

A Godly Quest For Pleasure

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Forerunner, August 2006

Throughout the entire creation, God Almighty has developed and produced repeatable designs and patterns. One of the most ubiquitous patterns consists of the *drive-reduction mechanism* found in all living things, from the single cell to the multicellular organism. An accepted scientific metaphor or theoretical construct, Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, places at the foundation of human behavior the systematic satiation of tissue needs or drives: hunger, thirst, fatigue, and sex. In simple terms, then, the drive-reduction mechanism is the means by which the body strives to reduce the state of tension that such needs produce.

Whole philosophies have developed around the satisfaction of these physical needs. For instance, among the Greeks and later the Romans, the Epicureans, also known as the Hedonists, stressed that the highest aim in life consists of attaining pleasure or, put another way, of satisfying the animal or carnal pleasures. Many similar philosophies and movements have existed throughout human history.

Paul warns Timothy that in the last days many would obsessively focus in on satisfying tissue needs—becoming "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (II Timothy 3:4), making an idol of pleasure and pleasure-seeking. A casual reading of this verse may lead us to disparage pleasure, regarding it as an intrinsic evil. The great God of the universe, however, does not intend for us to denigrate or disparage pleasure. After all, the marvelous drive-reduction mechanism (thirst, hunger, desire) reflects an aspect of God's very mind (Romans 1:20), something He pronounced good and wholesome after He created man (Genesis 1:31).

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with the legitimate satisfying of the desire for pleasure, as long as we do not make that process our overriding obsession, and as long as we play by God's rules, engaging those spiritual laws that bring about His desired ends. What we often fail to realize is that those desired ends may be the by-product, result, or consequence of something we have not yet considered.

Guard Your Affections

King David instructs in Psalm 37:4, "Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart." Later, the prophet Isaiah writes, "If you . . . call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord honorable, and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words, then you shall delight yourself in the Lord . . ." (Isaiah 58:13-14). Finally, Jesus Himself teaches, "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things [What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we wear?] shall be added to you" (Matthew 6:33).

All of these prescribed behaviors set in motion certain of God's eternal laws—which will bring about the desired results, namely the quenching of some deep, unsatisfied desires.

One of the most awesome responsibilities God has given us is the management and healthful cultivation of our desires and emotions. Proverbs 4:23 advises, "Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life." In other words, Solomon is telling us to guard our affections because they control or dictate everything we do.

English writer W. Somerset Maugham, in an ironic twist of this passage, wrote, "Be careful what you set your heart upon, for you might get it." Some have mistakenly concluded that God intends that we stifle our feelings, keeping metaphorical "blindens" on our emotions. Indeed, a superficial reading of Proverbs 4:25-27 seems to prescribe this: "Let your eyes look straight ahead [with fixed purpose], and your eyelids look right before you. Ponder the path of your feet, and let all your ways be established. Do not turn to the right or the left; remove your foot from evil."

While we are instructed to remove our feet from evil, we are not instructed to anesthetize our emotions in the process. The etymology of *emotion* goes back to the Latin *emovere*, meaning "to move out, to excite or motivate." The Eternal God has created tissue deficits and desires to excite and motivate us and to keep us productive.

In God's Word, we learn that the laborer's appetite works for him; "his hungry mouth drives him on" (Proverbs 16:26). In this context, we can see how a tissue deficit can bring about productive behavior. Frequently, God will allow a deficit or state of dissatisfaction to endure a long time in order to create an intense desire in us—one that we want with all our being to satisfy. Historically, our Israelite forebears had to endure horrendous slavery for a few centuries before they developed a passion for liberty (Exodus 12:40). In another example, those on the honor roll of the faithful in Hebrews 11 were all motivated by a state of dissatisfaction and a desire for something more permanent and lasting. Hebrews 11:16 says of them, "But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country."

The Law of Compensation

American writers Emily Dickinson and Ralph Waldo Emerson both marveled at the Law of Compensation that permeates all living things, which states that the value of something is taught by its lack: The value of water is taught by thirst. The value of freedom is taught by slavery. The value of peace is taught by war. Even the value of precious gems is taught by their rarity. Does it not make sense that the preciousness of true righteousness may be taught by its apparent lack?

Dickinson writes:

Success is counted sweetest by those who ne'er succeed
To comprehend a nectar requires sorest need.

In his essay on *Compensation*, Emerson observes:

For example, in the animal kingdom, the physiologist has observed that no creatures are favorites, but a certain compensation balances every gift and every defect. A surplus given to one part is paid out of a reduction from another part of the same creature. If the head and neck are enlarged, the trunk and extremities are cut short.

Transferring this insight into the human world of affairs, Emerson records the following insight:

The farmer imagines power and place are fine things. But the President has paid dear for his White House. It has commonly cost him his peace and the best of his manly attributes.

Emerson could not have realized how prophetic his words proved in the late twentieth century. In the middle 1970s, when President Nixon resigned his post in disgrace, he and former contender Hubert Humphrey had a conversation. As President Nixon bemoaned his humiliation and disgrace, Hubert Humphrey suggested that he would have endured that disgrace if he could have occupied the Oval Office for one hour.

Reflecting on the presidency of Bill Clinton, one wonders if, in his most private moments, the former president has perhaps learned the value of a good name and an untarnished reputation (Proverbs 22:1). The bold, unfeeling mask concealing guilt and shame is purchased at a horrendous price. One can only hope that, during his own administration, George W. Bush has perhaps come to value real peace, privacy, and security, as these desirable states have been scarce since September 11, 2001.

Danger in Excessive Desire

Pleasure, peace of mind, and the desires of our hearts are the consequences, the results, the byproducts of seeking the rare righteousness of God. Consequently, it is only through seeking and practicing righteousness that our deepest needs can become satisfied. Paradoxically, setting our minds upon pleasure as an end in itself will give us no lasting pleasure.

