

Recreation

Special Message #72
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Summary: Temporal, earthly pleasures exist for our enjoyment, provided it is enjoyment of God. That's achieved when you realize the enjoyment comes from God and you see it as a picture of His delightfulness, such that it causes thanksgiving and increases your love for God. Keep them in balance in your priorities though. They are out of balance when ... (7 things)

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Introduction

Why should a Christian be involved with recreation? Or should we? Is there any Biblical reason why we should ever watch TV? Or watch a sporting event? Or play a game? Or go on vacation? Or have some dessert? Or take \$500 that could feed a third world family for months and spend it on a Lazy Boy instead? What does the Bible teach about the role pleasure and enjoyment and recreation is to play in our lives as believers?

Only if it glorifies God

One thing we can say for sure is this – we should not do any of those things unless they glorify God.

1 Corinthians 10:31 whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

There is never, ever, any moment in your life in which it is acceptable to do anything other than what is most glorifying to God. If you think your duty is to live for Him most of the time, but then you get a little free time to yourself, you completely misunderstand the Christian life.

When you become a Christian you give up your whole life – every second of it, to God. None of it belongs to you anymore.

1Cor.6:19-20 You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

If there is ever a moment, any time in your life when it would be better to be reading the Bible or praying than to be doing what you are doing, then what you are doing is sin. If it would be better – more glorifying and pleasing to God, to be doing something other than what you are doing, then when you are doing is sin.

Statements against pleasure

So where does pleasure and enjoyment fit in to that? Scripture has some pretty negative things to say about pleasure, actually.

2 Peter 2:13 [the false teachers] are blots and blemishes, reveling in their pleasures while they feast with you.

Luke 16:19 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.

He lived in luxury – comfort – enjoyment. And when he died he went to hell. It does not say that he did anything wrong, or committed any particular sin, or rejected Christ, or anything like that. The only thing we know about him is he enjoyed luxury. And when he cried out for a little relief as he was suffering the agony of hell, here is the answer he got:

25 "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony."

2 Tim.3:4 says there will be terrible times in the last days because people will be lovers of pleasure.

James 5:1 Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. ... 5 You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence.

And in James 4:3 he says that the reason they don't get their prayers answered is because they pray with the wrong motives – that they may spend what they get on the pleasures. Does that mean it is wrong to pray for pleasure? And if it is wrong to pray for it, doesn't that also mean it is wrong to seek it? Is it wrong to spend hundreds of dollars to go to a pleasurable place for a vacation? Or for that matter, if I am by myself in a room with a comfortable chair, should I sit on the floor?

Enjoyment of God

If you have been around this church long you know that my standard answer for questions like that is this: enjoyment of temporal, earthly things is idolatry if it is done without reference to God, but it is acceptable worship if it is done as enjoyment of God Himself. If I take a bite of food and all of my focus is on the food itself, with my back to God, that is idolatry, because I am looking to the food as if it were the source of joy and satisfaction rather than God. But if I take a bit of food and enjoy it as an illustration of the goodness of God and I receive it as a gesture of His love, and gratitude rises up out of my heart as a result, that is enjoyment of God through His gifts, and that is a good thing.

So we reject asceticism. We reject those people who say that we should abstain from pleasure. Those people are described in 1 Tim.4.

1 Timothy 4:3 They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. 4 For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, 5 because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

You see, when you enjoy some earthly, temporal pleasure, like tasty food; if you receive it as a gift from God's hand in such a way that it generates gratitude in your heart toward God, that consecrates (sanctifies) that gift. The food is actually made holy by your gratitude. When some earthly object becomes a tool that carries exchanges of love between you and God, that earthly object becomes holy.

So that is the answer I have often given in the past. But that answer is actually still pretty general. It still doesn't answer the question of when and how much to enjoy earthly pleasures. At what point do you go too far and fall under the James 5 indictment of those who live in luxury and self-indulgence? How do I know when to say no to the impulse to enjoy some earthly pleasure so I can spend some time in prayer or Bible study? And how do I know when to say no to prayer and Bible study to enjoy some earthly pleasure? That is the subject of tonight's study.

Why do earthly pleasures exist?

