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Pure Pleasure

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Thomas, Gary (Gary Lee)

Pure pleasure : why do Christians feel so bad about feeling good? / Gary Thomas.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-310-29080-3 (softcover)

1. Pleasure—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BV4597.59T46 2009

231.7—dc22

2009009944

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Published in association with Yates & Yates, www.yates2.com.

Interior design by Beth Shagene

Printed in the United States of America



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Chapter 1



THE TYRANNY OF
TORRENTIAL THIRST



The way to be truly happy is to be truly human, and the way to be truly human is to be truly godly.

J. I. Packer

I commend the enjoyment of life.

Ecclesiastes 8:15

“Got . . . to get . . . some water!”

Houston sweltered in clammy humidity while the summer sun baked the streets with 95-degree heat. It was smack-dab in the middle of the afternoon, and every sane person sat cool and refreshed inside an air-conditioned house. Some no doubt felt startled by an eminently foolish, middle-aged, fluorescent-white man from the Pacific Northwest, melting in his running shoes as he trekked through the suburbs.

I had been invited by two churches to visit Texas. Since I was to preach on Sunday morning and then lead a staff retreat that evening, any run had to be shoehorned in on Sunday afternoon between the two morning sermons and the evening session.

Because of the heat, I planned to run just six miles. I took no water with me, but hey, the entire run would take less than fifty minutes; I figured, how thirsty could I get?

In less than fifteen minutes, I found out. Imagine chewing on hot

sand for ten minutes, spitting it out, and then letting someone blow the air of a hair dryer directly down your throat for another five.

That's what it felt like.

Unfortunately, I still had another half hour to go.

Thirty minutes into my run, I felt like a ninety-year-old man. When a discarded, half-consumed bottle of Diet Coke lying in a ditch started to look inviting, I knew I was in trouble.

Finally, I saw a woman walking in front of her house, a house that—glory, hallelujah!—had a hose rolled up in front of it. I walked up to her and through a parched throat croaked out, “Excuse me; would you mind if I take a quick drink from your hose?”

“Not at all,” she said, so I turned on the hose, let it run for a moment, and opened my mouth to receive—*the most plastic-tasting, mineral-encrusted water you can imagine.*

Think about it—the water in that hose had boiled inside a rubber tube for days. The bacteria were probably multiplying by the millisecond—no doubt falling over themselves in their rush to reproduce. As that water coursed down my throat, a small voice in the back of my mind said, “You're *so* going to pay for this. Three hours from now, you're going to wish you were dead.”

But I didn't care. Fifty degrees *past* thirsty, I wanted immediate satisfaction. I would willingly risk any number of gastric nightmares just to wet my throat. So I kept drinking.

I finally made it back to my car, immediately drove to a local drugstore, and proceeded to buy an armload of icy beverages.

And then I smiled as I realized I had the perfect opening for my next book.

When Thirsty Trumps Trustworthy

When I drank from that hose, I *knew* I was flirting with disaster—but I didn't care. My intense thirst made me willing to risk long-

term suffering for short-term satisfaction. Every scientist in the country could have lined up back to back and used charts, PowerPoint presentations, anecdotes, personal testimonies, and research-tested data to demonstrate the foolishness of drinking that water, but I still might have put that hose to my lips and sucked down the liquid relief. I felt *that* thirsty. My urgent need trumped any other immediate concern.

My physical condition mirrored what many people face—spiritually, relationally, and emotionally. And spiritually thirsty people will put a lot of poison in their mouths, just to stop the thirst.

Nonbelievers are supernaturally thirsty because they do not know God, whom they were created to enjoy. Many believers are thirsty because they do not know how to enjoy God and the life he has given them. Some in the church feel suspicious, at best, of pleasure. We consider *pleasure* a synonym for *sin*. If it feels good, we think, it must be the devil's handmaiden. So we set up our lives on duty, responsibility, and obligation—good things all—with little true pleasure to season our days. Over time, these lives that are devoid of holy and good pleasure become extremely “thirsty,” and we begin gravitating toward a release that is not holy or good or honoring to God—pleasures that war against our souls instead of building us up.

