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PLEASURE AND ENJOYMENT 3

EXAMPLES OF THE LORD JESUS AND THE APOSTLE PAUL

As we continue on the subject of pleasure and enjoyment, I would like to consider with you the examples of the Lord Jesus and the apostle Paul. We shall see how their lives reflect their teaching and how we can follow their example.

In Romans 14:17, the apostle Paul teaches that the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking. In 1 Corinthians 15:32, he also talks about eating and drinking.

1 Corinthians 15:32

If from human motives I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus, what does it profit me? If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.

Here, the apostle Paul seems to be speaking against eating and drinking. What is he actually driving at? Well, he is actually referring to a philosophy of life or an approach to life. It is the "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die" mentality. We know it is something negative because Paul goes on to say: "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company corrupts good morals' " (v. 33). So he is referring to an attitude held by those with bad morals.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul speaks about the importance of the resurrection of Christ to our faith. In verse 32, he says: "If the dead are not raised ..." In saying this, he wants us to know that there is life beyond the grave. If life on earth is all there is, then there is nothing to look forward to after death, and we might as well live with the mentality of "let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die". This is the philosophy of the Epicureans, who live to enjoy themselves.

Some pertinent questions to consider: Can committed Christians meaningfully join in the eating and drinking, the feasting and celebrations taking place in this world? Can we enjoy ourselves on such occasions? Can Christians meaningfully participate in and enjoy the things and the activities going on in this world?

Let us consider this subject in the life and teaching of our Lord Jesus.

The Lord Jesus

Isaiah 53 portrays the Lord Jesus as a man of sorrows. In Matthew 5:4, the Lord Jesus teaches: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted". Here, He

is referring to people who have a deep sense of consciousness of the darkness and sins in this fallen world. He came to die for the sins of mankind so that we can be delivered from bondage to sin and the evil one, and He was absorbed in this mission that God the Father had entrusted to Him. He said in John 4:34: "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work".

Yet, we read in the Scriptures of many occasions in which He meaningfully participated in festivities, at times, as the guest of honour.

The wedding at Cana – turning water into wine

John 2 records the Lord Jesus attending a wedding in Cana of Galilee, together with His mother and His disciples. This is an example of the Lord Jesus participating in a feast. And since the Lord Jesus testifies that He always does what is pleasing to God the Father, we can say that such participation can be consistent with a life that seeks to honour God.

Beyond just being present at the wedding, the apostle John records that, when the wine ran out, the Lord Jesus actually turned water into wine, and that this was a miracle that manifested His glory and deepened the faith of His disciples in Him (v. 11)!

Guest of honour at Levi's feast – new wine in fresh wineskins

Luke 5:27-39 is an account of one of the Lord's disciples, Levi the tax collector, giving a big reception in His honour and many were present. The scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day, were displeased. They grumbled at the disciples that they ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners. They were also unhappy that the Lord's disciples feasted while their own disciples and those of John the Baptist often fasted and prayed.

Luke 5:27-39

27 After that He went out and noticed a tax collector named Levi sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, "Follow Me."

28 And he left everything behind, and got up and began to follow Him.

29 And Levi gave a big reception for Him in his house; and there was a great crowd of tax collectors and other people who were reclining at the table with them.

30 The Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling at His disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?"

31 And Jesus answered and said to them, "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick.

32 "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

33 And they said to Him, "The disciples of John often fast and offer prayers, the disciples of the Pharisees also do the same, but Yours eat and drink."

34 And Jesus said to them, "You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you?"

35 "But the days will come; and when the bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast in those days."

36 And He was also telling them a parable: "No one tears a piece of cloth from a new garment and puts it on an old garment; otherwise he will both tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old.

37 "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled out, and the skins will be ruined.

38 "But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins.

