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## PLEASURE AND ENJOYMENT

There are many temptations and pitfalls in this world. A major area that can easily lead believers astray is that of pleasure and enjoyment.

Many kinds of pleasures and enjoyment are available to us. New ideas keep coming up, as many as the human mind is capable of conceiving. Two factors contribute to this trend: peoples' longing for pleasures and enjoyment, and the big business involved.

The entertainment industry is an example of big business. It is a multi-billion dollar industry which includes movies, pop music, games and sports and related areas like fashion. The Olympic Games is one such multi-billion dollar business. Some athletes who win medals in the Olympic Games become multi-millionaires; likewise footballers and tennis players who win major tournaments.

There are also other forms of entertainment, for example, adventure tours filled with thrills and challenges such as bungee jumping, and pleasure cruises marketed as "Cruises to Nowhere".

Countless novels and magazines line the shelves of book stores and supermarkets. Sensational news sells like hot cakes. People enjoy reading about celebrities and their scandals, and it doesn't matter to them that such reports are of questionable accuracy.

What is the primary motivation in most people's lives? Why do they strive so hard in their studies and careers? In my understanding, one primary motivation is pleasure and enjoyment, whether immediate or delayed. People study and work hard so they can earn money and enjoy what money can offer – houses, cars, branded products, fancy lifestyles.

Some who are not driven by the desire for money may still be motivated by enjoyment and pleasure. For them, it could be the desire to enjoy status, position, prestige, recognition, authority, power and fame. They derive much pleasure from these because people listen to them, obey their instructions, and try to please them.

We may also ask the question: Why is sex such a big issue? Why are people drawn into it and are embroiled in it? Why do they find it so difficult to extricate themselves from the mess they often get themselves into? A major reason is fleshy lust, which seeks for pleasure, enjoyment and thrills.

There is a relationship between this problem area of enjoyment and pleasure and the other problem areas of “relationship with the opposite sex, sex and related issues”, “greed and covetousness” and “desire for power, status, fame and recognition”, which I have covered in the preceding messages.

Pleasure and enjoyment is a primary area of appeal that advertisements often aim at. Some advertisements do not inform us much about the true value of the products being advertised in relation to our true welfare and well-being. Instead they appeal to the enjoyment and pleasure that we can derive from using these products.

In many contexts of life, the primary means by which people persuade others to join in an activity is to assure them that they will enjoy it. The moral value or meaning of the activity is of secondary importance and sometimes totally ignored. The main concern is whether people will enjoy it. If it is enjoyable, people will be persuaded to join in.

Much wrongdoing, illegal activities and crimes have been motivated by the desire for pleasure and enjoyment. If not for the fear of punishment and other adverse consequences, such activities would have been even more prevalent.

Throughout the history of mankind, people have been preoccupied with a life of pleasure and enjoyment in different forms: some gross, some obvious, some subtle. The Scriptures warns us that in the last days, this will be one of the negative characteristics of mankind.

### **Scriptural warning**

Let us turn to 2 Timothy 3:4, in which Paul describes the characteristics of the last days.

#### **2 Timothy 3:2-4**

2 For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant,  
revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy,  
3 unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control,  
brutal, haters of good,  
4 treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than  
lovers of God,

Verse 4 tells us that people will be “lovers of pleasure”. This has been true throughout the history of mankind, but it will be even more pronounced in the last days. By listing it with other very negative traits, Paul is telling us that it is significantly harmful to be lovers of pleasure. The term “lovers of pleasure” also indicates that pleasure-seeking has been adopted as an approach to life, and this has far-reaching negative implications.

Let us pay heed to the warning of the Lord Jesus in the parable of the sower, if we want to ensure we live a life of fruitfulness.

**Luke 8:14**

“The seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity.

Here, the Lord Jesus warns us against “pleasures of this life”. This term refers to pleasures associated with living in this fallen world. They can choke us and result in us not bearing fruit to maturity.

The apostle Paul addresses the subject of pleasure in 1 Timothy 5:5-6.

