

5

The Pursuit of Pleasure

Most of us have never encountered some of the most common first-century social institutions, for example, patronage/clientage, household slavery, a resident foreign army. And conversely, first-century Palestinians would not share some of our most common institutional experiences, for example: voting, public education, free choice of spouses and careers. The challenge, then, is to imagine ourselves “into” the world of the people we encounter in the New Testament. This requires conceptualizing scenarios – ways of acting, thinking, valuing, perceiving, and structuring the world – appropriate to their life-world.

—K. C. Hanson and Douglass E. Oakman¹

Amazing Grace

As we saw in the previous chapter, this remarkable father in Jesus’ story responds to the shameful (and outrageous) insubordination of both of his sons with amazing grace and mercy. Instead of banishing the younger son from the family, and severely reprimanding the elder son, he amazingly grants the younger son’s request and divides his estate between both sons. Incredulously, the elder brother does not protest receiving his share. In great haste to leave, the younger son deeply discounts the value of his inheritance portion (including the land), which breaches his relationship with the community. This allows him to quickly liquidate his inheritance so he can head off to a morally (but not necessarily geographically) far place with cash in hand. With the next sentence in this masterful short story, Jesus lets us in on the outcome of this younger son’s pursuit of pleasure:



And there he squandered his resources, living an abandoned, dissolute life.
Luke 15:13c Wuest

A New Start

One might wonder if in the beginning, the younger son did intentionally have an undisciplined, irresponsible lifestyle as his objective as he headed off to his Greco-Roman destination? With the ultra-conservative, button-down nature of observant Judaism as a backdrop, perhaps this younger son just wanted to have a little fun, something that can be so easily rationalized in our own minds. I remember the convoluted thinking of my college days when I easily reasoned: I know I need to follow Jesus someday, but not right now because I haven’t had the time or the opportunity to have

any fun yet. Well, the notion of having a little fun can easily expose a person to some seemingly small, momentary, and innocuous pleasures. And being exposed to pleasures of that ilk can easily lead to dabbling in somewhat greater pleasures; likewise not seemingly dangerous at first glance, until you partake. And so, before you know it, the accelerator for greater and greater pleasure gets pressed closer and closer to the floor board.

New Friends

When the younger son got to his destination, he quickly found some pleasure seeking Greco-Roman (and maybe even some Hellenistic Jewish) companions who were willing to help him spend his resources and immerse himself in pleasures at the Roman baths, gymnasiums, circuses and amphitheaters. In fact, those around him appeared to actually like him, or so this younger son thought, and seemed to enjoy being with him. The multi-day banquets he hosted for his new “friends” were certainly enjoyable and soon became “the talk of the town.” So different from austere Capernaum where their idea of having “fun” was to spend hours discussing Torah and reciting the Oral Tradition from memory.

A Dulled Conscience

In the beginning, this younger son probably thought he had actually found some new “good” friends, but in the end they turned out to be pleasure parasites (discernment is one of the first things to go when pleasure becomes a priority). Like that proverbial frog being slowly heated up in a kettle of water, this younger son could not sense what was happening to him, until the water was boiling and it was too late. The dulling of his discernment, the suppression of his conscience, and the amnesia of his memory were all conse-

quences of his narcissistic lifestyle that allowed him to (mostly) forget his past. The pursuit of pleasure serves as an anesthetic to our conscience deadening our notions of right and wrong which cause us to forget who we are and where we came from. Pleasure also heightens our sense of narcissism, a sense that other people (and things) exist to give us pleasure and thus make us “oblivious to our own shame or totally unconcerned about it.”²

Traveling Alone

Did you notice that this younger son appears to have left home alone? Thus, he had no one alongside him to serve as his conscience or reality check when needed. As a result, no one was there who lovingly cared enough about him to confront his priorities and decisions and bring him back to his senses when he began to drift. Left to his own devices, and absent any accountability, he fell victim to the “pleasure principle.” Like many a professional athlete who has the funds to afford the pursuit of pleasure (at least for awhile), it didn’t take him long to become caught in the vortex of his pleasure seeking. If we could have asked him, “How much pleasure will it take to satisfy you,” he most likely would have replied, “Just a little bit more.” Such is the progressive allure and the narcotic grip of the “pleasure principle.”