39 "And no one, after drinking old wine wishes for new; for he says, 'The old is good enough.' "

The reply of the Lord Jesus in verses 31 and 32 indicates that He was conscious of what He was doing. He was not distracted. Neither was there any improper indulgence in the eating and drinking, though He was participating in this big reception. In fact, as always, He was very mindful of His mission on earth, which is the salvation of sinful men. He ate and drank with them with the desire to reach out to them. These were the people who, more than the religious leaders, saw themselves as unwell and needed a physician (v. 31), and Christ has come to call sinners to repentance (v. 32).

Then in verses 36 to 39, the Lord Jesus went on to narrate the parables of the new cloth and old garment and the new wine and old wineskins. He wanted His hearers to appreciate the bigger picture of the meaning and significance of His coming. The scribes and Pharisees were legalistic and concentrated on outward forms. But the Lord Jesus emphasised what is within the heart, what is true wisdom and true fellowship with God. Unless the people have a change of heart and a change of emphasis, they would not be able to appreciate His presence, His teaching and His conduct.

What the Lord Jesus spoke about goes beyond the issue of "eating and drinking". He wanted them to recognise the importance of proper motive and what is appropriate and meaningful in different contexts. For instance, when the scribes and Pharisees grumbled about the Lord's disciples consorting with tax collectors and sinners, the Lord Jesus said that "eating and drinking" with these people was appropriate in this context. He knew what He was doing. It was fitting for Him to dine with them and He was doing so with a noble motive.

And likewise, when the religious leaders questioned why the Lord's disciples did not fast, unlike their disciples and the disciples of John, the Lord replied that whether to fast or not would depend on the context. He did not reject the principle of fasting; it has an important place in the lives of God's children. But, in the appropriate context, it is acceptable for someone who is very spiritual to be "eating and drinking". On this

occasion, the Lord Jesus was the guest of honour in a big reception. But when the occasion called for it, He would fast, as He did for forty days in the wilderness.

When the Lord Jesus said that the attendants of the bridegroom do not fast in the bridegroom's presence, He was alluding to Himself and His relationship with the disciples. The disciples were like the attendants to Him (the bridegroom). The Scriptures often refers to the Lord Jesus as the bridegroom and here He was likely also referring to the time when the bridegroom would be taken away from them – at the event of the Cross and the resurrection and ascension that followed (v. 35).

"Eating and drinking" goes beyond normal eating at a meal. It can include "eating and drinking" at a feast. We can participate in these with a clear conscience. This can be part of a life of faithfulness to God. However, we must be prayerful and do so within the framework of God's will and guidance. We should not indulge ourselves like the people of the world often do. Like the Lord Jesus, we should seek to maintain the proper focus on such occasions and not be carried away by the spirit of the world.

The Lord Jesus – neither a glutton nor a drunkard

To some people, the Lord Jesus appeared to be "a gluttonous man and a drunkard".

Luke 7:33-35

33 "For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon!'

34 "The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'

35 "Yet wisdom is vindicated by all her children."

Here, the Lord Jesus contrasted John the Baptist's lifestyle with His own. John the Baptist lived an austere life, "eating no bread and drinking no wine", whereas "the Son of Man has come eating and drinking". Both lived the way God wanted them to live. But their outward expressions were contrasting.

Because the people based their judgement on outward behaviour, they said that John the Baptist had a demon and labelled the Lord Jesus a gluttonous man and a drunkard. But far from being a gluttonous man and a drunkard, the Lord Jesus in reality manifested true wisdom (v. 35), though it may not always appear that way to others. In the parallel passage in Matthew 11:19, the Lord says: "Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds".

The lesson to learn from here is that we are not to judge others too quickly. God does not call us to live uniform lives. He has placed us in different contexts and for different purposes. Because of that, the outward expressions of our lives will of necessity have to be different. However, this is not an excuse for us to act as we

wish and yet justify ourselves. What is important is that we consecrate our lives to God and seek to live as He desires of us.

Zeal for Your house will consume Me

While there is a place for eating and drinking, the Lord Jesus was consumed with what was in the Father's heart and with the things of His kingdom. When He was cleansing the temple, He said: "Zeal for Your house will consume Me" (John 2:17).

