

“AMERICAN IDOL #3 (IF IT FEELS GOOD, DO IT!)”

(2 Timothy 3:1-5)

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[East Cobb U.M.C.; 8-15-10]

–I–

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Read Text: 2 Timothy 3:1-5 and Pray.
2. [VIDEO INTRODUCTION TO SERIES (“American Idol” theme music & logo)]...

A– [READ POEM “Besetting Sin”...]

*“There came a gentle tapping ‘let me in!’*

*I opened and beheld a very little sin.*

*He entered with apologies and scarcely raised his eyes*

*As if abashed to contemplate tempting one so wise.*

*I found myself amused at this and set out to explore*

*This little cunning sin I’d let inside my door.*

*I petted him and teased him and gave him bread and wine,*

*Grew fond of him, then adopted him, this little sin of mine.*

*He twined around my heartstrings and grew so very dear*

*I loved him and assured myself he was too small to fear.*

*He soon spied out my weakness and therein was the rub,*

*He built himself a treadmill, my weakness at the hub.*

*With every revolution my darling little sin*

*Enlarged himself and multiplied over and over again.*

*At last he stooped and lifted me and placed me on his knee,*

*Now he is my besetting sin and makes a pet of me.”<sup>1</sup>*

B–Today we’re continuing our series on the idols of American culture by talking about the Idol of Pleasure<sup>2</sup> in which the quest for self-gratification takes the place of trust in God. (Refer to bulletin sermon notes...)

3. To begin, let me ask the question that many of you are already thinking: “**What’s wrong with a little pleasure?** Why is it that Christians seem to always be trying to keep people from having fun in life? What’s so wrong with a little fun?”

A–Well, first of all let’s be clear: good, clean fun/pleasure is *never* wrong – in fact, we Christians believe that since God is the Creator of *all* good things, then He created not only pleasure itself, but also created *us* (as human beings) with the capacity to enjoy and appreciate it! So, thank God He created us that way!

B–The problem is that when our pursuit of pleasure becomes an end *in and of itself* (instead of being a *means* to enjoy God and the life He gives), then it’s become an idol for us – ...

1–...Which why today’s message is NOT about the dangers of *pleasure* itself, but about the dangers of the *idolization* of pleasure.

2–The technical word for this in the English language is “*Hedonism*” – it’s when we start centering our life *around* pleasure & the pursuit of pleasure (or a particular form of it).<sup>3</sup>

3–And its dangerous *not* because it’s fun, but because it promises something it ultimately can’t deliver: (that is...) true happiness and fulfillment.<sup>4</sup>

4. The poem I read earlier in fact reminds us that very often our “little pleasures” don’t remain “little” for long – that even though some pleasures may *seem* harmless at first, if we’re not careful they can become unhealthy *addictions* that control and possess us.

A–For example, consider the fact that in America today, 1 out of every 16 adults (15 million) are alcoholics,<sup>5</sup> 8% (1 out of every 12) currently struggle with illegal drug use, and 47% have tried them in the past.<sup>6</sup>

1–What’s more is that an estimated 10-15% of adults are addicted to some form of pornography (1/3 of which are women!), and over 70% of men under age 35 view it at least once per month.<sup>7</sup>

2–And we could go on and on with further examples like the 70 million adults who are medically obese,<sup>8</sup> the 6 million who’re chronic gamblers,<sup>9</sup> the 45 million who smoke cigarette,<sup>10</sup> and who knows how many addicted to something as simple as caffeine!

B–And remember, too, that no one starts out thinking, “*When I grow up I want to be a drug addict, or an alcoholic, or have an addiction to porn.*” No! Most of these start out as harmless, “simple pleasures” that help us enjoy life and cope with stress.

C–But over time they gradually gain control of our hearts, minds and behaviors to the point where they sometimes become more important than our families, our jobs, and our faith – and *that* is where they’ve become a dangerous idol in our life.

5. In today’s scripture, Paul warns his young apprentice Timothy that this very thing is happening to many people in his day and time, and I think it’s remarkable how closely Paul’s description of *his* culture matches what’s happening in *our own* American culture today.<sup>11</sup>

**[Contemp. Service ONLY: Read 2 Timothy 3:1-5 from MSG version...]**

6. So what's the answer? **How can we keep pleasure** (which in itself is a *good* thing) **from becoming an idol in our life?** Or how can we break free of it if we're already addicted? Let me suggest three things based on today's scripture:

7. First I believe we need to **SEEK UNDERSTANDING** – that is: seek to understand the sources, nature and character of our particular struggle.

