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PLEASURE AND ENJOYMENT 2

The world offers us all kinds of pleasure and enjoyment. And the powers of darkness use pleasure and enjoyment to tempt people and ruin their lives.

Many people make decisions in life largely motivated by pleasure and enjoyment. Enjoyment is at the heart of what lures people in the negative direction. The apostle Paul tells us this is a prominent characteristic in the last days: men will be lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. The Lord Jesus also warns us about the danger of being choked by the riches and the pleasures of this life.

Although this area of pleasure and enjoyment is very problematic, the Scriptures does not teach us to reject all forms of pleasure and enjoyment. In fact, it is God who provides us with all things to enjoy. Indeed, there is a meaningful place for pleasure and enjoyment in the life of a believer. It is therefore helpful for us to learn to appreciate this area in a wholesome way.

How does the evil one tempt us and lead us astray?

After the fall of Adam and Eve, the flesh of man continually craves for pleasure and enjoyment. This is a reality we have to live with in this fallen world. Satan seeks to exploit this weakness. He seeks to tempt and destroy man by offering him pleasure and enjoyment to feed the flesh. This can come in the form of physical, mental, emotional or spiritual experiences that are pleasurable and enjoyable.

Let us learn from how Satan tempted Eve. In Genesis 2:17, God made it plain to Adam that partaking of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil would lead to death. Then we see the evil one tempting Eve to do the very thing that God had forbidden. The evil one made it appear attractive and desirable for Eve to eat the fruit, something she would enjoy and derive pleasure from.

Genesis 3:5-6

5 "For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

6 When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.

“The woman saw that tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes” is temptation from the angle of physical enjoyment. “Desirable to make one wise” appeals to the mind. Good for food, a delight to the eyes and desirable to make one wise also appeal to the emotion. “You will be like God, knowing good and evil” appeals to the spirit.

We need to be careful about enjoyable spiritual experiences. People tend to think that a pleasant and enjoyable spiritual experience has to be from God and therefore is positive and to be welcomed. But that is not true. This is an effective strategy of the evil one. He can impersonate God and deceive people into thinking a pleasant spiritual experience that comes from him is of God. Accepting such experiences from the evil one can result in spiritual bondage. Such deception and spiritual bondage are often aggravated by the sense of enjoyment of spiritual power or “divine” guidance that accompanies the experience.

Some pleasures of the flesh are easily recognisable as negative, improper or harmful. For example, indulgence in immoral activities, gambling and drug-taking. Others are more subtle. For example, the enjoyment of adulation, fame, recognition, compliments and flattery, and the enjoyment of power and authority.

Dangers of living for pleasure and enjoyment

A life of pleasure and enjoyment may seem attractive. But such a life can lead to tragic consequences.

Generally, people do not start off by setting their heart to become wicked and sinful. They may start off in small ways by seeking pleasure and enjoyment without proper regard for truth and values. They may continue living in this way so long as they think they can get away with it. Over time, they live in increasing disregard for the truth. Then they become gripped by their improper way of life. The evil one is actively at work to tempt men to indulge in sinful pleasures and when men yield to their fleshly appetites, they can become addicted to such a lifestyle. They may even resort to committing crimes like cheating, stealing and robbing to feed their fleshly appetites.

This is what happens to gamblers. They start with the desire to enjoy some quick gains. But after a while, gambling becomes a habit they cannot shake off. They end up gambling away all that they have and incurring a mountain of debt.

The word “hedonism” is derived from the Greek word for pleasure. To be hedonistic is live in such a way as to get as much pleasure out of life as possible. To the hedonists, enjoying oneself is the most important thing in life. Hedonism is thus a life motivated by pleasure.

In 2 Timothy 3:4, Paul speaks of an extreme form of godlessness that would be manifested in the last days. He says men will be “lovers of pleasure rather than

lovers of God". "Lovers of pleasure" describes people who do not simply enjoy pleasure, but are motivated by pleasure.

Hedonists live according to their inclinations and feelings. They live sensuously, indulging the base appetites. They often disregard moral values in their pursuit of pleasure. This way of living results in the destruction of the inner man. Paul describes the woman who gives herself to wanton pleasure as "dead even while she lives (1 Tim. 5:6). This truth is also applicable to men.

When we live our lives based on pleasure and enjoyment, we are caught in a vicious cycle. The flesh craves for continual feeding. We may get temporary satisfaction. But soon we crave for more. The more we feed it, the more our fleshy appetite grows. Eventually, the craving may be so strong that we come under its grip. This kind of worldly pleasure and enjoyment is often accompanied by a sense of uneasiness within that refuses to go away even while we are indulging in it. It does not give true fulfilment. It does not yield good fruit. As Solomon found out, it is like striving after the wind.