The Lord Jesus was a Man of sorrows, one deeply identified with the sins and the suffering in the world. He lived out the principle of the Cross which He taught His disciples: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:23).

The Lord said: "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Luke 9:58). The Lord did not centre His life on pleasure and enjoyment. Had He done so, the Cross would not have taken place. Instead, leaving His glory in heaven, He came down to earth to identify with us. He did it voluntarily. He endured difficulties and hardships. He was misunderstood and was mocked. Yet, He was faithful to the end, even till death on the Cross.

As disciples of the Lord Jesus, let us check our lifestyle and our motivation. If our lives are consecrated to God, if we are walking in fellowship with Him, we can live a joyful life of meaning and purpose, whether we are eating or drinking, reading a book or taking a stroll, caring for our children or finishing a work assignment.

The apostle Paul

On the subject of pleasure and enjoyment, the apostle Paul made some statements that may appear to be contradictory. On the one hand, he teaches in Romans 14:17 that "the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" and in 1 Corinthians 15:32 that the "let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" mentality is wrong, and in 1 Timothy 5:6 that if we give our lives to wanton pleasure, we are dead even while we live. On the other hand, he also says in 1 Timothy 6:17 that God "richly supplies us with all things to enjoy" and in 1 Corinthians 10:31 that in whatever we do, including eating and drinking, we can do all to the glory of God.

Through his own life, the apostle Paul shows how these apparently contradictory teachings can come together and be meaningfully lived out.

Paul consumed by the ministry God entrusted to him

From the Scriptures, we can see Paul's basic approach and attitude to life. We can see that to fulfil the ministry the Lord had entrusted to him, he was prepared to go through anything, including laying down his life. He said in Acts 20:24:

Acts 20:24

“But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.

He testified in this way even though he knew that bonds and afflictions awaited him. To him, it was not important whether he lives or dies. What was crucial was that he remained faithful to God and to God’s calling for him. He was committed to doing the will of God. Following the example of the Lord Jesus, the apostle Paul was consumed by the ministry God had entrusted to him. He saw the hardships he had to go through not as meaningless suffering, but as suffering with a purpose.

Rejoice in the Lord always

Indeed, Paul’s account in 2 Corinthians 11 shows us how much he had to suffer.

2 Corinthians 11:23-29

23 Are they servants of Christ?—I speak as if insane—I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death.

24 Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes.

25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep.

26 I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren;

27 I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

28 Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches.

29 Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?

In the midst of such a life, Paul learned to rejoice, as we read in Colossians 1:24.

Colossians 1:24

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.

He said here that he was suffering for the sake of the brethren, the body of Christ, and “filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions”. Although Christ had died at the Cross, the work of God is not completed. There is much more to be done and Paul sought to do his part, regardless of the cost to him. Because he focused on serving the Lord, and on the meaning and purpose of what he was going through, he could

rejoice in all situations. Also, he was going through all these situations in fellowship with the Lord. That was why he could say in Philippians 4:4:

Philippians 4:4

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!

Contentment in the Lord

Paul learnt to have a healthy sense of contentment in the Lord in all circumstances. This comes through clearly in Philippians 4:11-13.

Philippians 4:11-13

11 Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am.

12 I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need.

13 I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

How is this possible? Paul summarised in verse 13: "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me". The word "do" in Greek has the sense of strength. "I can do" or I have strength for all things through Him who strengthens me. "All things" can include the things we do or the situations we go through. In whatever things Paul did and in whatever situations he went through, he could do them and go through them meaningfully, in the peace and joy of the Lord. He couldn't live in this way in his own strength. But he could through the Lord's enabling and in fellowship with God. His concentration was on what was important in God's kingdom – righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. As Paul lived in this way and spirit, he could testify that God had richly supplied him with all things to enjoy (1 Tim. 6:17).

Proper enjoyment at all times

If we are submitted to God and seek to do all things to the glory of God, we can learn to enjoy God's presence and do all things in fellowship with Him. Then like Paul, we too can meaningfully enjoy, without a sense of guilt, what God has richly supplied. Within the framework of a healthy walk with God, the right priorities and concentration, we can properly enjoy all things that God sees fit to supply us and whatever He wants us to do.

