

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# AN APPETITE FOR GOD

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For years now—decades, actually—I’ve enjoyed *Sports Illustrated* every week (except for the deplorable, pandering, exploitative swimsuit issue). When I get the mail on Thursdays, I tend to lose all awareness of the world around me. Time stops. Only something significant like an earthquake or the smell of chocolate could get my attention. I’ve been known to stand there at the mailbox for long periods of time, oblivious to everything but sports.

One Thursday a few years ago I was walking back from the mailbox, eager to sit down and read the latest issue, when I was interrupted by a clear impression in my spirit. Brief, quiet—but unmistakable. “You want to read that magazine more than my Word,” whispered the voice.

My initial reaction was to disagree and dismiss this as an unwarranted guilt trip. But with a sense of grief I recognized that God had spoken. And, as always, he was right.

Slowly, subtly, I had transferred my enthusiasm from God’s Word to *Sports Illustrated* and the daily sports page. It wasn’t that I had stopped spending time in the Word and prayer. Those remained consistent. But though my “eating habits” appeared healthy, my spiritual appetite was gone.

Our spiritual appetite is a product of our regeneration. If we don’t cultivate that desire, however, it gradually subsides. The result? Individuals who are dull of hearing and no longer pursue God and his purpose with the same intensity. They may be as faithful as ever in serving and attending meetings, but they’re no longer hearing God’s voice. They maintain the principles, but no longer experience God’s presence.

Most of us are very aware of our physical appetites. So are advertisers. Even if I’ve just gotten up from the dinner table, a seafood commercial can instantly make me hungry all over again. And when I’m at the local mall, the smell wafting out

### **For Further Study:**

Read the exhortation given to the Ephesian church in Revelation 2:1-7. What was God’s complaint against this church? How serious was the situation? (see verses 4-5)

of Mrs. Field's Cookies is devastating. Thirst works the same way—a hard game of basketball or a jalapeno pepper creates a serious need. At least three times a day I'm in touch with my physical appetites, or they are in touch with me.

But our spiritual appetites are less demanding. My soul doesn't rumble and growl the way my stomach does when empty. Also, I can find myself deceived into assuming I have some vast, endless reserve of spiritual strength which will sustain me indefinitely. With that mindset, I could be suffering from spiritual malnutrition and not even know it.

## Symptoms of Disease

In Matthew 5:6, Jesus provides us with a thermometer for checking our spiritual health: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be

“ If you're not hungry, you're not healthy.

”  
— Arthur Wallis

filled.” Let's be honest. How is your spiritual appetite at present? Are your devotions characterized by the intense desire Jesus describes in this verse? Has the past year seen an increase or decrease in

your appetite for God, his presence, his righteousness, and his Word?

This exercise is not meant to condemn or provoke legalistic introspection (although it *is* meant to convict, where needed). God loves and accepts us on the basis of Christ's finished work—period. Then, having laid a solid foundation of justification by grace through faith, God desires that we press on to develop our relationship with him. Just as we submit to periodic medical exams to check our physical health, we need to monitor our spiritual health at regular intervals. Loss of appetite, whether physical or spiritual, is symptomatic of disease. And where our hearts are involved, it is a “disease” that hides itself very well.

If your hunger has subsided, it is imperative that you seek God's diagnosis and make whatever changes are necessary—no matter how drastic. Your condition requires immediate care.

As you seek God, he may reveal a specific sin. (If so, deal with it radically.) But often you will find that what has decreased your hunger and thirst for righteousness is a normally innocent activity, a typically harmless pastime. It's not inherently evil, but it has *become* an evil for us, because we have allowed it to take too high a priority in our

**Meditate on Psalm 42:1-2.** Imagine the extreme thirst described here. Is it possible that you could experience such an intense longing for God?

