

Stimulating A Spiritual Appetite

Scratching the Unreachable Itch

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All of us are familiar with the pleasant instructions regarding the use of second tithe and the Feast of Tabernacles:

Deuteronomy 14:26 And you shall spend your money for whatever your heart desires: for oxen or sheep, for wine or similar drink, for whatever your heart desires; you shall eat there before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your household.

On the other hand, in the annual Jewish cyclical tradition of Torah readings, the rather pessimistic treatise, Ecclesiastes, chronicling Solomon's quest for pleasure and the disillusioning consequences is specifically reserved for the Feast of Tabernacles. John Ritenbaugh in a 1993 sermon suggested that Ecclesiastes illustrates the disillusionment that love for the worldly pleasures will inevitably bring.

Brethren, is the quest for pleasure and the quest for godliness mutually exclusive? Doesn't Proverbs 21:17 say that "He who loves pleasure will be a poor man; He who loves wine and oil will not be rich?" The Apostle Paul warned in II Timothy 3:4 that in the last days many would obsessively focus on satisfying tissue needs becoming "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God," making pleasure and pleasure-seeking an idol. Paul makes a pointed warning to both the Romans and the Philippians about those who make gods out of their bellies.

Reading these verses without a view of the context may lead us to disparage pleasure at all costs, regarding it as an intrinsic evil, something that would hinder our spiritual growth. If satisfying pleasure or appetite is evil, why has God Almighty developed the drive-reduction mechanism as one of the most ubiquitous repeatable designs and patterns throughout creation from the single cell to the multi-cellular organism?

We have a cow pasture about a block from our house. One evening last summer as Julie, Aaron, and I were taking our evening walk, we noticed a longhorn cow using her long handlebar horns with precision accuracy to scratch a hard to reach itch near her flank. The marvelous drive-reduction mechanism (satisfying thirst, hunger, sex, sleep, or some other tissue needs) reflects an aspect of God's very mind (Romans 1:20) providing many types for spiritual lessons. God has created tissue deficits and desires to motivate

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us and keep us productive. Frequently, God will allow a deficit or state of dissatisfaction to endure a long time in order to create an intense desire or hunger for something positive.

What should the Christian's attitude be toward pleasure? Are there lessons we can learn by studying and observing the drives for hunger, thirst, sleep, or procreation? The Great God of the Universe, as the designer of cravings, has no intention whatsoever that we denigrate or disparage pleasure, something He pronounced good and wholesome (Genesis 1:31), but merely the wrong or perverted use of that pleasure. The Puritan minister Cotton Mather exclaimed, "Wine is from the Lord, but the drunkard is from the Devil."

God has designed both the craving and the means to satisfy the craving. How we control and direct those physical appetites provide valuable lessons and insights as to how to attain their spiritual counterparts. God's Word provides the only instructions for the legitimate satisfaction of these cravings.

One of the most awesome responsibilities God has given us is the management and healthful cultivation of our appetites, desires and emotions:

Proverbs 4:23 Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life.

In other words, your appetite determines your destiny. A major key to our spiritual survival is the control, regulation, and redirection of our appetites from what is not good for us to what is good for us.

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."

Our parents, Adam and Eve, by setting their appetite on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, brought the curse of death down on humanity. Without instruction from Almighty God, we don't have a clue about how to direct our appetites. Of all creatures, without wired-in instinct, man seems to have the biggest problem at educating His appetites.

When I was back in grade school, I used to derive satisfaction from eating paste, Elmer's Glue, airplane cement or chewing roofing tar. Many of us live in the Deep South. Some of the daily concoctions served up by local restaurants and eateries don't seem to

be much of an improvement.

In a February 28, 2002 Town Hall article entitled "Are you Choosing to be Fat?' George Will revealed that most American adults (61%) are obese with mortality rates increasing far faster than those caused by smoking—another learned tissue need. Our uncontrolled appetites can literally kill us. Roderick Meredith once wrote that we parents are teaching our children to dig their graves with their spoons.

An April 2000 US News article revealed that more revenue was taken in by the pornography industry, with its filthy tentacles enmeshed in the Internet web, than for rock and roll concerts, classical music concerts, and all sporting events combined. Apparently pornography has replaced baseball as the national pastime.

