

Vital Supplement for Spiritual Vitality

THE PURPOSES OF PLEASURE

Proverbs 9:1-18 (Part 4):

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From a bird's eye perspective, if we examine Proverbs 9:1-18, we see three major units of thought with the two invitations that are polarized from each other:

- a. An invitation from Wisdom to her banquet: vv. 1-6
- b. Consequences of accepting the invitation: vv. 7-12
- c. An invitation from Folly to her banquet: vv. 13-18.

In this passage two women are compared. They are the representatives, the spokespersons, for wisdom and folly—so why do I use them to represent true and spiritual pleasures? Is it a stretch? In some places in Proverbs, wisdom and folly are contrasted in such a way that no one could mistake them, but not here. Here they appear in a similar fashion. Folly is not represented by a witch and wisdom isn't an angelic creature. They are both beautiful, both diligent, inviting, both equally prepared, and both have an agenda. So it is not a stretch at all to compare them with pleasures. From appearances, pleasures hold the same promises of enjoyment, but only the one who is discerning knows that the difference is clear once you step into the experience. We learn to probe, to question, and to listen more carefully to their intentions.

In our examination of the invitation to experience pleasure from Wisdom, verses 1-12, by way of application, we are able to glean our first truth: **When you encounter true pleasures, enjoy them, but don't exclusively focus on them. Rather, follow them along for they are designed to take you to God.**

In my favorite meditation by C. S. Lewis describes a very helpful way to investigate a pleasure:

I was standing today in the dark toolshed. The sun was shining outside and through the crack at the top of the door there came a sun-beam. From where I stood that beam of light, with the specks of dust floating in it, was the most striking thing in the place. Everything else was almost pitch-black. I was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it. Then I moved so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no

toolshed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun. Looking along the beam, and looking at the beam are very different experiences.

When we “*look along*” at true pleasures, don't just look at them. Rather, allow true pleasures to take you to God. Perhaps another illustration is helpful. Let's say a dear friend makes me a chocolate cake. It is one thing to “look at” the cake, examining the rich, decadent chocolate icing mixed in with pecans and taste the rich texture. But if I were to “follow it along,” I would discover that this dear friend made out of love for me! Thoughtfulness is behind this cake. A personality is behind this cake! Likewise, don't merely focus on a true pleasure. Follow it along and it will take you to God.

In our examination of the invitation to experience pleasure from Folly, verses 13-18, by way of application, we discover our second truth: **False pleasures are designed to captivate you. But they are not merely meant to captivate you; they are meant to capture you. But they are not meant to merely capture you; they are meant to kill you, both spiritually and physically** (e.g., alcohol; drug abuse; sexual addiction).

In many ways our present culture is enraptured not by what is noble, true, and trustworthy, but by false pleasures that lie outside of God's purposes. One of the most effective tools for captivating, capturing, and killing us is the false pleasures generated from entertainment industry. In so many ways they follow the patterns of Folly. Not only do they call out to us with their marketing techniques, but they offer tantalizing pleasures of amusement that are very difficult to resist. While they seek to captivate your mind, bring excitement to your senses, and delight your heart, know that there is an agenda behind their humor, the visual pictures you see, and the sounds you hear.

Consider this statement by George Lucas: “Film and visual entertainment are a pervasively important part of our culture, an extremely significant influence on the way our society operates. People in the film industry don't want to accept the responsibility that they had a hand in the way the world is loused up. But, for better or worse, the influence of the church, which used to be all-powerful, has been usurped by film. Film and television tells us the way we conduct our lives, what is right and wrong.”¹ David

Putnam, producer of *Chariots of Fire* and *The Mission*, put it this way, ““Movies are powerful. Good or bad, they tinker around inside your brain. They steal up on you in the darkness of the cinema to form or conform social attitudes... In short, cinema is propaganda.”² Just as you are what you eat, you are what you watch.

From our study of these invitations of pleasure, in sum, we have learned **that true pleasures point us to God whereas false pleasures take us away from God.** But when you combine a spiritual pleasure (loving others) and a true pleasure together, you have wisdom. If you will go to the banquet of wisdom, then you are not only in accord with God’s desires, inclinations, and preferences, you will find yourself delighting in Him. So, enjoy what you have, but remember that the only time you will be most satisfied is when God is most glorified.

But it can be very difficult to make out the voice of true pleasure like wisdom because of the craftiness of those behind false pleasures.

How Should We Then Live?

How do we recognize which one is the voice of true pleasure like wisdom? This is an excellent question because false pleasures are well-established on the level of appearance. Folly mimics wisdom; she may even call out to you the same message. But what she offers appeals to your fleshly appetites and sinful tendencies. John Wesley once asked his mother Suzanna Wesley, how to detect evil. And I believe her answer is helpful when encountering the captivating enticements Folly offers:

“Use this rule: Whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sight of God, takes from you your thirst for spiritual things or increases the authority of your body over your mind, then that thing to you is evil. By this test you may detect evil no matter how subtly or how plausibly temptation may be presented to you.”