**1 Timothy 5:5-6**

5 Now she who is a widow indeed and who has been left alone, has fixed her hope on God and continues in entreaties and prayers night and day.

6 But she who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives.

Although Paul is speaking about widows here, the principle is applicable to all. Verse 5 is a positive description of a widow who is absorbed in entreaties and prayers night and day. But Paul gives a serious pronouncement in verse 6. He warns us that a person who lives for wanton pleasure is in reality dead even while still living. Paul uses such strong words because the issues involved are very serious. Let us delve further into the Scriptures to understand why the issues are so serious.

**Solomon’s negative example**

In the Book of Ecclesiastes, King Solomon testified of his foolish pursuit of pleasure. It speaks powerfully to us of the futility of such a life.

**Ecclesiastes 2:1-3**

1 I said to myself, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself.” And behold, it too was futility.

2 I said of laughter, “It is madness,” and of pleasure, “What does it accomplish?”

3 I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding me wisely...

Solomon tried to stimulate his body with wine. He said: “...my mind was guiding me wisely”. He was a wise man, but here, he used his cleverness for the wrong end. He was wise in the sense of being capable, smart and intelligent. He was able to achieve his own objectives. But his way of pursuing pleasure was foolish from God’s perspective. It had a negative moral direction and it would harm his soul.

**Ecclesiastes 2:3-7**

3 I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding me wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives.

4 I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself;

5 I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees;

6 I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees.

7 I bought male and female slaves and I had homeborn slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem.

There is a place for works, for building houses and vineyards, gardens and parks. But what is wrong is that Solomon was doing all these things because of his self-indulgent and relentless pursuit of pleasure and enjoyment.

**Ecclesiastes 2:8, 10**

8 Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men—many concubines.

10 All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor.

Solomon indulged himself in “wine, women and song” (v. 3 read together with v. 8). He gave himself totally to a life of pleasure (v. 10). He felt justified in seeking pleasure. In essence, he was saying, “I laboured for it, this was not illegal, I didn’t steal, I didn’t commit any crime.” This is also how many people in this world think. They work hard, reward themselves with many pleasures, and believe that it is all right.

On reflection, Solomon concluded that his life of pleasure was just vanity and striving after wind.

**Ecclesiastes 2:11**

Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.

In reality, such a life is worse than not achieving anything; it is definitely harmful. Yet, many people strive to be in a position like Solomon so they can indulge in the way he did. This is a major issue relevant to both believers and non-believers. The flesh is weak and it often craves for pleasure and enjoyment in a way that harms us

and damages our lives. We must resolve this area properly if we want to live a life pleasing to God. It helps if we can see more clearly the issues involved in the pursuit of worldly pleasures and enjoyment and a life motivated by pleasures and enjoyment. It is closely related to living according to what we feel like and a life of fleshly indulgence.

### **Epicureans' approach to life**

The pursuit of pleasure and enjoyment is the lifestyle of a group of people known as Epicureans. They are followers of Epicurus, who lived long ago. Epicurus taught that total reality consisted only of matter, and when we die, we all revert to impersonal matter. This led to an approach to life that had as its goal the pursuit of pleasure and enjoyment – enjoy all you can while you can, since death ends it all as far as the individual is concerned. If this is our approach to life, we can easily end up living a life of sensuality and immorality to feed our base appetites.

Many people are influenced in this direction. They believe that total reality consists only of the visible realm. They do not recognise the reality of God and true moral values. But even as they pursue pleasure and enjoyment without regard for moral values and meaning, there is a witness in their hearts that something is amiss. God has created us in His image and has given us a conscience. For those who indulge in fleshly pleasure, the conscience within them will register a sense of uneasiness even in the midst of their indulgences. But if they continue to disregard their conscience, it can become increasingly insensitive.

This approach to life and the process and outcome can be portrayed pictorially in this manner. It is like being greeted at the entrance of the life of pleasure by bright lights and captivating music. But as we enter, we are led into a dark and dingy room, infested with rats and ravaged by diseases, a place filled with deadly booby traps and minefields.