It didn't take the descendents of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob long to find their way back into the world, having their appetites shaped and directed by the world's media.

Like our ancient forebears rescued from Egypt, God is going to have to reeducate our peoples away from perverted and misdirected appetites. Turn with me now to Leviticus 18 to a rather unsavory segment of scripture—nevertheless placed here for our instruction. All of these appetites or desires had been stimulated by their sojourn in Egypt (symbolic of the world).

Leviticus 18: 6-14 None of you shall approach anyone who is near of kin to him, to uncover his nakedness: I am the Lord. The nakedness of your father or the nakedness of your mother you shall not uncover. She is your mother; you shall not uncover her nakedness. The nakedness of your father's wife you shall not uncover; it is your father's nakedness. The nakedness of your sister, the daughter of your father, or the daughter of your mother, whether born at home or elsewhere, their nakedness you shall not uncover.

Okay. You get the point. I find this portion of scripture equally as tedious as the begats. We might call this the mis-begats or the ill-conceived begats.

Leviticus 18:22-25 You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination. Nor shall you mate with any animal, to defile yourself with it. Nor shall any woman stand before an animal to mate with it. It is a perversion. Do not defile yourselves with any of these things; for by all these the nations are defiled, which I am casting out before you. For the land is defiled; therefore I visit the punishment of its iniquity upon it, and the land vomits out its inhabitants.

Brethren, our nation's appetite metaphorically is cloyed by the perversion of our people and its ready vomit them out. Before 1986 there were no reported cases of AIDS in America. Now it is out of control. As Judge Bork has so aptly stated, the appetites of our people are slouching toward Gomorrah.

Paul explains that when the knowledge of God is thrown out, perverted appetites form automatically:

Romans 1:24 Therefore God gave them up to uncleanness, in their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves.

Romans 1:26-28 For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due. And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do things that were not fitting.

Appetites are trained; they are not genetically wired in. Bestiality, homosexuality, lesbianism, pedophilia, transgender aberrations are all learned from, and nurtured and cultivated by, the world. Like the natural branches broken off in Romans 11 for disbelief, these appetites can never achieve satisfaction like a natural drive, but will require more perversion to scratch the unreachable itch.

In a 1997 Forerunner article John Reid wrote, "We can see from these biblical examples, as well as from our experiences in life, that *uncontrolled wrong hungers will be fed!* It seems to be an unwritten law. Unless something happens to forestall the process, hungers for the wrong things will seek satisfaction to the detriment of those who possess them." James writes, "When desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death" (James 1:15).

What I'd like to do here is to give a set of strategies to control and redirect our appetites, ultimately retraining our appetites to crave spiritual rather than carnal pleasures.

First, a major part of our character development consists of delaying gratification. Proverbs 23:2 teaches "And put a knife to your throat if you are a man given to appetite." God tells Gideon that moderation and restraint should identify suitable candidates for his army:

Judges 7:5 And the Lord said to Gideon, "Everyone who laps from the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set apart by himself; likewise everyone who gets down on his knees to drink." And the number of those who lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, was three hundred men; but all the rest of the people got down on their knees to drink water.

By contrast Esau could not restrain his tissue needs exclaiming, "Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?" (Genesis 25:32). Being unable to say no to appetite branded Esau as a profane person, on the same level as a fornicator (Hebrews 12: 16).

Our Elder Brother has given us the most sterling example of delaying gratification when he rejected Satan's temptation to turn stones into bread.

Matthew 4:2-4 And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry. Now when the Tempter came to Him, he said, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." But He answered and said, "It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

As we can glean from the last part of that verse, delaying negative drives is only part of the answer. Richard Ritenbaugh in his April 1996 Unleavened Bread sermon pointed out that the commands to eat unleavened bread outnumber the commands to refrain from eating leavened bread 3 to 1, indicating that it is not enough to suppress negative appetites, but they must be redirected at a wholesome appetite. In other words, the most efficient way of avoiding bad is to do good, creating no time to think about bad.

