Testaments in, and I'll never forget it. When they opened our suitcases ... The whole airport was red. They had machine guns. One guy opened the suitcase. There was cameras everywhere.

He looked, he saw the Bible, saw 35 of us each with an extra suitcase. Tears filled his eyes. He zipped it back up. He said to the people around him in perfect English, "Amerikanskis. Let them all through. Don't search another suitcase." And I realized then, something's on. 1989, I realized something's happening in Russia. It's right before the Iron Curtain turned into a window of opportunity. The worst thing that was happening in Communism was really the best thing that was happening for Jesus Christ and his people. God was about to set those people free. And so it ended up, I did. Before I knew it, I was sitting with President Gorbachev at the Kremlin. Before I knew it, I was handing Yeltsin a Bible, speaking in the Kremlin. Before I knew it, they were saying, "What do you suggest?"

Dr. Clinton: How many people you lead to Christ?

Rick Amato: They say over a million, Tim. Who knows? If just one came to Christ. I know that to this day, I still get mail letters, emails, all kinds of communications. So, we were able to take over 5,000 Americans with us to Russia, Romania, Hungary. We took them there, but the major impact was in Russia. Where today 20 million of the New Testament we had translated and printed are now in Russia in Moscow alone. That's just Moscow. So it all really did happen.

Dr. Clinton: Rick, along with everyone's story, there's some other narrative going on and something began to happen in your life that took you a different way.

Rick Amato: Tim, like a lot of people, when I put my faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ and confessed his resurrection, I knew it because I believed it. My guilt was gone. My shame was gone. My fear was gone. My blame was gone. But I had been molested as a kid. My father was a very, very violent person. My mother and he just fought like cats and dogs, like the Hatfields and McCoys. My brother had his neck broken, his hand cut. My other brother got shot in the head. I grew up in a violent family. So there was a lot of trauma there. But I never went back to those street drugs. Never went back to alcohol, any of that. But as the ministry just exploded, multimillion dollar a year, \$40 million, 25,000 donors. I

had my own show on VH1 before anybody did, called The Preacher Dude with Rick Amato. I was in every major Protestant denomination, speaking everywhere.

Something happened to me. The same kind of thing that happens to celebrities. Like Elvis Presley. Same thing happened to Prince. Same thing happened to a lot of people. And that is that I didn't have the inner life, the serenity inside to deal with the spotlight. I can remember sitting in Olympic Stadium before anybody ever preached there. I was the first minister to ever speak in the Kremlin. First minister to speak in Olympic Stadium. I can remember sitting with 50,000 people there on the stage, feeling alone, isolated, feeling empty inside and not knowing why, because I'd done everything I was supposed to do. I fasted. I prayed. I was living a clean life. I was never alone with a woman, 25 years, besides my wife. I was morally pure and clean. But inside mentally, there was trauma from my past.

So I started having panic attacks and the doctor said, "Well, here. Here's something that'll help you." And he gave me a prescription. It was a prescription all right. Prescription for trouble. He gave me Xanax, benzodiazepines like Klonopin, Ativan and all that stuff. And I thought, "Well, the doctor gave it to me. It's not a street drug. It's not alcohol."

Dr. Clinton: Should be okay. This is legit.

Rick Amato: Right. I'm saved.

Dr. Clinton: I'm free.

Rick Amato: I'm free. Well, all I can say is little did I know I had become enslaved until eventually there was an accident in Russia. I was shipping some things over [inaudible 00:12:44]. I broke seven facets in my back. So they gave me Fentanyl patches on top of the Xanax. Needless to say, in short order, I was habituated. There's probably somebody listening to me right now ... Maybe this is just for them. I was a Christian. I loved God. I had degrees in psychology and religion. I was a church attender. As far as I know, I was doing everything a real authentic man of God has to do, and I got addicted to prescription drugs. I was a slave from the minute I got up in the morning to the minute I went to bed at night, I had to have the prescription drugs or I would feel these terrible withdrawals. So the long story short of it is that began a pattern in my life, a cycle of habituation, withdrawal, recovery. And then I would think, "Well, I could do it." I never addressed the core issues of my mind. I never addressed the core issues of the trauma that had affected me. We now know molecularly in our intestines, in our heart ... Your heart has 45 billion more brain cells than your brain. I was traumatized on the inside while extremely successful on the outside. I think that describes a lot of Christians today. Their hands are full, but their hearts are empty.