### **Asceticism – the other extreme**

It is wrong to live a life motivated by pleasure and enjoyment. But does it mean it is wrong and undesirable for us to experience pleasure and enjoyment? Some people reject all forms of pleasure and enjoyment, seeing them as worldliness. They feel uncomfortable and are ill at ease when they enjoy something, and may even feel guilty, as if it is wrong to experience pleasure. They choose a life of discomfort, pain and deprivation, self-abasement and severe treatment of the body. This is known as asceticism. People who practise asceticism see it as the way to spirituality.

But Paul rejects this approach as self-made religion and of no value against fleshly indulgence or the weakness of the flesh.

**Colossians 2:23**

These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

In this context, Paul is talking about wrong teaching – what he termed as the teachings of men – with their many decrees, such as, “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” (vs. 20-22).

**Pleasures can be spiritually positive and meaningful**

In contrast to the unwholesome, unbiblical approach of these people who chose extreme deprivation, pain and discomfort, Paul shows us the path to true spirituality and a life that is truly pleasing to God.

**1 Timothy 6:17**

Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy.

Paul is saying here that enjoyment is not wrong in itself: “God richly supplies us with all things to enjoy”. This means believers may, in a meaningful way, enjoy many things with a clear conscience. This is in the will of God for us.

God has created many beautiful things for our meaningful enjoyment – the fantastic beauty in nature – the flowers, the trees, the birds, the sky, and many wonders in nature. I wonder how many of us have, from time to time, looked at the sky, especially in the evening, and marvel at its beauty – and every evening it is different.

There are many things we can meaningfully enjoy with a clear conscience, if we know how to go about it. Learning how to enjoy the mundane things of life including our work is actually part of wholesome, healthy Christian living and true discipleship. Enjoying our daily food can be part of our appreciation of our wonderful God “who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy”.

In Psalm 16:11, David tells us there are pleasures which we can properly be absorbed in, that God approves of and that are positive in nature.

**Psalm 16:11**

You will make known to me the path of life;  
In Your presence is fullness of joy;  
In Your right hand there are pleasures forever.

The “path of life” here is a life of fellowship with the Lord. “Fullness of joy” and “pleasures forever” tell us that healthy, positive pleasures are a meaningful part of healthy Christian living and true discipleship. We can link this to the “abundant life”

that the Lord Jesus promises in John 10:10. This kind of pleasure nurtures our spiritual life in contrast to the life of wanton pleasure that leads to spiritual death.

The question we may then ask is: Wherein lies the problem in this area of pleasure and enjoyment? What should be our approach to it?

### **Proper approach to pleasure and enjoyment**

As we seek to understand this subject, let us be mindful of the following points:

1. It is clear that there are worldly pleasures and enjoyment which are improper and harmful, and which we must stay away from. They can be attractive and appealing to the flesh, but they are damaging to our spiritual life and our fellowship with God.
2. What may be legitimate can become harmful and improper. For example, eating and drinking. The Lord Jesus says that He "came eating and drinking" (Matt. 11:19) and it was not wrong for Him to enjoy these things. We can also enjoy eating and drinking. But when they become excessive and indulgent, when they crowd out other more important things in life, when they displace God in our hearts, they become negative.

Enjoyment that is legitimate may not be suitable for us in a particular instance because it may be contrary to the will of God for us. For example, God may want us to concentrate on a task, and this may mean foregoing a meal. But if we abandon that task and go off to eat and drink, we have done something improper and harmful for our lives. This applies to many areas in life which can be legitimate and proper, and which we can enjoy in the right context.

3. It is not wrong to experience pleasure and enjoyment. It is wrong, damaging and renders us vulnerable when we allow pleasure and enjoyment to become the basis of our decisions, conduct and life. This is the critical issue. When we do so, even in legitimate areas, we end up living contrary to the Lord's will for us, and we move towards a life of bondage and destruction. At the heart of it, it is like having the "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die" mentality. We are living as if there is no ultimate truth, meaning and values and no accountability to God.