Think of all the temporal things you enjoy: Food, Friends, Family, The companionship of your wife, Sex, Money, Comfort, Entertainment (TV, movies, novels, music, etc.), Recreation (hunting, fishing, sports, games, etc.). Why does all that stuff exist? And why is it so pleasurable?

For our enjoyment

Did God plant those things on earth just to test us, in the hopes that we would say no to them as often as possible? No.

1 Timothy 6:17 Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

Why did God provide us with money and all the stuff money can buy? That verse couldn't be more clear – God provided us with all that for our enjoyment. I looked up the Greek word translated “enjoyment” and it turns out that word means...”enjoyment.” The only other time it is used is in

Hebrews 11:25 [Moses] chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time.

That word simply means pleasure, or enjoyment. So 1 Tim.6:17 says that God richly provided us with money and the stuff money can buy for our pleasure and enjoyment.

When you give someone a gift, you want them to enjoy it, right? And the more they enjoy it the happier you are. When you do your Christmas shopping, you look at some item and think, “Hmmm, how much enjoyment would she get out of that?” If it is not enough, you don't get it. If it is a lot, then you cannot wait to give it to her. God is the same way – He gives gifts to be enjoyed. And the more we enjoy them the better. There is not upper limit on how much we should enjoy them. It is impossible to enjoy a gift from God too much. You can't do it. The more pleasure you get out of it, the happier He is – as long as your enjoyment increases rather than decreases your love for Him.

If you give a gift to your wife and that gift starts to interfere with your relationship with her, that is no good. If you give a gift to your child and his enjoyment of that gift starts to cause problems in his life, he starts failing all his classes, does not get his work done, ignores the family, does not get enough exercise, etc, then he has crossed over into a misuse of that gift. But as long as it does not interfere with his relationship with you or create any problems in his priorities, then the more he enjoys it the better.

God wants you to enjoy life.

Ecclesiastes 11:8 However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all.

Ecclesiastes 8:15 So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 3:22 So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot.

God wants you to enjoy your job. Notice it doesn't say “find a job you enjoy.” It says “Enjoy your work.” In those days most people just did whatever their father did. Your profession was pretty much predetermined. Not very many people went out and did something different from what their dad did. So whatever your job is that you have – enjoy it. And he wants you to enjoy your wife too.

Ecclesiastes 9:9 Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love

Think of all the enjoyment God designed to be experienced in marriage. If you doubt that read the Song of Songs. One thing you have in that book is a couple of really, really happy people. And that is the model for marriage.

God wants you to enjoy the company of friends.

Romans 15:24 I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while.

The word translated “enjoyed” means to be satisfied. Paul had some desires with regard to companionship and friendship and exchanges of love with those people, and he stayed there until those desires were satisfied.

Part of living the Christian life is enjoying earthly pleasures, and it is not a good thing to be sad during times when God wants you to be happy. They tried that in the time of Nehemiah when he read the Scriptures to the people for the first time.

Neh.8:5-12 Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. ¹⁰ Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." ¹¹ The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve." ¹² Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

How to make enjoyment of earthly pleasures fellowship with God

Now, tell me what is wrong with this statement: “Christians should find a healthy balance between communion with God and enjoying earthly pleasures.” That is wrong because any enjoyment of earthly pleasures that is not communion with God is wrong. So then the question is, “How do you make your enjoyment of earthly pleasures fellowship with God?” Is it just a matter of saying “thanks God” when you are done? Or “God, I recognize that was a gift from You”? I believe there is more to it than that.

Realize what is happening (you are experiencing God’s giving of the ability to enjoy)

The pleasure must be enjoyed in a way that increases your love for God. And one way you can do that is to realize exactly what is happening when you are enjoying one of God’s gifts. Enjoyment does not come from God’s gifts. It comes only from God, *through* those gifts. And that is patently obvious from the fact that the very same things that sometimes delight your heart other times do not. Sometimes you engage in some activity and you just feel great. You are thinking, “Man, it doesn’t get any better than this. Life is good!” And you are just happy. And other times you can do that exact same activity and come out depressed.

No activity supplies enjoyment. All the activities we do for fun are like plates. And enjoyment is like the food. If God puts food on the plate, then it is satisfying. If He does not, then it is not.

This is a principle that is emphasized heavily in Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes 5:19 Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work--this is a gift of God.