In his April 9,1994 sermon on growth, John Ritenbaugh asserts that God's grace teaches us to actively displace our worldly desires or cravings with Godly cravings and desires for truth and righteousness.

Titus 3:11-12 For the grace of God that brings salvation to all men, teaching us that denying ungodly and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age.

Even worldly wisdom seems to support this diverting technique, realizing that energy

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projected toward some useful purpose is infinitely more satisfying than idleness.

In Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography we read:

This gave me occasion to observe that when Men are employ'd they are best contented. For on the Days they work'd they were good- natur'd and cheerful; and with the consciousness of having done a good Days work they spent the Evenings jollily; but the idle Days they were mutinous and quarrelsome, finding fault with their Pork, the Bread, &c. and in continual ill-humour: which put me in mind of a Sea-Captain, whose Rule it was to keep his Men constantly at Work; and when his Mate once told him that they had done everything, and there was nothing further to employ them about; O, says he, *make them scour the Anchor.* (Franklin: Autobiography: 377)

This is similar to Charles Whitaker's Grandmother's maxim "The only good boy is a tired boy." The Germans have a Proverb: "Die arbeit macht dass leben sues" (the) Work makes (the) life sweet.

Solomon recognized that the diversion of energy into work was a worthy desire or craving.

Ecclesiastes 5:18-19 Here is what I have seen: It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it is his heritage. As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor—this is the gift of God.

Work also gives one peace of mind—a blessing many people today are lacking, trying to get relief through Sominex and Melatonin.

Ecclesiastes 5:12 The sleep of a laboring man is sweet, whether he eats little or much; but the abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep.

Our Elder Brother said of work, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish His work." Brethren this should be our food as well. As the greater church of God, we are split into small enough groups so that each individual can do much more than

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when we grew to the massive size we had. All of us can hold up John Ritenbaugh's hands, visiting and encouraging our brethren scattered over the vast reaches of our country. Apart from the larger congregations like Fort Mill, Portland, Anaheim or Victoria, most of us congregate in groups of 5 or 6.

How many of you have gotten to know your closest church neighbors perhaps half a day's drive from where you live? We can help out on things like the transcribing program. We are a tiny insignificant splinter in the greater Church of God, but with God's intervention, we can make a mighty big bark. We can call and write to brethren who are afflicted or who are cut off from regular contact from one another except for our phone contact on the Sabbath. Finishing the work of God has many facets in this last whimpering thunder of Revelation 10:4.

Work is not the only means to divert unwholesome impulses, those kind condemned in Leviticus 18. Even worldly wisdom has attempted to provide some partial solutions. Sigmund Freud coined the term *sublimation* as "an unconscious process whereby the libido, or sex instinct, is directed into a more acceptable form or outlet." Freud accounted for artistic creation as a manifestation of sublimation. The Chaplin Dictionary of Psychology refers to sublimation more broadly as "any redirection of socially unacceptable impulses into acceptable channels." What Freud or J. P. Chaplain failed to realize was that God Almighty had already designed and patented the process.

One of the most valuable lessons that I have learned from our pastor John Ritenbaugh is that when God fashions or designs a tool, such as wind, water, or fire, it usually has a multiplicity of uses, not just one. The procreative urge found throughout nature constitutes another sterling example of God's brilliant mind. When we observe the fruits of procreative urge among the plant kingdom, we see inestimable beauty with an endless kaleidoscopic variety of color and a delectable variety of fruits pleasing both the gustatory and olfactory nerves-sense of taste and smell. Both the emotion of infatuation and mature love create a sense of well being, creating a warm and magnanimous feeling in the one so smitten. Several years ago in Los Angeles, *Love's Restaurant* ran a commercial with the refrain, "When you're in *Love's* the whole world's delicious."

My former Literary Criticism Professor at the University of Wisconsin, James Mehoke, stated that all art is a strategy of communication, articulating some unexpressed need. In our own congregation, we have examples of compositions whose origin was in sorrow- Brian Wulf's original compositions come to mind. Rachmaninof's beautiful piano Concerto #2 and Robert Schumann's Symphony #2 were the products of working through intense mental conflicts. Richard Strauss composed his beautiful Alpine symphony as an expression of grief at the death of his composer friend Gustav Mahler.