The joy of giving

This sense of enjoyment of life is not restricted to eating and drinking. It can include all kinds of things, even giving. We do not always think of giving as enjoyable, but yes, even giving can be joyful.

Some believers feel guilty if they don't give. And when they give, they do not do so willingly or joyfully. If we have properly consecrated our lives to God, we shouldn't be feeling this way. Even if we give out of our poverty, we can still do so joyfully. This is what Paul described of the churches of Macedonia: "their abundance of joy" even as they gave generously though they were very poor.

2 Corinthians 8:1-2

1 Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia,
2 that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality.

God was at work in the lives of the Macedonian Christians. Even though they were having a difficult time themselves, but because of their experience of the grace of God, they gave with such generosity Paul described it as an overflowing of "the wealth of their liberality".

When we seek to live sacrificially and learn to share what God has generously given to us, we enter into a deeper level of enjoyment and sense of fulfillment.

Having the eternal perspective

While it is true that pleasure and enjoyment has a place in healthy Christian living and need not be seen as worldly and a hindrance to spirituality, it is important that we do so while maintaining the eternal perspective. We live in a fallen world. Involvement in the things of this world can dilute our sense of urgency and earnestness in the things of God. So we need to keep the right priorities in life. We need to focus on what is important in God's kingdom, which includes preparing ourselves and others for eternity.

Let us heed the words of the Lord Jesus, which He spoke to the crowd after the miraculous feeding of the five thousand:

John 6:27

"Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal."

With these words, the Lord warned the crowd of the danger of being preoccupied with physical food instead of the eternal food from heaven. This is a warning that we will do well to pay heed to.

Living on every word of God

When the Lord Jesus was beginning His public ministry, the devil tried to derail His mission by tempting Him to meet His physical needs. But the Lord resisted the

temptation and instead quoted from the Scriptures saying: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). Obedience to God and faithfulness to Him must be the primary motivation of our hearts.

Undistracted devotion to the Lord

Yes, there is a place for eating and drinking, for taking care of our health. Many things in this world are legitimate for us to be involved in and to enjoy. But if we are absorbed in them, they can become a distraction. We end up channelling our time and energy on the wrong ends. We then lose our sense of urgency and priority on what is important in God's kingdom and that which endures.

Let us look at the words of the apostle Paul.

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

29 But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none;

30 and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess;

31 and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away.

Paul begins this passage with the phrase, "the time has been shortened", which tells us the urgency of the time. He says that believers ought not be preoccupied with how to please their wives or their husbands, or in acquiring possessions, or in using the "things in the world". Clearly, these are legitimate in themselves. There is a place for believers to have wives, but marriage should not become a distraction. There is a place to rejoice and to weep, but these too shouldn't make us lose our focus on the things that really matter. The things in this world are temporary, as Paul says: "the form of this world is passing away".

What Paul is emphasising here is that believers should live lives of undistracted devotion to the Lord (v. 35). They should keep their eyes on what is important to God and on what He desires of their lives.

Concluding reflections

Let us ponder over our lives. To what degree can we identify with the heart and spirit of the Lord Jesus and also what was manifested in the life of the apostle Paul? Let us reflect on the depth of their consecration to God, the thrust of their lives, what consumes them, and how within the framework of submission to the will of God, they could meaningfully participate in various activities in the joy and peace of God.

As we learn to live in this way, we will find it feasible for us to live a life wherein we can meaningfully enjoy many things, activities and involvements, including eating, drinking and daily living.

Let us also reflect on whether we have been distracted in any way by the attractions of the world. Are there pleasures and enjoyment that we indulge in that we ought not, that damage our lives and dilute our concentration on what the Lord desires of us? May the Lord help us to live in a manner truly pleasing to Him, continually enjoying deep fellowship with Him and having a deep sense of fulfillment in life.

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