Ecclesiastes 2:25 for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?

Ecclesiastes 6:2 God gives a man wealth, possessions and honor, so that he lacks nothing his heart desires, but God does not enable him to enjoy them, and a stranger enjoys them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous affliction. ³ A man may have a hundred children and live many years; yet no matter how long he lives, if he cannot enjoy his prosperity ... I say that a stillborn child is better off than he.

So those times when you are doing something and you are just having a blast, you feel really good, you are just able to thoroughly enjoy what is going on, that is a direct action of God. Think of a chemist, who has mixed some chemicals together, but knows that the entire mixture is completely inert until he adds one last ingredient that will act as a catalyst. And until he takes a dropper and drops of few drops of this catalyst into the mix, nothing happens. But once those drops hit the rest of the mix, the chemical reactions take place and the substance he's trying to create comes into existence.

When Ecclesiastes. talks about the ability to enjoy the pleasures of life, that ability to enjoy is the catalyst in the dropper. When you mix together you and some fun activity, the substance that is supposed to result (joy) is not created until God drops a few drops of the catalyst. Which means, whenever you do find happiness in your heart, you know you are experiencing a direct action of God. And your awareness of that going on at that moment enables a special kind of communion with God. It is not just that He created an earth thousands of years ago with some fun stuff. It is that He is doing something right this very minute that is a gesture of His love.

Picture of His delightfulness

Secondly, all enjoyment of non-sinful things in this world is a picture and illustration and taste of the delightfulness of God. So when you enjoy a good meal, there is something about that particular kind of enjoyment that points to what it is like to be near God. When you enjoy hunting or the mountains or some adventure, there is something about that particular kind of enjoyment that points to what it's like to be near God. The same goes for when you - enjoy competition, or - you enjoy the physical relationship with your wife, or - you enjoy the company of friends, or - beautiful weather, or - sleeping in, or - getting an unexpected bonus at work, or - playing a game, or - being entertained (TV, movies, sports, etc.)

Now, some of you might be thinking, "I can see how some of those things would illustrate certain things about what it is like to be near the presence of God, but some of the things in that list I can't see how those point to God at all." For example, playing games - How does the enjoyment I get from playing games teach me about what is delightful about the nearness of God? I am not sure. I know that sports are mentioned by Paul in what seems to me to be an approving way. He uses them as analogies of how we are to live the Christian life. If sports were sinful it is hard to imagine Paul doing that.

But what do you do when you really enjoy some activity, - it is not forbidden by Scripture, it does not violate any biblical principles, but you just cannot see how it teaches you anything about God?

I think we can look to Ecclesiastes to answer that question too. In that book he speaks of the vanity of trying to figure out the big picture of your life. It is a chasing after the wind - you cannot do it. Only God can see the big picture. There are a lot of things about this life that we cannot see how they fit into the overall puzzle. And the good news is you do not have to have it all figured out. Just enjoy your life. Enjoy the gifts from God. If you cannot see how it all fits together, don't worry about it. Just enjoy the fact that God is dropping some drops of that catalyst on your fishing trip or you ball game or your bowl of chili or whatever, and say, "God, I am so glad to be here with You."

Think about why people go somewhere special for their honeymoon. When you're on your honeymoon you will probably have a good time just about anywhere. The purpose of a honeymoon is for the couple to enjoy each other, right? So why go to some paradise? Is it so they can enjoy the beach and the sun instead of each other? No. They go there because a delightful setting enhances their enjoyment of each other. And that is how it is with the pleasures that God has given in life. Those pleasures enhance your ability to enjoy God.

If a couple gets so they cannot enjoy each other's company at all unless they are in Hawaii, that is a bad sign. But on the other side there is something about going to Hawaii together that can really enhance their enjoyment of each other. There is a special kind of closeness that comes from enjoying some wonderful thing with a person you love. That is why most people do not go to movies alone. Why go to a movie with another person? You are not talking to each other, looking at each other, interacting with each other. You are sitting there in a chair watching a screen - just like you would if you were there alone. And yet, people always want to go with their friends or loved ones, because there is something about enjoying something with someone you love that both increases the enjoyment and adds closeness to your relationship. So God wants you to enjoy life, and to enjoy it with Him. So when you are enjoying some earthly pleasure you do not just fire up a "thank you" to God when it's over. Throughout you are saying things like, "God, I am so glad to be here with You enjoying this

together. Your delights are so pleasing and wonderful to me. Your goodness touches my soul. You are the God who makes delightful things, and enables me to enjoy them. I love You!"