Parenthetically here, we should stop and observe yet another aspect of the wisdom of Jesus. Remember when He intentionally sent out His disciples in pairs (Mark 6:7)? Dispatching them in that way creates built-in accountability, encouragement and support. For “iron to sharpen iron,”³ someone else needs to be nearby for metal-to-metal contact to occur!

What Really Happened?

What kind of a lifestyle did the younger son

embrace in his new found home away from home? Let's take a look at how different translators have handled this phrase:

There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. (The Message)

There he squandered his estate with loose living. (NAS)

And there he squandered his wealth with a wild lifestyle. (NET)

There wasted his substance with riotous living. (KJV)

Where he squandered his wealth in the wildest extravagance. (J.B. Phillips)

There are two key words in this sentence that shape our understanding. The first is the Greek word *dieskorpisen* which has typically been translated as *squandered* or *wasted*. K. Bailey suggests it is best understood as *scattering*; e.g., the scattering of grain in the winnowing process or the scattering of sheep in a field.⁴ J. MacArthur concurs with the root meaning of *scattering* but gives it an emphasis of “spending his inheritance in the pursuit of wickedness” by indulging in “gross immorality.”⁵ The basis for MacArthur's emphasis seems to be the accusation made later in the story by the elder brother in verse 30 that his younger brother had *wasted his father's money on harlots*.

The second key word in this sentence is *zon asotos* which has typically been translated as *loose living* and which is probably best understood as *spendthrift* or *carefree living*.⁶ It is a word that does not necessarily connote debauchery. Bailey contends that *zon asotos* can reference a wasting away of resources on personal pleasure⁷ as distinct from debauchery.

Bailey and MacArthur frame two different ways of characterizing the lifestyle of the younger son in this far place he has chosen for himself. In terms of the story Jesus is unfolding, does it matter whether the younger son's lifestyle was 1) an irresponsible and undisciplined one, or 2) a lifestyle rooted in gross immorality? And if one characterization needs to be chosen, which emphasis is most appropriate for the overall contextual development of Jesus' story? For now, let's consider Eugene Petersen's characterization in *The Message* as best encapsulating Jesus' original meaning:

There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had.

How Bad Was It? – The Debauchery Issue

I sometimes think we fail to identify (enough) with the younger son in this story (at least at this point) because of the extreme debauchery we Westerners have assumed (rightly or wrongly) regarding his lifestyle in this far place. Perhaps because we think we have not exhibited those particular kinds of excesses in our lives, we fail to sufficiently identify with this younger son and thus miss some of the implications waiting for us here.

When the elder brother made his *he wasted your money with harlots* accusation, we need to ask: Is his statement factual, or is it hyperbole rooted in his own compassionless, legalistic morality that exaggerates the shortcomings of others while defining his own flaws as virtues? Is his assertion true, or is it an unfair characterization that flows from the anger and resentment he has toward his younger brother? One might wonder: How would he even know whether or not his younger brother cavorted with prosti-

tutes? After all, he wasn't there. And how might his (unwarranted?) accusation have implicitly shaped the traditional approach of Western translators/commentators in describing his younger brother's lifestyle?

What Can We Surmise?

It is fairly easy to surmise (whether justified or not) that the younger son did indulge himself in sexual debauchery. After all, back then the number of pleasures available to a young man was more limited than the array of pleasures available today. And in the Decapolis, prostitution was common and was even institutionalized in some pagan temple rituals. Furthermore, he was a young man of means without any moral or social constraints. So it seems like an obvious conclusion, right? But what if that surmised outcome is flawed? Would it change in any way what this parable confronts us with? To test that, let's take a brief look at this question from another viewpoint.