A–That's really one purpose of Paul's advice in today's scripture – to help Timothy understand the temptations that he's up against in his culture, and even in his own life.<sup>12</sup>

B–You see, part of fighting a successful war is knowing who and what the enemy is – knowing their strengths and weaknesses, as well as our own.

1–So in our own struggles, for example, it'll help us if we know what our own triggers for temptation are, so that we can avoid them when encountered.

2–It'll also help if we understand *where* they come from – e.g., was there something in our past that led us to unconsciously seek a particular pleasure as a coping tool for pain, hurt, insecurity, or loneliness?

C–And we can gain this insight/understanding in a variety of ways:

1–It could be through books or online articles that we read to help us understand the nature and character of our particular struggle.

2–It could be that we seek faith-based counselors or psychologists that can shed light on the “blind spots” of our lives by helping understand the sources of our struggle.

3–And it might some combination of these, but the point is that if we know the enemy we're up against, then we have better chance of overcoming him.

D–And yet, while understanding our struggle is a good *first* step, this by itself will *not* give us total victory – what we need for that is to take several more steps...

8. So, the next one is to **SEEK ACCOUNTABILITY** – that is... surround ourselves with other Christians who'll hold us accountable for our actions, behaviors, and even our faith.

A–If we read further in today's scripture<sup>13</sup> we'll hear Paul telling Timothy how he felt their relationship could help Timothy live a more godly life – in other words, he's setting forth an argument for the value of *covenant relationships* between Christian brothers & sisters.<sup>14</sup>

B–The early Methodists actually did this in a very effective way in their weekly small groups by holding each other mutually accountable to how they'd kept the three “General Rules” of the Christian life: (1) Do no harm; (2) Do good ; and (3) Do things that help you stay in love with God (like prayer, Bible study, and worship).<sup>15</sup>

C–Now, here at East Cobb UMC, we continue that tradition by offering several weekly covenant groups that function in this same way – one for men and several for women, but they each exist for support, encouragement, and mutual accountability not only for our *walk* of faith, but also for the specific ways we *live out* that faith as God’s people.

D–For that matter, each week I participate in a covenant group like this at another church, and I wouldn’t trade anything for it, because it’s a safe place that I don’t have to be “Pastor, Rev., Dr., or Preacher,” but just simply “Brian” with other Christian brothers who’ll love and challenge me to be my best.

E–And it’s here (in Christian accountability) that we *begin* to find real, genuine freedom in life.

9. And yet, I’d be wrong to tell you that understanding and accountability *alone* can keep us (or get us) free from the idol of pleasure, because they can’t! For that, we need a third and final step: ...learn to passionately **SEEK GOD**.

A–After telling Timothy to “*stay clear of/ avoid*” the evil that’s all around him,<sup>16</sup> Paul goes on to urge him to *practice* faith in ways that’ll help him grow closer to God.<sup>17</sup>

B–It’s as if he was telling Timothy, “*If you’ll seek the daily presence of God first, then you’ll have the spiritual power to be able to avoid temptation when it comes your way.*”<sup>18</sup>

C–Now unfortunately, though, too often today we think that all we need to do is to “*Just Say No*” to addictive pleasures like drugs or alcohol or porn.

1–But while that’ll sometimes work for a while, I guarantee you it *won’t last!*<sup>19</sup>

2–You see, Paul knew (as many of us need to) that the only way we’ll have *lasting* victory over our struggles with pleasure is when we admit that those struggles are *bigger* than we are, and are willing to throw ourselves into the arms of God.

D–It’s when we’re willing to be honest and say “*God, you know that I want this particular pleasure; But as much as I want it, I want you more*” – *that’s* the spiritual place where we’ll find ultimate victory.

1–Remember the words to the old song... “*Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face; and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace*”<sup>20</sup> – well, this is what it’s talking about!