Dr. Clinton: Paul reminds us in Ephesians 6:2, Rick, that we're in a battle. I personally believe if you have any value for God, all hell will work in any and whatever way possible to begin to have dominion over you. To get you out of the way. To get you confused. To get you to believe that you're not worthy. None of us are worthy, but you know what I'm saying, Rick. The story doesn't stop there. You start taking a beating, in my mind.

Rick Amato: It was awful, Tim. My wife, Susan, says it best. "Everybody has a script that they were raised with." The script I had in my life made me a really good dad. I was there when every one of my children were born. I dedicated them to Christ when they were born. The ones that were cesarean, I had to come in after, but the first two, Beth and Nancy, I took him right then. So my daughter, Beth, was the apple of my eye. After I got hospitalized in 2013, seven years ago ... I'm one in a million according to Atlanta Center for Disease Control. Never went back to benzos, got off all that stuff.

But I know that when I got out of the hospital the last time for the benzodiazepine and Fentanyl habituation dependency addiction, I remember I went back to Liberty, got a Master's Degree in Human Service and Counseling with a focus on addiction to understand how this happened to me, to learn what I already knew and announced at the Southern Baptist Convention in 1996: addiction is a developmentally acquired brain disease. Just like if I'd had got saved or anybody gets saved, if you bring Christ into your heart, you make him the Lord of your life. If you have leukemia, you're probably still going to have leukemia. It might go into remission and come back for the rest of your life. Same thing with cancer, you get saved. You got AIDS. You get saved and become a Christian.

Addiction's a brain disease. Once you're a pickle, you can't be a cucumber. The alcoholism of my early teens had formed colonies in my brain that caused me, once I introduced benzodiazepines, which affects the brain almost precisely the same way alcohol does, I was instantly habituated again. It's like some people can take a painkiller and they're never habituated.

Well, I went back to Liberty. Got a Master's, got a 4.0, graduated with honors. Hadn't done that since fourth grade when I discovered girls. I got to tell you, it changed my life. Well shortly after that, the apple of my eye, my daughter, Beth Ann Amato, died in an unspeakable tragedy when a first-week intern made a mistake with medications. Tried to intubate her and missed. The autopsy said she was in perfect health. He killed her. She had three little children. That was a terrible insult to my life. But the injury that came afterwards was when I discovered her husband had been having an affair with her best friend, and her cousin. And her best friend's husband was his best friend. All the while he was preaching and singing, and I just wanted to kill him, Tim. I hope you people in the listening audience can understand.

I wanted to kill the doctor. I wanted to kill him. But then I had to look at my part in it. That's when I realized I had modeled inauthenticity. I had modeled a life

that wasn't authentic. I decided to change my life completely to reflect 100% authenticity, which for me meant a very sad divorce. Come to find out 8 out of 10 people that lose children get a divorce and a period of my life where I had to force myself to breathe. I never drank. I never took drugs, never smoked weed, never went back to any of that stuff, but I had to face my own mental health for the first time and make it priority number one.

The seed to my greatest power was hidden in the heart of my worst problem. When I finally faced the darkest corners of my life, I found a light brighter than the noon day sun, just waiting to shine in me and out of me. That's when my quest really began. Just like I was once a missionary and I stepped into Russia to stop a nuclear war, there's a tsunami in America right now of mental health illness. There's a tsunami. A mental health crisis. I want to step into that and raise up other people to stop the madness.

Dr. Clinton:

Because Rick, a lot of people don't make it. A lot of people get lost. They get swept out to sea. They get overwhelmed and consumed by their pain. That doesn't mean they're helpless or hopeless, but they may feel helpless and hopeless.

Rick, somewhere a mind found itself. Somewhere, something happened inside of you. That's the hopeful side of this for a moment because Rick, I don't know how you do that. I don't know how you get through that, humanly speaking. I think it's what we share here for a moment. It's because of the grace of God. The Psalmist constantly cried out, "It's the steadfast love of God that never fails. It never stops. That keeps beckoning. It keeps embracing, trying to pull us to himself."

Rick, in this you're right. There is a mental health crisis. People are not addressing it. We're silencing people who are coming out of that kind of brokenness. We're shaming them by ignoring them and so much more. We're putting stigmas on people and shoving them out the back door when they should be coming in the front door, being received with open arms. Rick, we've got to do something. I know that's a passion of yours. Rick, we're fighting the clock. Share with us what God has laid on your heart. What you envision. What's the dream that God's placed deep inside of you?