When we live in this way, we become easy victims of the evil one. His goal is to destroy us. He uses the things of this world to lure us, and before long, we become absorbed in them. We become poor stewards of what God entrusts to us – our material wealth, our time, our energy. We start neglecting what is truly important in life. We lose our spiritual appetite for the things of God. Our time with God, our worship of God and our prayer life become less and less meaningful. We become less receptive to what God wants to say to us. We become dull to the truths of the Scriptures. It is the path that leads to spiritual death.

4. What then is the right basis and motivation of our life? It is love for the Lord and love for the truth. It is living according to what is morally right and what is in line with the perspective and values of God's kingdom. Approaching life on this basis may mean foregoing certain pleasures and enjoyment. And it may involve discomfort, hardship, pain and suffering. The willingness and preparedness for such a life is at the heart of true discipleship. It includes the commitment to move in any direction we know God desires of us even when we know it would involve hardship, pain and suffering.

If this is the basis and motivation of our life, it will lead us to a life of abundance and meaning, fruitfulness and true success. In such a life, we can truly enjoy many things that the Lord provides for us along the way, and in particular, the sweet pleasure of unceasing fellowship with God and the joy of the Lord.

### **Concluding remarks**

Living a life motivated by pleasure and enjoyment can be likened to a man who is stuck in quicksand. He will keep sinking ever deeper into a life of bondage and misery. So long as he continues to be driven by pleasure and enjoyment, he will remain in the quicksand. However hard he struggles, he will not be able to live a life of true meaning and fulfilment. The longer he lives in this manner, the deeper he will sink into the quicksand, and it will be more and more difficult for him to get out of it. The evil one will be at work in him, making him increasingly enslaved to the various lusts and pleasures, and causing his misery and bondage to deepen.

In Titus 3:3, Paul tells us man can be enslaved to various lusts and pleasures.

#### **Titus 3:3**

For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another.

Before we became Christians, we were "enslaved to various lusts and pleasures". But after we have turned to the Lord, we can still be enslaved to them although it ought not be so. The evil one and the powers of darkness are always seeking to take advantage of the weakness of the flesh and draw us towards a life of fleshly indulgence.

We may not be like the Epicureans who lived on the basis of "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die". We may have a sincere desire to love God, to live for Him, to honour Him. But in certain areas, we may act according to what we enjoy and what pleases us. If we give in to any form of fleshly indulgence, it weakens our moral and spiritual being. To the degree that we give in to fleshly indulgence, to that degree it will move us away from God and from His kingdom. Once we yield in one area, it becomes easier for the evil one to attract us and appeal to our flesh in other areas. It becomes increasingly difficult for us to resist the influence of the evil one



because we have become weakened in our moral and spiritual being. As we become more enslaved, it becomes more difficult for us to be set free.

Let us realise it is easy to falter in this area and the consequences are grave. We are fallen beings living in a fallen world. There are many different ways the evil one can tempt us and it is easy to give in to pleasure and enjoyment because it is attractive.

Different people may have weaknesses in different areas with regard to this issue of pleasure and enjoyment. In those areas we are weaker in, we tend to proceed on the basis of the pleasure and enjoyment that we can derive, without due regard for the Lord's will and the moral principles involved. We may not realise the danger and harm of living on such a basis. But to live in this way is to live without due regard for moral values and conviction. It leads to immorality, a life of darkness and a life displeasing to God. It is a question of degree; but at the heart of it, this is what it means. Appealing to our fleshly desires and our base appetites is one of the most effective and devastating ways the evil one tempts us in order to destroy us.

Let us ask the Lord to help us to have a wholesome understanding of this subject of pleasure and enjoyment. Let us also ask the Lord to help us discern whether we are living on the basis of pleasure and enjoyment instead of on the basis of truth, biblical principles and the will of God. If our lives are focused on pleasure and enjoyment, let us ask the Lord to help us to take corrective measures. May He help us to resolve this area thoroughly, on the basis of what was accomplished at the Cross and by the empowering of the Holy Spirit.

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