Another Perspective

K. Bailey suggests our traditional understanding that the younger son "spent it (money) in immoral ways is built on his older brother's slanderous remarks." Bailey contends that the "parable itself is silent" as to how much immorality of behavior was actually involved. As previously stated, he suggests another way to view the younger son's lifestyle, namely that the younger son was just "carefree and a spendthrift" with a "sense of wasting money on personal pleasure." Bailey goes on to observe that "generosity is a supreme virtue, coveted by all" in the Middle East. By giving gifts and hosting extravagant banquets, this younger son would have been demonstrating his generosity, which Bailey suggests is the "highest kind of pleasure for such an individual" in that culture.⁹

Hitting Closer to Home

This different (non-debauchery) view of the nature of the extravagance and wastefulness of the younger son is actually more challenging for us today. It reminds us that one does not have to be given to extreme pursuits of immoral pleasure to be "lost." Being self-absorbed will eventually get you to the same place. Or maybe it helps to look at it from the other (spiritual) side of the coin: being self-absorbed in your own thing is as bad as if you have lived an immoral, dissipating life. Common to both of these lifestyle options is a failure to invest one iota in the Kingdom of God.

Remember Jesus' parable of the Talents¹⁰ and the parable of the Ten Minas?¹¹ In both, the servant who did absolutely nothing with his master's endowment was severely rebuked when his master returned. In burying/hiding his talent/minas, both servants exhibited none of the extravagant dissipation of the younger brother's lifestyle in Jesus' Luke 15 story. These servants didn't do anything "immoral" per se, at least to our traditional way of thinking. What both servants did do (because of their flawed view of their Master and his priorities and objectives) was absolutely nothing to advance their master's interests with the resources he had entrusted to them during his absence! Thus, the end result was the same – the Kingdom of God was not advanced.

From this perspective, the existence of debauchery as a lifestyle does not need to be resident in Jesus' story for the parable to either "work" or "speak." There are enough contextual excesses already in the story such as asking for your inheritance while your father is still alive, selling the land, breaching the implied "covenant" with the community, for this parable to be suffi-

ciently full of outrageous excesses. Whether the younger son did or did not cavort with prostitutes is not central to the story Jesus is weaving, even though the elder son may think so!

Where to Put the Emphasis?

Well then, which younger son lifestyle perspective should we embrace in this parable? The traditional immoral living perspective as suggested by MacArthur, or Bailey's suggestion that the younger son may just have been pursuing a life dedicated to typical hedonistic pleasures?

Sometime ago, a friend suggested to me that when you have two (or more) interpretive options in the Scripture that seem to equally "fit" the passage, always embrace the one that requires more of you rather than the one that requires less of you (better to be safe than sorry).

If we take that advice, it is not essential to the story whether this son engaged in a self-absorbed lifestyle or an immoral lifestyle. Both are wasteful. Both are narcissistic. Both are sinful. Both lifestyles do nothing to advance God's Kingdom. Neither has an Eternal perspective in view. Neither approach "redeems the time" as Paul would put it.¹² And therein resides the challenge for you and me. What are we doing with our time and resources that God has loaned us for a season? Because of these kinds of implications, I have personally chosen to see the younger son's (sinful) lifestyle as one of being more self-absorbed with what gives him pleasure and satisfaction in life than the pursuit of debauchery per se. For me, looking at it that way hits much closer to home and therefore asks much more of me.

Implications for Today

Being self-absorbed in your own pursuits is not unique to the First Century, and narcissistic behavior is not just confined to our 21st-century

secular culture. The world has indeed been successful in squeezing the church into its self-absorbed, narcissistic mold. Ever listen closely to the conversations in our church hallways? There you hear the word "my" being disproportionately used, e.g., my gifts, my call, my blessings, my ministry, even my Jesus. We seem to have missed the Baptist's realization that *He must increase and I must decrease*.¹³ I sometimes think in our church life we should ban the use of the word "my" for six months substituting "His" or "Him" instead.