On Sunday morning as we sit in church listening to the pastor, the tyranny of our thirsty souls screams so loudly that we become all but deaf to wisdom, to warnings, even to Scripture about the ways in which we terrorize our souls with polluted pleasures. We may hear testimony after testimony about how our pet escape actually works as a trap, an insidious threshold to addiction, misery, and ruin; but if we're *really* thirsty, we may not care. When we allow ourselves to get *this* thirsty, we make ourselves vulnerable to any number of spiritual ills. We'll drink the poisoned water anyway.

I woke up this morning and had a big glass of water and a venti

chai tea latte. From this vantage point, I could look back at myself those few months ago and say, “Gary, put the hose *down*.” But that’s because I wasn’t thirsty this morning. From where I now sat, that half-empty bottle of diet Coke in the ditch looked absolutely gross. I wouldn’t consider giving it a second glance. In fact, right now, the very hose seems repulsive. I could fault myself for taking a drink, but *wouldn’t it be wiser to fault myself for allowing a situation to occur in which I became so thirsty that I reached the point of desperation?*

So let me ask you—from a spiritual, relational, emotional, and physical perspective—how thirsty do you feel as you read these words? Has your faith become all about obligation, duty, and responsibility? Do you find yourself occasionally shocked by something that looks inviting to you, something that you know should instead feel abhorrent? Does your lack of joy leave you achingly vulnerable to temptation?

Instead of persistently criticizing yourself for constantly giving in to such temptations, why not take a step back and figure out how to cultivate a life that will free you from the tyranny of your often-demanding thirst? Can you accept that there might be a holy purpose behind the intentional cultivation of appropriate pleasures?

Filled to the Brim

Rather than showcase a life of satisfaction, for years the church has tried to scare us out of our sin. For example, you could fortify yourself against an affair by meditating on all the evil that could result: the consequences of bringing home an STD; the shame of getting caught and exposed, perhaps risking your job or at least your reputation; the pain of seeing your spouse’s hurt reaction; the horror of watching your kids lose their respect for you; or the threat of a revenge-minded spouse.

I suppose there’s a place for this approach. If you lived *not* to sin,

you might even be able to make a case that such an exercise would bring spiritual benefit.

Or . . .

You could focus on building a marriage in which thoughts of straying get pushed out by a real and satisfying intimacy in which no room exists for another lover. You could spend your time actively raising your children, becoming engaged in their lives in such a way that your heart overflows with love for your family, making any thought of tearing apart your family repugnant. You could faithfully pursue the work to which God has called you so that you have neither the time nor the inclination for something as sordid as an affair.

See the difference? We can build lives of true, lasting pleasure and so fortify ourselves against evil because evil has lost much of its allure—or we can try, with an iron will, to “scare” ourselves away from evil while still, deep in our hearts, truly longing for it.

Which life do you want to live?

Which life do you believe will ultimately succeed?

Thomas Chalmers, a nineteenth-century Scottish preacher, called the former method (meditating on the “vanity” of sin) “altogether incompetent and ineffectual.” He believed that the “constitution of our nature” demands that we instead focus on the “rescue and recovery” of our heart from wrong affections by embracing the “expulsive power of a new affection.”¹

In a similar way, G. K. Chesterton* wrote that “the great gap in modern ethics” is “the absence of vivid pictures of purity and spiritual triumph.”² In other words, we need to preach the glory of a truly soul-satisfying life instead of sounding obsessed about the

*G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) was a British poet, journalist, novelist, and spiritual writer best known for his Father Brown mysteries, his biography of Francis of Assisi, and his spiritual classic, *Orthodoxy*. His work greatly influenced the conversion, and later the writings, of C. S. Lewis.

dangers of a life lived foolishly. We can send our kids off to college with horrid tales of drunken students falling to their deaths from third-floor balconies, show them charts that demonstrate the percentage of sexually active college students who carry at least one sexually transmitted disease, share testimonies of the soul-destroying effects of the love of money—or we can build into them a vision of the unique soul-satisfaction that comes from being an instrument used by God, of the opportunities to build relationships with people who may become lifelong friends, and of the glory of becoming equipped to enter the life profession God created them to fulfill.

I want my children to fill their lives with *good* things, which in turn will help them to disdain the bad. I want to capture their hearts with “vivid pictures of purity and spiritual triumph” instead of trying to scare them away from soul-destroying habits.