Some people have mistakenly condemned wholesome things such as music, dancing, card games, alcohol, or sex as intrinsically evil. Such prudish attitudes have fostered warped behaviors and unhealthy emotions, perhaps the opposite of what was intended. Interestingly, our Puritan forefathers were not nearly as stuffy or prudish as historians have commonly drawn them. For example, Puritan preacher Cotton Mather once said, "Wine is from the Lord, but the drunkard is from the devil."

In other words, God has not forbidden any desire, pleasure, or behavior when it is attained through exercising His holy law, but He sternly warns against the excessive or misdirected use of any good thing. God even condemns a vain display of righteousness, comparing it to "filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6).

If a person sets his heart on power or authority to the extent that it becomes his all-consuming passion—even to the extent that he would be willing to compromise certain aspects of God's law to attain that goal—he will derive no pleasure from exercising that power (Leviticus 26:19).

God's Word specifically warns not to set one's desires on money, for "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10). We also learn that if we obsessively chase after riches, "they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle" (Proverbs 23:5).

In a similar vein, Lebanese poet/philosopher Khalil Gibran compared romantic love to holding quicksilver in the palm of the hand. If one tries to grab it, the contents will spill on the ground, but if you gently hold it, the quicksilver will remain.

This paradoxical tension is also at work regarding setting one's heart on pleasure for pleasure's sake. Solomon warns, "He who loves pleasure will be a poor man; he who loves wine and oil will not be rich" (Proverbs 21:17).

We find a comparable caution regarding the desire for rest, sleep, and idleness. Scripture warns, "Do not love sleep, lest you come to poverty" (Proverbs 20:13). The sweetness and deliciousness of sound, restful sleep is a by-product of productive, meaningful work, not an end in itself. In Ecclesiastes 5:12, we learn that "the sleep of a laboring man is sweet, whether he eats little or much." By stark contrast, an old Yiddish proverb suggests that the hardest and most taxing work is to go about idle. The sluggard must expend tremendous reserves of energy explaining why he has not been productive.

In a similar vein, as a teacher I become amused at the elaborate stratagems students have devised to "con" or "beat" the system. One student made an elaborate "cheat sheet" consisting of a tiny, microscopic scroll containing the test answers, which he inserted into his watch. During the exam, he could retrieve all the answers just by winding his watch. Beside the obvious deceitfulness and dishonesty of the whole procedure, the precious energy spent at constructing this device could have been spent more profitably on wholesome studying, relieving the discomfort of a troubled conscience.

Our Elder Brother Jesus tells us not to set our hearts on security, warning us that anyone who is overly concerned about saving his skin will probably lose it (Luke 17:33). Excessive desires, even for normally good things, contain inherent dangers that lead to sin, destitution, destruction, and even death.

Craving More

Is there anything inherently wrong with power, money, food, sleep, rest, sex, or pleasure? Of course not! The controversy God has with us is the means by which we attain them. *God has deliberately designed our nervous systems so that they are not satisfied with impermanent or short-lived things.*

God expresses concern about the consequences of setting our hearts upon temporary pleasures, among which are the dangers of excess, or the danger of being distracted, from a more satisfying permanent source of pleasure.

If we love pleasure and devote our entire beings toward its pursuit, we will not be satisfied with a little pleasure. Like an addict, we will always crave more and more without being satisfied. "The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing," observes Solomon (Ecclesiastes 1:8).

If we love sleep, we will not be satisfied with a little sleep. We will crave it increasingly more until the cumulative effects are realized (Proverbs 24:30-34). Setting our minds and hearts on anything per se, whether it is money, pleasure, power, or position, may actually distract us or prevent us from attaining what we actually crave in our heart of hearts.

Even quality music does not really fill us up. As a teenager, I listened to portions of Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake" ballet until I almost became sick of it. As a ten-year-old, I did become sick of orange juice by trying to satisfy a craving. For a while, instead of having my appetite satiated, I developed an opposite reaction—an abhorrence for that which earlier gave me pleasure. The same thing occurred with ice cream.

God wants us to direct our affections at things that are going to last, things that will endure, things that will fill us up and satisfy us rather than increase our craving. It is like the old "Squirt" soft-drink

commercial: "Quenches your thirst without an afterthirst." With godly pleasures, we receive no regret or unpleasant afterthirst. "The blessing of the Lord makes one rich, and He adds no sorrow with it" (Proverbs 10:22).

Satiation Without Saturation

God's spiritual gifts have the capacity to satisfy us, to fill us up without the unpleasant after-effect of being overcome with guilt, feeling sick and bloated, or developing an abhorrence for those things. Jesus says we are to develop a thirst or a craving for God's Holy Spirit: "If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink" (John 7:37). The food that Jesus craved—He says in John 4:34, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish the work"—would fill us up so that we would never go hungry again (John 6:35).

He tells us that, if we hunger and thirst for righteousness, we will truly be filled (Matthew 5:6). We are admonished to set our hearts and minds on the pursuit of wisdom. The consequences are protection, discretion, length of days, riches, honor, peace, and life (Proverbs 1:4; 2:10-11; 3:2). What more could we want?

David tells us repeatedly in Psalm 119 to set our hearts on God's law, which exemplifies love toward God and love toward mankind, including one's enemies. David testifies, "It is my meditation all the day" (Psalm 119:97). There is no excessive satiation or kickback from setting all our affections on and performing God's law. The consequences are lastingly pleasurable, as David promises: "Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble" (Psalm 119:165).

If peace and tranquility, the feeling of being totally filled or fulfilled, are our heart's desires, we need to channel our affections on those things that will bring about those consequences, ones that will bring us closer to God. David points the way: "You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11).