

# Spiritual epicureanism: the godly quest for pleasure

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HAWKINS, Texas—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 distributed among all living things, from the single cell to the multicellular organism.

One popular scientific metaphor or theoretical construct, Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, places at the foundation of human behavior the systematic satiation of tissue needs: hunger, thirst, fatigue and sex.

Whole philosophies have developed around the satisfaction of the tissue needs. The epicureans, or the hedonists, stressed that the highest aim in life consists of attaining pleasure or satisfying the animal pleasures.

The apostle Paul warned that in the last days many would obsessively focus on satisfying tissue needs, becoming "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (2 Timothy 3:4), making pleasure and pleasure-seeking an idol.

A casual reading of this verse may lead us to disparage pleasure, regarding it as an intrinsic evil. The great God of the universe has no intention whatsoever that we 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 (Genesis 1:31).

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

David instructs us: "Delight yourself also in the LORD, and He shall give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4).

Isaiah instructs us: ". . . 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).

Jesus instructs us: "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 God's eternal laws, which will bring about the desired results, namely the quenching of some deep unsatisfied desire.

### **Guard your affections**

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

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

In other words, guard your affections because they control or dictate everything you 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 blinders on our emotions. Indeed, a superficial reading of Proverbs 4:25-27 seems to initially 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. God Almighty has created tissue deficits and desires to motivate us and keep us productive.

We learn that the laborer's appetite works for him; his hunger drives him on (Proverbs 16:26). In this context, a tissue deficit brings 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. Our forebears had to endure horrendous slavery for 430 years before they developed a passion for freedom and liberty (Exodus 12:40). The honor roll of the faithful in Hebrews 11 was motivated by a state of dissatisfaction and a desire for something more permanent and lasting.

American writers Emily Dickinson and Ralph Waldo Emerson both marveled at the law of compensation, which permeates all living things: stating 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. Does it not make sense that the preciousness of 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 observes:

"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 and insight have proved in the early 21st century. In the middle '70s, when President Nixon resigned his post in disgrace, he and former contender Hubert Humphrey had a conversation. As Mr. Nixon bemoaned his humiliation and disgrace, Mr. Humphrey suggested he (Mr. Humphrey) could have endured that disgrace if he could have occupied the Oval Office for one hour.

Reflecting on the current situation in the presidency, one speculates that in his most private moments William Jefferson Clinton 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 with a horrendous price.

Pleasure, peace of mind and the desires of our heart are the consequences, the results, the byproducts, of seeking righteousness. 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 gives us no pleasure.

Some people have mistakenly condemned wholesome things such as music, dancing, 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 forebears were not nearly as stuffy or prudish as historians have drawn them. Cotton Mather once said, "Wine is from the Lord, but the drunkard is from the devil."

### **The danger of excess**

In other words, God has not forbidden any desire, pleasure or behavior when it is pursued or practiced through exercising His holy law, but He does warn 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 we set our hearts on power or authority to the extent that it becomes an all-consuming passion and we would be willing even to compromise on cer-

tain aspects of God's law to attain that goal, we will derive no pleasure from exercising that power (Leviticus 26:19).

God's Word specifically warns us not to set our desires on money, because "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 one gently holds it the quicksilver will remain.

The paradoxical tension continues regarding setting one's heart on pleasure for the sake of pleasure. We learn that "he who loves pleasure will become poor; whoever loves wine and oil will never be rich" (Proverbs 21:17).

### **The hardest work is idleness**

We find a similar caution concerning the desire for rest, sleep and idleness. The Scriptures warn, "Do not love sleep or you will grow poor" (Proverbs 20:13). The sweetness and deliciousness of sound, restful sleep is a byproduct 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 is not productive.

In a similar vein I become amused at the elaborate stratagems (the devious schemes) students have devised to con or beat the system. One student made an elaborate cheat sheet consisting of a microscopic scroll containing the test answers that he inserted into his watch. During the exam he could retrieve all the answers just by winding his watch.

Beside the obvious deceit 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 to not set our hearts on security, warning us that anyone who sets his heart on saving his skin will probably lose it (Luke 17:33).

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 they are not satisfied with things that aren't permanent or don't last.

God has expressed 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 you love pleasure and devote your being toward its pursuit, you will not be satisfied with a little pleasure. You will always crave more and more without being satisfied.

"The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing" (Ecclesiastes 1:8).

If you love sleep you will not be satisfied with a little sleep. You will crave 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.

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, like the old Squirt commercial: "Quenches our thirst without an afterthirst."

We learn that with godly pleasures we have no regret or unpleasant afterthirst. "The blessing of the LORD makes one rich, and He adds no sorrow with it" (Proverbs 10:22).

When the rock group the Rolling Stones claimed "I can't get no satisfaction," I reflected, "You can't get no satisfaction because you ain't looking in the right place."

Even quality music doesn't really fill us up. As a teenager I listened to portions of the *Swan Lake Ballet* until I almost became sick of it. As a 10-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.

### **Satiation without saturation**

God's spiritual gifts have the capacity to satisfy us, to fill us up without the unpleasant aftereffect of cloying or satiation with or developing an abhorrence for those things. Jesus said we are to develop a thirst, a craving, for God's Holy Spirit.

Jesus said, "If any man is thirsty, let him drink" (John 7:37). The food Jesus craved (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).

We are told that if we set our hearts upon (hunger and thirst for) righteousness, we will 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. What more could we want? (Proverbs 1:4; 2:10-11).

David tells us repeatedly in Psalm 119 to set our hearts on God's law (exemplifying love toward God and love toward mankind, including one's enemies). David said, "It is my sole meditation day and night" (Psalm 119:97).

There is no satiation or kickback from setting all our affections on and performing God's Law. The consequences are pleasurable.

Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble (Psalm 119:165).

If peace and tranquillity, the feeling of being totally filled, or fulfilled, is our heart's desire, we need to channel our affections on those things that will bring about those consequences.