Becky Carlson once made the comment to me that probably a major reason a musician spends so much time on practicing and mastering music is a latent desire to be cuddled.

Most mental illness is caused by misdirected drives or drives turned inward on the self rather than in productive service to mankind. Terms like manic-depressive and obsessive-compulsive (terms which Topeka's own Karl Menninger has referred to as diagnostic name calling) when converted to productive work, become useful motivators. Many priceless works of art, music and literature would not have come to fruition if Ritalin, Prozac, or lithium carbonate had been prescribed.

God diverted one drive to another in the refashioning of Jacob into Israel, Saul into Paul, and the misdirected anger of James and John in Luke 9:54 becomes transformed into the purified vengeance of the Two Witnesses in Revelation 11:5.

Likewise much of the lyrics of rap show an intensity and passion, but it is a perverted passion for hatred and disrespect for other human beings. Can you imagine what constructive potential that energy might have if it were directed to something wholesome or good? Can you imagine if the energy used on boxcar graffiti were turned into beautiful murals like those at the Kansas State Capital. It reminds me of a line in the movie *Strange Cargo* in which Clark Gable says to Joan Crawford, "Baby you hate real good; that means you'll love real good too." It might help to see hatred as the emotion or passion of love in reverse. If you spell *love* backwards, it spells *evil* reminding us of evil. My son Aaron noticed that if you turn *evil* around it spells *live*.

God can miraculously change the natures of His characters around. The Millennial verse that we all know is in Isaiah 11:6, "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb. The leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.

Julie, Aaron, and I have seen a little foretaste of this in a wildlife preserve for tigers and other large cats in which we have a membership. (www.tigercreek.org) Tigers are potentially extremely affectionate creatures. We have learned how to chuff-prrrrr using the tiger sign for hello. Tigers are not yet domestic, but they can bond to one person. The trainer Terri Block occasionally walks in the cage (armed with her squirt bottle of vinegar) and pats the huge tigers on the rump or strokes their heads and plays kissy face. Terri cautions us not to try this at home. Some miscalculating trainers have sometimes had limbs severed from carelessness. Sometimes when I have tried to give a friendly chuff to one of these cats (one of which formerly belonged to Michael Jackson), it jumps up full size on the side of the cage and gives a frightening roar. (Something about me must have reminded him of Michael Jackson). Nevertheless, at

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some point in time, God is going to make a minor adjustment in the brains of these creatures turning them into docile and affectionate pets.

Like the tigers and the lions, our appetites are going to have to be re-educated and re-directed. Psalm 37: 4 teaches us to "Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart." Paradoxically, often what we set our hearts upon is not our deep-seated heart's desire and we become disillusioned or disappointed with the consequences.

What we intensely crave with our deepest longings we cannot satisfy with the senses. Ecclesiastes 1:8 poignantly teaches, "The eye is not satisfied with seeing nor the ear with hearing." In the Amplified Bible, Psalm 119:96 is rendered, "I have seen everything [human] has its limits and end, [no matter how extensive, noble and excellent] but Your commandment is exceedingly broad and extends without limits [into eternity],"

God Almighty has given mankind a craving for eternity (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Human achievement and accomplishment and filling the senses with worldly pleasure do not fill this longing. Some of you probably remember the lyrics to a poignant pop song back in the 60's by Peggy Lee, *Is That All There Is?* One of the verses read:

And when I was twelve years old, my Daddy took me to the circus
'The greatest show on earth'.
And there were clowns and elephants, dancing bears, and a beautiful lady in
pink tights flew high above our heads.
And as I sat there watching, I had the feeling that something was missing
I don't know what but when it was all over I said to myself "Is that all there is
to the circus?"
Is that all there is?
If that's all there is, my friends, then let's keep dancing

When David's son satisfied his lust with his sister Tamar, and when the Prodigal son hit bottom, they probably felt a similar sentiment—a craving unfulfilled.