Guidelines for enjoying temporal pleasures

So, that gives you some basic biblical foundation for this whole area of enjoyment of temporal pleasures. But what I have said so far leaves a whole lot of questions still. Not the least of which is, "How do I know which recreations to do and how much time and money to spend on them?" How much is too much? How much is too little? We do not have time tonight to address every question, but let me just give you a few guidelines.

Enjoy a good variety of pleasures

First, realize that God designed us to enjoy a variety of pleasures. The thinking that says, "Well, if the best thing you can do is pray or read the Bible, then why not just do that 24 hours a day?" - that kind of thinking is like saying, "Why not take the healthiest food in your house and eat nothing but that?" Or "Why not take the best tasting food and never eat anything else?" Your body has a huge variety of needs. You need vitamins, protein, sugar, water, minerals, even fat. And not only that, some of the things your body needs it needs to get in combination with other things. And so God designed us to get board even with our favorite food so we will crave something else. That way we eat a variety of food and get all the various things our bodies need.

I think it is the same way with earthly enjoyments. God programmed a law of diminishing returns into the pleasures of life so that we couldn't get out of balance in our priorities.

Ecclesiastes 4:8 There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. "For whom am I toiling," he asked, "and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?" This too is meaningless-- a miserable business!

You save up money so you can have enjoyment later. If you always do that, and never get around to enjoying it, it's a waste. One the other hand, if you spend all your time enjoying your money and none of your time earning it, that does not work out either.

There is always a tension between immediate and deferred pleasure. Recently I took Tracy down to Mexico for a vacation. And I really enjoyed just flaking out – sleep in, relax, pig out at the buffet, go down to the beach and bogy board in the waves, lay down in the sand next to my wife and read for a while, pig out at the buffet, take a rest, hit the buffet, go for a walk on the beach, watch a movie, mess around on my computer, stay up as late as I please, sleep in. That was so enjoyable. Normally I work 80 to 90 hours a week, then do things around the house, exercise, etc, so just throwing discipline out the window for a few days felt so good.

But after a few days of that it occurred to me that if I lived that way all the time I would not be very happy. I would be out of shape, 400 lb, unhealthy, I would never have any sense of accomplishment, I would not be learning anything, I would not have any energy, I would not feel very good, etc. Too much enjoyment of immediate pleasure and you ultimately end up with very little pleasure. And too much emphasis on deferred enjoyment ends up in not enough enjoyment too.

So the right approach is not an "all or nothing" kind of attitude that looks only for the best possible activity and discounts the importance of everything else. When you have reason to believe there is too much of one thing in your life, cut back. And if there is not enough of another, add some of that. I think it is a good idea to keep track (within reason) of what you are doing so you can assess if something is missing. Your time is just like your budget. If you go to your wife and say, "I found a cabin in the mountains. The payment would be \$900 a month. Let's get it." Unless you have a lot of extra money in your budget that you weren't using, before you get the cabin you need to decide what other things you are going to cut out of your budget to free up that 900.

Time is the same way. In fact, time is even more absolute, because there is no deficit spending with time. You cannot use 29 hours every day and start going in to time debt. Right now you are spending 24 hours every day doing what you do. And so if you decide, "You know, I'm going to start working out for a half hour a day"- you have to decide what other thing in your life you are going to spend a half our less on each day to free up that time.

I keep track of how I spend all my time, and I have a schedule that reflects what I believe God wants me to do. And as long as the totals for each category roughly match my schedule, I do not have to feel guilty about all

the 10 trillion things I am not doing. Nor do I feel guilty about my recreation being a waste of time, because I've already determined how much is appropriate. I do not have to worry about, "Oh, I should be doing some work or reading my Bible instead of doing this fun thing" because I already have built in to my schedule what I believe is the right amount of work and Bible reading.