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), the problem with the rich man is not that he was rich or that he enjoyed himself. Rather, his life was consumed by self-centred pleasures and enjoyment without due regard for truth and meaning. He was indulging in his own fleshly desires and was unconcerned about the sufferings of others like Lazarus.

We may not live solely based on pleasure and enjoyment. But if we enter into situations because we are motivated by pleasure, and if we do so without due consideration for their moral meaning, then we are on dangerous ground.

It is important for believers to understand the principles involved and seek to resolve this area as thoroughly as possible. Otherwise, we will be vulnerable and unstable. The powers of darkness will attack us in our areas of weakness. They will bring us through tempting situations and we may find great difficulty resisting them. Let us not be overconfident nor presumptuous, thinking that we have no difficulty in this area.

Proper place of pleasure and enjoyment

There are two wrong notions we ought to discard. One notion is that if something is enjoyable, it means it is desirable and good. Those who hold such a notion have no qualms about doing what they find enjoyable. The other notion is that if something is pleasurable or enjoyable, it means it is spiritually unhelpful or even harmful. Those who hold such a notion may feel ill at ease when they find themselves enjoying something. They may even feel a sense of guilt because they associate pleasure with worldliness and a hindrance to spirituality. They see such enjoyable things as temptations of the evil one and therefore to be shunned.

How do we resolve this area and meaningfully enjoy the many things that God richly supplies us for our enjoyment (1 Tim. 6:17)?

The biblical approach

There are worldly pleasures and enjoyment that are improper or harmful and which we should stay away from. At the same time, there are those that can be legitimate and proper. But even things that are legitimate and proper can become harmful and improper when we overindulge and are preoccupied with them, or when they are contrary to the Lord's will for us in a specific situation.

There is a place for pleasure and enjoyment. But pleasure and enjoyment should not be the basis of our decisions, conduct and life. This is the critical issue.

Some people do things for the pleasure or good feelings they derive from being involved in those things. For example, they donate money and help the poor because they love the applause they receive for their contribution. But there is little or no positive moral content in such an act or involvement. If what motivates us is the publicity and compliments people pay us, it calls into question the genuineness of our concern for others. When we encounter difficulties or hardship, we may no longer find it enjoyable to be involved, and we may simply drop out.

If we live in this way, we will be unstable and unreliable. God will not entrust important responsibilities to a person if he carries them out only when he derives pleasure from doing so. This is not the way of a person of good character and conviction. If a person has good character and conviction, he will do things because they are good in the eyes of the Lord. He will persevere in this path even if it is unpleasant and he faces obstacles, and even if he has to pay a price.

The proper basis for our lives and conduct is extremely important. If the foundational basis and the primary motivation of our lives is love for the Lord and submission to His will and what He has revealed in the Scriptures, we are on the right track. If the basis and motivation is enjoyment and pleasure, it is fundamentally wrong and we will move in the direction of death and destruction.

Developing and living by convictions

Why do some believers make good progress in their walk with God while others don't? One main reason is their strength of conviction in important areas of the faith. Let us examine some of these areas.

1. Our daily personal time with God

It is important to set apart time for prayer and for reading the Scriptures. Many believers do recognise the importance of such times. But some do not do it with conviction. When they do not enjoy reading the Scriptures or praying, they simply

stop. They think it is pointless for them to continue. They may even think they are being hypocritical to continue at it.

Our time with God each day must flow forth from our recognition that it is something meaningful in the eyes of the Lord. And if it is something the Lord desires of us, there will be value in it. Even when we feel God is far away and not answering our prayers, we must persevere in faith, knowing that God hears us and that He delights in the prayers of those who love Him. If we come to God in prayer and read the Scriptures with the right attitude, it will be meaningful in the spiritual realm. When we maintain such times with the Lord, we will grow and be stable in God.

2. Outworking in church life

We participate in and contribute to church life in various ways. We attend the different meetings: congregational worship, prayer meeting, meeting in small groups. We also have fellowship with the brethren at other times.

Some Christians participate in these meetings for the enjoyment they can get out of them. When they no longer enjoy a meeting, or when they meet with difficulties and become discouraged, they stop attending, or they may be present but their heart is not in it. Do we live our lives in this way? It is important for us to understand the Lord's will and purposes for us in attending these meetings. We can then commit ourselves to attending them and work at it because we are convicted that these meetings are important, and they are part of the outworking of church life and the fulfilment of God's purposes.

Of course, it does not mean that we should not enjoy attending meetings, or that when we enjoy meetings, we are pandering to the flesh. Christian meetings, when working out well, can be both enjoyable and beneficial to our soul at the same time.