It reminds me of the thesis of one of the world's classic works of literature, Goethe's *Faust*—the Book of Ecclesiastes filtered through German Romanticism. In this philosophical drama a highly educated, but burned out and disillusioned old college professor, Dr. Heinrich Faust, agrees to forfeit his eternal life to Mephistopheles (the devil) if Mephistopheles is able to give him one supernal ecstatic moment of joy or pleasure, one fleeting moment in which he is compelled to say "Wait, you are so fair."

Faust had already concluded that the road to joy hasn't seemed to traverse through academia where he had studied all the learned philosophical, legal, and theological works, and sadly concluded that he was still the same wretched old fool he was before all this learning.

The devil tried his level best to bring Dr. Faust to that fleeting moment of joy, including mirth, song, strong drink, illicit sex, political power, magical power, secrets of the occult, time travel—anything his heart could desire, but the wary old Faust, even though he had not ever experienced genuine joy, knew the counterfeits inside and out and wasn't about to accept any substitute.

After all the hundreds of duds in the joy experiments, Faust stumbled on the secret of joy by accident as he undertook a land reclamation project in the Netherlands in which he and a crew of workers built a series of dikes to reclaim land from the ocean, a project that would require hard work and sacrifice, but would ensure the livelihood, happiness, and well-being for the benefit of mankind. From this altruistic motive (which Herbert W. Armstrong repeatedly referred to as the "way of give") Heinrich Faust received his first experience of true joy which had eluded him his whole life, a moment when he could say, "Wait, you are so fair." Because this mindset belonged to the spiritual rather than the carnal mind, God's messengers felt compelled to snatch Faust away from Mephistopheles, depriving the devil of his part of the bargain.

Perhaps the term "*altruistic hedonism*" would constitute an over simplistic description of joy, but the deceptively simple lesson in Goethe's drama, as well as throughout the pages of scripture, is that the way of work, service, sacrifice, and enduring trials in the arena of life is the way to true joy, while the attempt to shirk, escape responsibility, and to have concern with our own pleasures, actually destroys joy. Many people mistakenly feel that to have cessation of stress, hassles, and that ugly four-letter word "*work*" would guarantee happiness. God Almighty explicitly tells us that joy follows work, and that joy invariably becomes somehow coupled with trials and tests.

I play in the Rex Ulmer Polka Band performing the geriatric circuit three times a month in various nursing homes in Gladewater and Longview, Texas. Both Rex and I used to play professionally. His dance band performed in ballrooms throughout Kansas, Oklahoma, South Dakota and Minnesota. I played piano in assorted gin mills, pizza parlors, and supper clubs. Nothing has given us more pleasure than playing for free for these nursing homes. The gratitude expressed by these senior citizens is worth more than money could ever buy.

Turn back to Isaiah 55. One of the big lessons of the Feast of Tabernacles is that

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satisfying the senses cannot attain the things we really crave; our appetites have to be re-directed to a Godly plane.

Isaiah 55:1-2 "Ho! Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters; And you who have no money, Come, buy and eat, Yes, come buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance.

Ted Bowling in a sermonette entitled "Longing for God," described the kind of thirst we should have for God.

Psalms 42:1-3 As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while they continually say to me, "Where is your God?"

The serious tissue deficit is again referred to in Psalm 63.

Psalms 63:1 O God, You are my God; early will I seek You; my soul thirsts for You; my flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water.

The only way we can satisfy the deep cravings, the itch that can't be scratched, is by spiritual food and drink. Christ said in Matthew 5:6, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." To the woman at the well, He promised:

John 4:14 But whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of Water, springing up into everlasting life.

On the last day of the feast, the Last Great Day, Jesus said, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water."

And finally moving ahead to the Kingdom of God:

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Revelation 21:6 And He said to me It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts.

Brethren, we desperately need to cultivate a thirst for God's Holy Spirit and the holiness and righteousness that it will produce in us. To briefly summarize the conversion of our physical carnal appetites, we need to:

- (1) Delay satisfaction, controlling our appetites.
- (2) Divert unwholesome drives into wholesome ones, realizing that disillusionment will take place if we try to substitute physical for spiritual cravings.
- (3) Delight ourselves in God, allowing His Holy Spirit to change our character from carnal to godly.