**1** What are your vital signs? Use this self-diagnostic test to check your spiritual health.

(H=Healthy, Q=Questionable, S=Sick)

	H	Q	S
Heart (Pr 4:23)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Eyes (Ps 123:1-2; Heb 12:2)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ears (Pr 2:1-2; Is 50:4)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lungs (Ps 150:6)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Blood pressure (Php 4:6-7)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Oral hygiene (Jas 3:3-10)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hand-eye coordination (Jas 2:14-17)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Body odor (2Co 2:14-16)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**For Further Study:**

When young King Josiah discovered and studied God’s Word, he took radical action against Judah’s idolatrous practices (2 Kings 22:1-23:25). If the Holy Spirit revealed idols in your life, would you be willing to follow Josiah’s lead?

lives. We have adopted it as an idol, and the Lord himself is no longer our passion and priority. Instead, we spend our limited time and energy in the worship of false gods. Yet our God is a jealous God who will specifically confront anything that affects our passion for him.

The Scripture says, “let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles...” (He 12:1). In the next section we will look at some of the more subtle hindrances Christians often encounter. Prepare yourself to be challenged. And purpose in your heart now that nothing—absolutely nothing—will dull your appetite for God.

**Time Bandits**

The development of your spiritual life should take precedence over all else. If something is important to us, our schedules will reflect that, and a close look at how we spend our time is a sure indication of what we have built our

lives around. So if we are not taking the necessary time to pursue God via the spiritual disciplines, it simply means some other activity has become more important to us.

Here are some of the activities which most frequently compete with what could otherwise be spiritually productive time:

**Television.** I can almost hear the groans. You don’t need me to tell you that Christians should exercise great care in choosing what we watch on TV. But it’s equally important to monitor *how much* we watch. For many of you, television is more of a habit than you would like to admit (and if you can’t admit it, you won’t change it).

It takes time to cultivate holiness. That’s why I’ve chosen not to get any of the cable-TV sports channels. For me it would be a daily temptation and distraction. It would interfere with my practice of the spiritual disciplines, and I don’t want that to happen.

What will it take for you? Disconnecting your cable service? Watching one football game on Sundays rather than two? Throwing the TV set into the nearest dumpster? Skipping television completely for a month? Take whatever-

### PRIME TIME HOLINESS

The television industry calls evenings and weekends, when most people are free to watch their programs, “prime time.” The problem is that prime time television viewing conflicts with the prime time for Christians to cultivate the habits of holiness...

Early on I learned that our family did not fit into commercial breaks or after eleven p.m. From our frustration we realized that we could choose either family time or TV time. Together we chose family time and turned the television off.

— David McKenna

I’m learning that people can hate a lot of television, hate their own viewing habits, hate what it does to them and their families, and still think it’s bizarre that anybody wants to get rid of it.<sup>1</sup>

— Jerry Mander

The Church would be revolutionized if Christians would reverse the amount of time they spend on two things: watching TV and reading their Bible.

— Derek Prince

**Meditate on Ephesians 5:15-17.**  
Do you view time with the sense of urgency Paul describes here?

er action is necessary to make sure you have this habit under control.

At best, this week’s prime-time attraction will affect you for a week or two. By contrast, if you turn off the TV and spend that same time slot practicing the spiritual disciplines, you will be affected for eternity.

So go ahead—try it. All you’ll miss is the latest TV show or movie (most of which are well worth missing anyway). In its place you will be positioning yourself to hear the voice of God and experience intimacy with your Father.

**Videos and movies.** A few years ago I read a magazine article confirming my worst fears on the subject of videos, movies, and the church:

While Hollywood films have become an integral part of contemporary society, most Christians would say that they neither go to the movies nor watch television. Yet that

assertion is a myth. Actually, most Christian households watch the same movies and the same television programming in the same percentages as non-Christians. The only difference is that Christians add a portion of religious programming to their viewing diet.<sup>3</sup>

Ted Baehr, a Christian film critic quoted in the same article, says, “The overwhelming majority of Christians in the U.S. have the same media habits as the non-Christian population.”

Do you hear that? Not a handful of particularly weak believers, but *the overwhelming majority*. If this is accurate, it’s unacceptable.

It doesn’t surprise me that bored, directionless unbelievers constantly distract themselves with movies. But

“ Have you ever spent an evening or a Saturday with your eyes glued to the television? You should do a dozen things, but you keep gawking at the inane objects wiggling before you. Afterwards, you sense an empty feeling in your stomach knowing you have spent four or five utterly wasted hours and you will never again have those hours back to use.<sup>2</sup>

”  
— Jerry White

why is it that Christians are sitting bug-eyed in front of the big screen just as often?