1. Whatever weakens your reason;
2. Whatever impairs the tenderness of your conscience;
3. Whatever obscures your sight of God;

¹ George Lucas, quoted by Aljean Harmetz in “U.S.C. Breaks Ground for a Film-TV School,” *New York Times*, Nov. 1981, p.C16.

² *David Putnam, producer of Chariots of Fire and The Mission. Movieguide, Nov. 1990, pg. 13.*

4. Whatever takes from you your thirst for spiritual things; Whatever increases the authority of your body over your mind, then that thing to you is evil.

False pleasures are not only a problem out there, but they are a problem within. Folly appeals to those dark areas in our lives. I find it strange that we are so sensitive to false pleasures but insensitive to true pleasures like wisdom. This insensitivity is a result of sin and desensitization. The flesh is a built-in-compulsive inner force inherited from man’s fall, which expresses itself in general and specific rebellion against God and His righteousness. The flesh can never be reformed or improved. The only hope for escape from the law of the flesh is its total execution and replacement by a new life in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Another reason why we are so insensitive to false and true pleasures is because of the counterfeit kingdom. We have to recognize that there is not only an agenda behind false pleasures, but that spiritual warfare lies at the heart of it all. Satan and his dominion do not want you to experience true and spiritual pleasures. Perhaps no one has captured this more beautifully than C. S. Lewis’s *Screwtape Letters*. The letters of the infernal Screwtape, a senior devil from a highly organized Hell, instructs his nephew Wormwood, a junior demon, in the art of winning over a young man’s soul—not by a sudden fall into mortal sin, but by the routine and undramatic temptations of daily life. To be honest, it is one of the greatest books on the psychology of temptation. In Chapter XIII we have the following response from Screwtape to Wormwood:

It seems to me that you take a great many pages to tell of a very simple story. The long and short of it is that you have let the man slip through your fingers. The situation is very grave, and I really see no reason why I should try to shield you from the consequences of your inefficiency. A repentance and renewal of what the other side call “grace” on the scale which you describe is a defeat of the first order. It amounts to a second conversion—and probably on a deeper level than the first.

As you ought to have known, the asphyxiating cloud which prevent your attacking the patient on his walk back from the old mill is a well-known phenomenon. It is the Enemy’s most barbarous weapon, and generally appears when He is directly present to the patient under certain modes not yet fully classified. Some humans are permanently surrounded by it, and therefore inaccessible to us.

And now for your blunders. On your own showing you first of all allowed the patient to read a book he really enjoyed, because he enjoyed it and not in order to make clever remarks about it to his new friends. In

the second place, you allowed him to walk down to the old mill and have tea there—a walk through country he really likes and taken alone. In other words, you allowed him two real positive Pleasures. Were you so ignorant as not to see the danger of this? The characteristics of Pain and Pleasures is that they are unmistakably real, and therefore, as far as they go, give the man who feels them a touchstone of reality.

He goes on to say:

How can you have failed to see that a real pleasure was the last thing you ought to have let him meet? Didn't you foresee that it would just kill by contrast all the trumpery which you have been so laboriously teaching him to value? And that the sort of pleasure which the book and the walk gave him was the most dangerous of all? That it would peel off from his sensibility the kind of crust you have been forming on it, and make him feel that he was coming home, recovering himself? As a preliminary to detaching him from the Enemy, you want to detach him from himself, and had made some progress in doing so. Now, all that is undone.

He ends his letter with this advice:

It remains to consider how we can retrieve this disaster. The great thing is to prevent his doing anything. As long as he does not convert it into action, it does not matter how much he thinks about this new repentance. Let the little brute wallow in it...Let him do anything but act. No amount of piety in his imagination and affections will harm us if we can keep it out of his will. As one of the humans has said, active habits are strengthened by repetition but passive ones are weakened. The more often he feels without acting, the less he will be able to ever act, and in the long run, the less he will be able to feel. Your affectionate uncle, Screwtape.

The last thing counterfeit kingdom wants is for you to experience true pleasures. Because they point you to God, they find their source in God. So, they will put out offers that are tantalizing, attractive... appealing to our fleshly appetites and sinful desires, promoting a curiosity into the darker things of life. Don't give into them. They will take you place you never thought you would go. Satan's dark forces don't attack us with swords and knives, they chip away at our spirit, working to convince us that it is much more fulfilling to be happy in this moment than to be holy as a way of life, undermining God's purposes with every blow. Will you be the one to rise and face the foe by delighting in God's pleasures, or will you conform to Folly's ways.