“Where freedom is near,” a theologian once wrote, “the chains begin to hurt.”³ Jesus’ more pleasurable way of *life* showcases the agony of the way of *death*. When we unashamedly preach true, holy, and God-honoring pleasure, then the sordidness of sin, the foolishness of spiritual rebellion, and the agony of addictions become shockingly apparent.

Chalmers would argue that an “old affection”—a sinful desire—is “almost never” overcome by the sheer force of “mental determination.” That is, sin almost always eventually gets a young man or woman who is merely “determined” not to fall. The nineteenth-century preacher would say that mental reasoning (“I know I shouldn’t”; “This could end badly”; “My parents would get so angry”; “This might affect my future”) cannot possibly compete with the force of our passions. “But what cannot be thus *destroyed* may be *dispossessed*—and one taste may be made to give way to another, and to lose its power entirely as the reigning affection of the mind. It is thus that the boy ceases to be the slave of his appetite.”⁴

Let’s return to my original story. I *knew* that drinking from the

hot Houston hose amounted to a dicey proposition, but I didn't care. I needed *something* to conquer my thirst. College students, single moms, middle-aged men, and elderly widows need something too. Let's give them visions of something *better*, something nobler, to fill their hearts. Let's set the church on the path of exalting "vivid pictures of purity and spiritual triumph." Let's advertise the good life by becoming living examples of truly satisfied souls.

Spiritual triumph begins and ends with finding our satisfaction in God above all things. We serve a generous God, however, who eagerly wants to bless us with many other pleasures, gifts from his hand, that delight us—and in delighting us, bring pleasure back to him. Rather than seeing these gifts as competitors that steal our hearts from God, perhaps we can gratefully receive them and allow God to use them to ruin us to the ways of the world.

Prayer and fellowship are among life's richest pleasures, but let's not stop there. Let us learn to fill our souls with beauty, art, noble achievement, fine meals, rich relationships, and soul-cleansing laughter. When we acknowledge these pleasures, we acknowledge God as a genius creator of brilliant inventions. Let us be wary of a faith that denies these blessings as "worldly" and unfit, as though Satan rather than God had designed them. Let us refuse to fall into the enemy's trap of denying ourselves God's good pleasures so that we end up deeply vulnerable to illicit pleasure.

In truth, God created us first for *his* own pleasure, not our own; but when we live a life of holy pleasure, we do bring pleasure to God (see chapter 3). In this context and with this understanding, pleasure can become a powerful force for piety and goodness.

The Place for Pleasure

This book asks how we might recapture pleasure in the Christian life. Wouldn't you like to explore the potential of building a life of

healthy pleasure? If God designed healthy pleasure to sustain us, how can you become better equipped to receive the strength of such pleasures? Would you like to better understand how God delights to see his children live in pleasure, just as any father loves to sit back and watch his children squeal with delight on Christmas morning?

If your life has been all about obligation, responsibility, and denial, you're in for an eye-opening treat. If you've become dangerously thirsty, vulnerable to any number of soul-numbing temptations, you're about to be fortified against sin. If your life has lost its appeal and your heart has lost its joy, get ready for a new awakening.

Perhaps you have never connected your pleasure with God and have set up a wall between what we might call "creational" pleasures and worship. We'll do our best to tear down that wall. Or maybe you're facing an entirely different battle. You've become a slave to your pleasures. You never or rarely say no to pleasure, and you need help to put pleasure in its proper place and perspective. There's something here for you as well.

Are you ready to explore what may seem threatening to some—namely, what if pleasure can lead us *to* God instead of compete *with* God?

≡ DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION ≡

1. Gary talks about becoming so thirsty on a run that he was willing to drink water that might make him sick. Instead of simply faulting himself for taking the drink, however, he thinks he should be faulted for putting himself in a situation where he became so desperate he didn't care about the consequences. How is this analogy helpful when it comes to handling temptation and addiction?
2. Prior to reading this book, when you heard or thought about pleasure, did your mind immediately roam to illicit enjoyments? Why do you think the word *pleasure* is so often used to describe sinful desires?
3. Do you agree with Gary that it's more helpful to fill our lives with good and godly desires, and thereby reduce (though not eliminate) our desire for illicit pleasure, or do you think this approach is certain to fail? What would be an alternative approach?
4. Has pleasure had too large, or too small, a role in your life? What do you think has contributed to this?