Obviously, some movies are worth seeing. (Most of these, unfortunately, were done before 1950, so get used to enjoying black and white.) But if we were honestly to evaluate the majority of today's films it would be two thumbs down. They simply lack redemptive qual-

ities. They don't contribute to our pursuit of godliness. In fact, they desensitize us to sin and subtly erode our desire to pursue God.

I have no desire to be the Church's equivalent of Siskel

and/or Ebert. Instead, let me encourage you to develop biblical criteria for evaluating movies. Here are two verses that will help you gain discernment regarding entertainment: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1Co 10:31). "[G]ive thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1Th 5:18).

Allow these biblical principles to sharpen your discernment and determine your viewing priorities. If you can't watch a particular movie to the glory of God, don't. If you can't give God thanks for the TV show you're

watching, stop watching it.

**Hobbies and sports.** The biblically informed Christian recognizes that time for leisure is a gift from God. But that's far different from "working for the weekend." In a culture that curses Mondays and worships Fridays, we should continually assess whether our leisure time has taken on too high a priority.

I have no doubt God takes pleasure when a woman decorates her home, or a father attends a football game with his son. Yet as I listen to people rave on about their favorite hobby or a particular sports team, I sometimes discover a corresponding lack of passion for Jesus and the church. These enthusiasts apparently invest lots of time into this area of interest, but they just can't seem to find

**2** Would you be willing to have all the movies you have seen in the past six months printed in next week's church bulletin? Why or why not?

**Meditate on**

**1 Corinthians 10:23.**

Too many Christians get hung up on a system of do's and don'ts. What litmus test does Paul recommend for evaluating our activities?

“ One of the significant measures of a person's spiritual commitment is what he does with his discretionary or leisure time.<sup>4</sup>

— Jerry White

**For Further Study:**

If you'd like a biblical view on the importance of work, read 2Th 3:6-13; Ac 18:3, 20:34-35; 1Co 4:12; and 1Th 2:9.

“ When we consider the question of our occupation, we must not lose sight of the big picture. As the Puritans insisted, our primary calling is to live a godly life. Our occupation is not the most important thing in life, though our own culture would have us believe that it is. No job that hinders our spiritual development can be the right one. And if the personal satisfaction we find in our job leaves a lot to be desired, we must remember that it is, after all, a secondary consideration to the life of faith and holiness.<sup>5</sup>

— Leland Ryken

time for the spiritual disciplines or regular participation in their local church.

We are commanded to “find out what pleases the Lord,” (Ep 5:10) and do it. Can you imagine that God is pleased when our love for

sports or hobbies is stronger than our love for him?

**Careers.** With increasing intensity, corporate America is demanding excessive allegiance from its work force. Men and women are expected to sacrifice anything—time, family, integrity—in exchange for upward mobility. As you can imagine, devotion to the Lord and his Church aren't considered as valid priorities, if they are considered at all.

This is not to encourage laziness or irresponsibility, nor am I bashing anyone who seeks to honor God through diligent service on the job.

Work is a gift from God and a significant part of his call on our lives. He uses our work as a way to meet financial needs, develop our character, and advance the gospel.

My concern is for those who have allowed career to eclipse their passion for Jesus Christ and his kingdom. Over time, they have lost their radical edge. They are no longer hearing God's voice consistently. They substitute “quality time” with their families for “quantity time.”

They attend church, but their hearts are at the office.

I'm privileged to serve a church filled with people who have as their passion and priority God and his purpose, not

their careers. There's Joann, who graduated from M.I.T. with a degree in architecture. Rather than making big money at a prestigious firm, she has chosen to work free-lance in order to care for people in the church. Ed could be retired and fishing his life away in Florida. Instead, he serves others through his involvement with the

**3** How many hours, on average, do you spend each week on the job? (Homemakers included)

- 30-40 hours     40-50 hours  
 50-60 hours     60-80 hours  
 More than 80 hours

**Meditate on Acts**

**2:37-41.** In response to Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost, about 3,000 people—including many foreigners who were just visiting Jerusalem for Passover—were added to the church. Imagine how many of them sacrificed careers at home in order to participate in God’s purpose.

church’s marriage-counseling team, and oversees the teaching-tape ministry. Larry travels the country for the federal government, but makes a point of adjusting his schedule so that his leadership of a small group and attendance at Sunday meetings are not needlessly interrupted. Many in our church have turned down promotions because they involved relocation.

