

## PURSUING PLEASURE—FINDING BOREDOM

God intended us to enjoy His creation.  
But we need to be good stewards of our pleasures.

by Dr. Gene Edward Veith

Reprinted with permission from the February, 2001 issue of The Lutheran Witness

### “I’m bored.”

He has a room full of action figures, video games, cable TV, a VCR, interactive CD-ROM virtual-reality simulators and a fully loaded computer with Internet access. But he doesn’t “have anything to do.”

Does this remind you of your children—or, of yourself as a child? Perhaps. But boredom is more than an irritation in child-raising. It has been called a *major spiritual problem*, one that is particularly characteristic of our time. Boredom is often the motivation for adultery and divorce, abuse of alcohol or drugs—even suicide.

The ancient moralists associated boredom with sloth—one of the seven deadly sins. They considered it a form of spiritual laziness, an ungrateful lack of interest in what God has ordained.

But the ancients do not seem to have been as bored as we are. The word did not even enter the English vocabulary until the age of enlightenment of the 18th century.

Boredom is a chronic symptom of a pleasure-obsessed age. When pleasure becomes one’s number-one priority, the result, ironically, is boredom. The ceaseless attempt to rekindle pleasure in the face of boredom can lead to moral degeneration.

Even innocent pleasures can, if we let them, lead us away from God. Like all of God’s material gifts, pleasure requires good stewardship.

### Diminishing returns

“He who is full loathes honey,” Solomon observed, “but to the hungry even what is bitter tastes sweet (Prov. 27:7). In other words, pleasant things lose their appeal when overdone, while desire can make even bad things seem attractive. “If you find honey, eat just enough—too much of it, and you will vomit” (Prov. 25:16).

These Bible passages clearly warn us that there is a law of diminishing returns when it comes to pleasure. The more we seek pleasure for its own sake, the less we will have. And that can have catastrophic moral consequences for those who insist on indulging themselves with no restraint. What once gave pleasure will soon fail to satisfy. The experience must become more and more extreme to yield the desired sensation.

This unconstrained pursuit of pleasure can lead to physical and, certainly, spiritual death. Heroin addicts take bigger and bigger doses to achieve an ever-diminishing “high.” Eventually, they take so much that it kills them.

Movies once titillated with subtle innuendoes. Today, they are more explicit just to keep their audiences entertained.

Consumers of pornography soon tire of nudity; they want to see sex, then perverted sex. Since it is the breaking of taboos that gives them a thrill, they must keep stepping over the line. And the line keeps moving. Those who are jaded at this level sometimes take the next step of acting out their fantasies in real life.

### **Must we be Puritans?**

The Puritans, the Reformers, the early church theologians were not just worried about sinful pleasures. They were concerned about even the innocent pleasures of life. In Book 10 of *The Confessions*, Augustine confessed his sinfulness in enjoying his food too much and in becoming distracted by the beauties of nature. In one passage, he even admitted his guilt in enjoying church music too much.

Such scrupulous self-denial seems almost comical today. There is nothing sinful about enjoying a hymn. The Ten Commandments do not require bland cooking. Surely such self-denial is too extreme, perhaps even legalistic. Certainly, those who have been redeemed by Christ have a great freedom and are liberated from regulations that say, “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!” (Col. 2:21).

And yet, Augustine was no legalist. Nor were the Reformers and Puritans who sometimes wrote in a similar vein. It would be presumptuous for us—with our soft lifestyles and hedonistic culture—to dismiss what these spiritual giants have to say.

Augustine was not condemning pleasure as such, anymore than he was condemning church music. He said that sometimes, when the choir sang the Psalms, he got so caught up in the beautiful melody that he neglected the words of Scripture that the song meant to proclaim. The pleasure he received distracted him from the true object and purpose of worship. Augustine realized that worship is not supposed to be entertainment, the equivalent of a concert or a nightclub.

He was simply describing with remarkable honesty and accuracy his own psychological struggle with his sinful nature. After he described how he had sinned—allowing himself to be distracted by the beauty of the music in church—he admitted that he also sinned in being too strict, in allowing himself to want the music to be eliminated altogether. Whether he was too lenient or too strict, too self-indulgent or too self-righteous, he was a sinner—a dilemma resolved only by the all-forgiving grace of God.

Innocent pleasures could be problematic for Augustine insofar as they made him concentrate on himself, tempting him to indulge his own desires instead of honoring the

will of God. The flavor of good food or the beauties of nature or of the arts could cause him to focus on the *creation* and to forget about the *Creator*.

Thus, even innocent pleasures can shut out God, insulating us into our own little self-indulgent worlds and weakening our ability to undergo the suffering and self-denial that are often demanded of Christ's disciples.

### **Pleasure is not forbidden**

Praising God for His works and thanking Him for His benefits can sanctify earthly pleasures. "For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving" (1 Tim. 4:4).

We must simply be good stewards of our pleasures. By God's design, *excessive* indulgence soon turns to ashes. Boredom is a sign that nothing earthly will satisfy us. God, on the other hand, gives us access to an infinite reservoir of joy: "You have made known to me the path of Life; You will fill me with joy in Your presence, with eternal pleasures at Your right hand" (Ps. 16:11).

Dr. Gene Edward Veith Jr. is professor of English at Concordia University Wisconsin, Mequon, Wis.