These increasingly self-centered tendencies in "believers" has given rise to "spiritual narcissism," what some feel may become the malignant condition of the Western evangelical church. This notion of the pew consistently looking for "what's in it for **me**?" has pulled many a church into therapeutic consumerism with its emphasis on how to be a good parent, have a successful marriage, recover from divorce, manage your finances, etc. This implicitly fosters the notion that being a disciple of Jesus is much more about my personal self-development and self-fulfillment (Dr. Phil takes Jesus' rightful place!) than it is about picking up our crosses daily and following Him, no matter what. Nothing wrong with any of these "how to" programs so long as in the aggregate they don't take all of our time and energy away from nurturing a passion for biblical literacy (where God reveals Himself) and studying/pondering/ meditating on "who God is, what God cares about, and how God does things"¹⁴ so we can be transforming, glorifying disciples of Jesus.

No More Money

Suddenly one day the party was over. The money was suddenly gone. No more lavish banquets. No more extravagant gifts for his "friends." And soon thereafter, the "friends" became conspicu-

ously absent. He was indeed the captain of his own ship and wrecked his vessel (life) upon the rocks of pleasure. He left home to be free and paradoxically ended up becoming a prisoner to the “pleasure principle.” Another one of those spiritual “laws of gravity” that you cannot avoid was now manifesting itself:

For whatever a man is in the habit of sowing, this also will he reap; because the one who sows

*with a view to his own evil nature, from his evil nature as a source shall reap corruption.*¹⁵

In the next sentence, Jesus lets us in on the beginning of the inevitable consequences:

And having squandered all, there came a mighty famine in that country and he himself began to be in want.

And that is where we will continue next with this “greatest short story ever told.”

Reflections

- Can you relate to the “pleasure principle?” What observations from your experience would you add to describe its narcotic effect over time?
- How has your notion of what constitutes “having fun” changed over time? What wisdom would you now pass along to others who are just starting to “live life?”
- Have you had the experience of having “friends” drawn to you for what you could give or do for them rather than for who you are? Might you have also done that to others? What relational wisdom have you gained from those experiences?
- Have you ever traveled alone for a season? Conversely, have you ever traveled with another person (or two) into new situations, e.g., moving to a city, starting a new job? Contrast those two very different experiences and outcomes?

- Has accountability been, or is it a part of your life? What impact has that had on you?
- How did you react to the discussion about whether the younger son pursued a debauchery lifestyle as opposed to a self-absorbed, narcissistic lifestyle? From your perspective, are those significantly different lifestyles or essentially a distinction without a meaningful difference? How about when you consider that question from God's perspective?
- How did you react to the discussion about "spiritual narcissism" and "what's in it for me?" Would you agree or disagree with that characterization, and to what extent? Can you recognize any of those tendencies in yourself? In your church?
- Paul in Ephesians 5:15 exhorts us to be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but wise, making the most out of every opportunity. If you take a personal audit of your life in the last few months, are you mostly "redeeming the time" for God's Kingdom, or mostly wasting the time by focusing on yourself? Are you investing in God's Kingdom or in your kingdom? What does it mean to always see your life and everything around you from an Eternal perspective?
- If you suddenly received \$10,000,000, how do you think that would affect you? What might you end up doing with it? What might those future actions and decisions reveal about you?
- What takeaways are there for you from reflecting on this particular verse?

Sources and Notes

- 1 K.C. Hansen and Douglass Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998) 5.
- 2 John MacArthur, *A Tale of Two Sons* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008) 47.
- 3 Proverbs 27:17
- 4 Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Cross and the Prodigal* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1973) 41.
- 5 John MacArthur, *A Tale of Two Sons*, 61.
- 6 Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Cross and the Prodigal*, 41.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Cross and the Prodigal*, 41.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Matthew 25:14
- 11 Luke 19:11
- 12 Ephesians 5:15
- 13 John 3:30
- 14 A Favorite phrase of Dr. James C. Martin, Co-Founder of Preserving Bible Times
- 15 Galatians 6:7-8