People like this aren’t interested in attracting attention to themselves. They just want to serve, and they haven’t allowed the culture to seduce them. While pursuing excellence in their work, they haven’t let that work distract them from their primary priority and passion—Jesus Christ and his advancing kingdom. Their selfless example provokes me on a daily basis.

This kind of radical obedience should be the norm. God is establishing churches that are full of people fully prepared to climb off the career ladder—should God direct them to—because they want to build something that is far more meaningful and significant. These men and women won’t allow themselves to be jerked around by corporate transfers, compiling possessions and positions at the expense of their relationships with God, their family, and their church. Nor will they have any regrets when God one day summarizes their lives with a resounding,

“Well done!”

**4** Congratulations! You’ve been offered a significant promotion. It comes with a huge salary increase, and puts you in line for an even better job in just a few more years. This is it ... the big time awaits!

There’s just one little catch. To take the job you will have to relocate to another city 1,500 miles away.

How would you rank the following factors in terms of their importance in shaping your decision?

(1=highest priority, 6=lowest priority. Give each factor a different ranking)

- \_\_\_\_\_ Salary and benefits
- \_\_\_\_\_ Price of real estate
- \_\_\_\_\_ Career advancement
- \_\_\_\_\_ Church
- \_\_\_\_\_ Climate/geography
- \_\_\_\_\_ Proximity to family/friends

**Initial Sacrifice, Eternal Reward**

Has anything diminished your appetite—your passion—for God? It could be something minor, something that appears insignificant. A fascination with news, for example. An opportunity for promotion. An intriguing hobby. A dream vacation. Something so seemingly justifiable that you haven’t even thought of reevaluating it.

But here’s the issue: Is it competing with God as your primary passion? Once you recognize that something—anything—is hindering your growth in godliness, please don’t waste any time in attacking and avoiding it.

As we remove these hindrances, let’s replace them with the spiritual

“ God has given us the Spiritual Disciplines as a means of receiving His grace and growing in godliness.... We have learned that the Spiritual Disciplines are scriptural paths where we may expect to encounter the transforming grace of God.<sup>6</sup>

— Donald Whitney

disciplines of prayer, meditation, Bible study, fasting, confession, and solitude. What may initially seem like a sacrifice won't compare to the reward of intimacy with the One who made us for himself. ■

#### GROUP DISCUSSION

1. We've all seen images of starving children. What signs would indicate that a Christian is starving spiritually?
2. Discuss how seemingly innocent activities can become idols in our lives.
3. How can we respond to conviction without getting trapped by guilt?
4. Is it possible to be spiritually hungry without *feeling* ravenous for God?
5. How do you react to Jerry Mander's quote about television on page 82?
6. Suppose you were offered a job transfer with a 20% salary increase. What steps would you take in making a decision?
7. What is the difference between rest and leisure?
8. If you were to list your dreams on one side of a sheet of paper and God's purposes on the other side, how would they compare?
9. Do you sense a need to increase your appetite for God? What first step can you take?

#### RECOMMENDED READING

*Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* by John Piper (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1986)

*A Call to Spiritual Reformation* by D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992)

*Religious Affections* by Jonathan Edwards (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Book Publishers, 1996)



## NOTES

1. Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments For The Elimination of Television* (New York: Wm. Morrow & Co., 1978).
2. Jerry White, *The Power of Commitment* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1985), p.67.
3. Mike Yorkey, *Citizen* magazine, January, 1989
4. Jerry White, *The Power of Commitment*, p.68.
5. Leland Ryken, *Work and Leisure in Christian Perspective* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1987), p.151.
6. Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1991) pp.16 & 28.