Rick Amato:

Tim, I have a dream, and my dream is the same as it was for Russia. Just like I was a missionary there, now I'm a missionary to America. My dream is that while hundreds of people are dying, they're not going to a mental health therapist. They're not going to prison. They're dying of overdoses in America. 21 veterans are killing themselves every day. The divorce rate. 75%. Pastor's wives and pastors are beaten down. The attrition rate is incredible.

My dream is that in this dark hour, just like when Brezhnev was killing the Christians right before the Iron Curtain turned into a window of opportunity, I think this mental health crisis is a catalyst for the church in America, believers in

America to wake up and come to their senses that Christian and mentally healthy are synonymous terms. Authentic and Christian are synonymous terms.

So I want to step in. I just want to bring my little loaf of bread and fishes. You say, how did I get through it? One day at a time. Same way I stay off drugs and alcohol, living in the moment, doing the next right thing. Knowing God didn't say I was. He doesn't live where my daughter got killed in the past. Not living in, "I will be." He doesn't live where the anguish never goes away every day. He said, "I am." Living in this moment with my focus on attachment to other mentally healthy brothers who are authentic with their faith. It's not about what they believe about dogmas and creeds and ideas. It's about how they deal with resentment and anger and depression and anxiety. It's authentic brothers in God, daily, that's kept me not only breathing, but has brought me to a place of happiness and joy and freedom that I want to make war on addiction. I want to be a lighthouse, and I want to be used to help other Christians in other churches. I want to step up and raise up step uppers in the church.

Dr. Clinton: Rick, you love research. You love science. You love addictionology. In other words, you want to get in the midst of it all and say, "Listen, let's bring everything we can into this fight for the glory of God."

Rick Amato: Yes. I want to tell-

Dr. Clinton: For the freedom of others.

Rick Amato: I want to tell all my brothers, just because the tomb is empty doesn't mean our heads have to be. I want to avail ourselves of the latest research and combine it with the ancient scriptures that were saying it way before the researchers said it and come with that double-edged sword together to cut the chains off people in bondage in the churches. Beginning with pastors and their wives and moving out into the people so we can have first responders everywhere that know how to set people free.

Dr. Clinton: That's a vision too, Rick, that the church would be the place. That we would develop inside the church, mental health first aid responders, mental health coaches, who can step into the moment because we do have an access to care problem. We don't have people out there. We don't have enough help. In addition, we're not acknowledging the severity of the problem. We're sticking our head in the sand. It's got to change.

Rick Amato: Well, Tim, you think it's common sense. If you think about it, there's 600,000 ordained Protestant ministers. If you put all the rabbis and mullahs and ministers together, the number's astronomical, and we know from modern science, only faith in a higher power ... I was asked on Fox national television, the guy, Eric Bolling, put the microphone in my face. He said, "What's the answer for addiction?" I said it there, I'll say it again. Only God can save an addict. Nothing else. Once you're a pickle, you can't be a cucumber. You'd think

the Christians in the churches would be screaming from the rooftops. What I'm saying is the church and the mental health crisis together may very well be the combination for the greatest awakening Christianity's ever seen when we face the darkest corner of our existence on this planet right now, which is the mental health crisis.

Dr. Clinton: I believe that the mental health crisis will be the greatest challenge the church will face over the next 10 years, if not longer.

Rick Amato: And it'll be our greatest victory, Tim.

Dr. Clinton: God help us to step into this moment. Rick, thank you for joining us.

Rick Amato: Thank you, Tim. What a privilege.

Dr. Clinton: We got to have you back.

Rick Amato: Thank you, Tim.

Roger Marsh: Well, that's certainly a powerful testimony that we've heard today here on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. It's touching to hear the ways that God continues to transform lives and then to use those transformed people for his glory. I encourage you to visit today's broadcast page at drjamesdobson.org to learn more about our guest on today's program, Rick Amato. He has such a passion for evangelism and is addressing the disturbing mental health crisis in the nation. Again, that's drjamesdobson.org and then tap onto the broadcast page.

Well, thanks so much for listening today and every day this week for our interviews and programs. Be sure to join us again Monday for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.