3. Channelling our time, energy and resources

How do we channel our time, energy and resources? Do we do so based on whether the things we are involved in are enjoyable? Or do we seek to understand the true value and meaning of that involvement from the perspective of God's kingdom? Do we seek to understand the Lord's will for us in that context? If the Lord wants us to participate in a certain activity such as having fellowship with Christians we have difficulty with, let us learn to do so even though we are not inclined to.

Right approach to life

The right approach in this area of pleasure and enjoyment is to first consecrate and commit our lives to God and His will, seeking His guidance for our lives. With this as the foundation, and within the framework of truth, we can enjoy all things and involvements with a clear conscience. We can enjoy simple things like eating and drinking, walking, working, relating with people and helping others. We can also

enjoy times of fellowship and service with others. We can even enjoy times of “inactivity”, times in which we are not doing anything specific. As Paul puts it, we can do all things to the glory of God.

When we concentrate on doing the things God wants us to and not on superficial, fleshly enjoyment, we will be able to enjoy many things we did not previously enjoy. And we can enjoy them at a deeper level, even when there is pain and unpleasantness.

I am not suggesting that we enjoy unpleasantness and pain. No, we should not even try to learn to enjoy pain. That would be a perversion. Nowhere in the Scriptures does it urge us to enjoy suffering and pain. But rather, we are learning to concentrate on the meaning and purpose of what we are going through, in fellowship with God.

Such enjoyment comes from doing things that are meaningful, purposeful and valuable in the eyes of the Lord. We enjoy doing them together with God and together with other believers who love God. Unlike worldly enjoyment, such enjoyment will not lead to negative consequences and will not lead to regret. In fact, such enjoyment is deep, meaningful and abiding.

Our approach to life ought not be: If I enjoy doing something, then I will do it. It should be the other way round: What I recognise the Lord wants me to do, what I ought to do, I will do it, and learn to enjoy doing it, in fellowship with God.

Enjoyment that is legitimate, fulfilling and abiding has a few qualities: there is the sense of God’s presence, of His love, guidance and undertaking; there is the conviction that such enjoyment will bear fruit that abides; there is the confidence that we have a part in God’s perfect plan and purposes. It is the joy of walking with God and going through all kinds of situations in fellowship with Him.

The psalmist refers to such enjoyment in Psalms 16:11.

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.

Example of Moses

To be faithful, effective and stable servants of the Lord, we cannot avoid pain and discomfort, and we ought not choose according to what is enjoyable and pleasurable.

We can learn from the example of Moses. Let us look at Hebrews 11:24-27.

Hebrews 11:24-27

24 By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter,
25 choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin,
26 considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward.
27 By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen.

This passage is an example of a life of faith. Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter (v. 24). He rejected the passing pleasures of sin (v. 25). He knew that such enjoyment would not be truly satisfying. He chose instead to endure ill-treatment with the people of God.

Moses considered the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt (v. 26). He had an eternal perspective: he was viewing things from the perspective of God's kingdom.

Moses was "looking to the reward" (v. 26), the reward that comes from God and that is truly meaningful and fulfilling.

Moses was also prepared to face dangers and the wrath of the king of Egypt (v. 27). He was prepared to do so because of his convictions and faith in God. He saw Him who is unseen. He knew God would richly bless those who choose to walk with Him, who trust Him and are faithful to Him, who value things that are truly precious, who are prepared to reject worldly pleasures and endure ill-treatment and all manner of difficulties.

This is the right approach and right attitude to life. This is the life of faith. It involves choice. It involves the willingness to choose what is in line with God's will, even if it is unpleasant and not enjoyable. As we live this kind of life, we can look forward to the future because it leads into the very presence of God, into God's eternal kingdom and God's blessings.

Concluding thoughts

In closing, let me share two poems that encapsulate a life lived for God.

Poem 1: Principle, direction, goal

It is when we become nothing,
And God becomes everything,
That in Him and through Him we can,
Become something.

It is when we give up everything,
And God becomes everything,
That in Him and through Him we can,
Have something,
And everything.

It is when we give up seeking pleasure and enjoyment,
And give up ourselves completely to God,
That in Him and through Him and with Him,
We can enjoy all things.

Poem 2: Experience, testimony, goal attained, varying degrees

I am nothing.
God is everything.
I am something,
In Christ.

I have nothing.
I have something,
Everything,
In Christ.

I set not my heart on enjoyment.
I enjoy all things,
Nothing,
At all times,
With God,
In Christ.

Let us then reflect on our walk with God, on what He means to us, on our approach to life, our motivation, our conduct and our choices. Are they all in line with what the Lord desires of us?

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