If some temporal pleasure starts to take over your affections and push the more important things out of your life, scale back how much time you devote to that in your schedule. And if you do not have the discipline to do that, then just drop it altogether (if possible) until you are able to train your heart to have the right priorities.

How to tell when temporal pleasure is too high a priority

"But how do I know when some earthly pleasure has become too high a priority?" Here are a few ways:

1) When the price you pay for the pleasure outweighs the benefit

There is a section in Pr.23 about the foolishness drunkenness. And the argument of that passage is basically that even though there may be some enjoyment connected to being drunk, the cost is too high. It turns you into a fool and brings you all kinds of woe and sorrow and strife and complaints and needless bruises and bloodshot eyes and confusion. And so it is just not worth it.

If your recreation is ruining your marriage, it is not worth it. If it is putting you into debt, it is not worth it. If it is interfering with your ministry it is not worth it. If it is interfering with developing friendships it is not worth it.

There is value to recreation. But there are a lot of other things in life that are much, much, much more valuable. And so if it costs you any of those things, it is not worth it.

2) When it enslaves you

Titus 3:3 At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.

Once again, you see that when earthly pleasures become too high a priority it causes anger. You get mad at people because they inevitably interfere with your pleasures. And that's especially the case when you are enslaved by that pleasure.

Anything that enslaves you is sin – period. I don't care if it's sexual sin or coffee. If you have a habit you cannot stop, something that dominates your life, something you're doing too much and your efforts to quit or back off have failed.

3) When it becomes the defining love of your life, or eclipses your love for God

2 Tim.3:4 says there will be terrible times in the last days because people will be **lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God**. When you start loving pleasure in the same ultimate, life-defining way that you are supposed to love God, then you have gone too far. Everybody enjoys pleasure (by definition). But when you go from simply enjoying it to it being the love of your life – that pushes God aside.

4) When your hope is in that thing rather than God

The reason you do the other things you do is for that.

1 Timothy 5:5 The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help. 6 But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives.

The one who lives for pleasure in a bad way is the opposite of the one who puts her hope in God. If the thing that keeps you going in life is looking forward to some earthly pleasure rather than the grace of God, you have crossed over into idolatry.

5) When you prefer that thing above what God promises

Heb.11:25 [Moses] chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. ²⁶ He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.

Sometimes indulging in some earthly pleasure means sacrificing future reward from God. Moses chose to give up the pleasures of Egypt and chose to suffer with the enslaved Hebrews not just out of discipline or duty, but because he regarded association with God and the rewards God promised to be of greater value. Selfishness is evil but self-interest is not. God has made it so the most righteous thing to do also happens to be the very thing that is ultimately in your best interests. So you never have to choose between your own best interests and what is right. But you do often have to choose between something that you know will feel good now and something God promises will feel much better later. And when you prefer the former over the latter, then your devotion to that pleasure has become corrupted.

6) When it chokes the work of the Word in your heart

Luke 8:14 The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.

It interferes with the work of God's Word in your heart. You are distracted when you read Scripture because you are thinking about it. Your heart is reluctant to accept certain things in the Bible because it might interfere with or restrict your involvement with that thing, or maybe even require that you give it up altogether. Or it can just draw your affections from the things of God. You are not as excited about your ministry at church as you are about your next enjoyment of that thing. You think about that thing more than you think about God's Word. You study that thing more than you study Scripture – like the guy who has all the statistics of his favorite sport memorized but does not have any Scripture memorized. Or the guy who can tell you anything about hunting but almost nothing about what Scripture teaches.

7) When it impels selfishness rather than love

A final marker of out-of-control love for pleasure is when your enjoyment of earthly pleasures impels selfishness rather than love.

James 4:1 What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your pleasures that battle within you? 2 You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. 3 When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

When enjoyment of God's gifts is in its proper place it does not push you toward selfishness or interfere with love. Seeing a smile on someone else's face should be a greater priority than lesser pleasures. So if my watching a ball game is going to create consternation for my wife, I happily and eagerly shut it off.

If you find yourself getting angry a lot, chances are it's because your love for pleasure is bloated out of proportion. You are so devoted to enjoying those pleasures that there is hostility in your heart when someone interferes. When you get that kind of lust for pleasure, your enjoyment of that pleasure is not fellowship with God at all, which means there is absolutely no purpose for it.