2–When we seek to love GOD *more* than we love our favorite form of pleasure, then that pleasure begins to lose its control over us, and is put back in its *proper* place as a gift meant to help us live healthy and fulfilled lives.<sup>21</sup>

E–And this is simply another way of saying that the most effective way to avoid/fight the dangers of pleasure is to actively and passionately *seek God*.<sup>22</sup>

## -III-

9. So, just like in Paul's time, we're surrounded today by a culture that idolizes pleasure.

A–But Paul's advice to his young apprentice Timothy then about how to avoid/break free from it still works today: *Seek Understanding; Seek Accountability; and Seek God.*

B–And when we do these, we'll find that the mantra "*If It Feels Good, Do It!*" is replaced by a new one: "*If it brings glory to GOD, then do it with all your heart!*"

10. [PRAY: "*O God, thank you for the good gifts of pleasure that you created for us to enjoy in this life. But forgive us, though, when we've allowed our love for these pleasures to replace our love for you, making them an idol in our lives. For those of us who're caught up in the idolization of some of these pleasures, help us to seek to understand them, to find accountability regarding them, and to seek you more than them, so that we might find the freedom of your Holy Spirit from them, and that they might no longer exercise control over us. Lord, thank you that you are the God of freedom, and that those who walk daily with/in you are free indeed. – help this to be true for each of us here today. And we'll give you all the honor and thanks. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.*"]

### **ENDNOTES:**

1. Author Irene Holsted.
2. The dictionary defines pleasure as "*a state of gratification*" (Mirriam-Webster Online Dictionary, term "pleasure" at [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pleasure](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pleasure)).
3. Hedonism: "*the doctrine that pleasure or happiness is the sole or chief good in life*" (Mirriam-Webster Online Dictionary, term "Hedonism" at [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hedonism](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hedonism)).
4. The only one who can truly deliver these is *God Himself!* Early Christian leader Saint Augustine once prayed, "*Our hearts are restless, O God, until they rest in you.*"
5. From the website [www.learn-about-alcoholism.com/statistics-on-alcoholics.html](http://www.learn-about-alcoholism.com/statistics-on-alcoholics.html).
6. From the Centers for Disease Control data found at [www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/09.pdf#063](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/09.pdf#063).
7. From the article "Statistics on Pornography, Sexual Addiction and Online Perpetrators" at the TechMission Safe Family's website [www.safefamilies.org/sfStats.php](http://www.safefamilies.org/sfStats.php).
8. Another 58 million adults classified as at least "overweight." (Source: Website for "Just Pray NO!" Ltd. Worldwide Weekend of Prayer and Fasting at [www.justprayno.org/american\\_idols.htm](http://www.justprayno.org/american_idols.htm)).
9. From [www.clearleadinc.com/site/gambling-addiction.html](http://www.clearleadinc.com/site/gambling-addiction.html).
10. From the article "Understanding Nicotine Addiction," at the website <http://quitsmoking.about.com/od/nicotine/a/nicotineeffects.htm>.
11. Verse 5 unfortunately describes a lot of so called Christians today – people who "*hold to the outward form of godliness but deny its power.*" THE MESSAGE version translates this as people who "*make a show of religion, but behind the scenes they're animals.*"

12. Psalm 119:34 puts it this way, (MSG) “[O God], *give me insight so I can do what you tell me – my whole life one long, obedient response [to you].*” (NRSV) “[O God], *give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart.*”

13. Especially Verses 10, 14-15.

14. James 5:16 conveys this idea quite bluntly when it says... (MSG) “*Make this your common practice: confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you can live together whole and healed.*” (NRSV) “*Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.*”

15. These three rules were part of what was called the “Methodist Discipline.”

16. In Verse 5 where he says (MSG) “*Steer clear of these people*” (NRSV) “*Avoid them!*”

17. Find these in Verses 14-17, where Paul urges Timothy to “*continue in what you’ve learned and firmly believed...*”

18. James 4:7-8 puts it this way, (NRSV) “*Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.*” Listen to how the MESSAGE version says it... (MSG) “*Let God work his will in you. Yell a loud no to the Devil and watch him scamper. Say a quiet yes to God and he’ll be there in no time. Quit dabbling in sin. Purify your inner life. Quit playing the field.*”

19. This is often called trying to “gut it out” in our own strength, and at least in my experience, it’s where we usually fail to have victory over the idol of pleasure. Pastor and author John Piper once wrote that “*When you become so blind that the maker of galaxies and ruler of nations and knower of all mysteries and lover of our souls becomes boring, then only one thing is left -- the love of the world. For the heart is always restless. It must have its treasure: if not in heaven, then on the earth.*”

20. Lyrics by Helen Lemmel (1922), “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus” (#349 in [The United Methodist Hymnal](#)).

21. I’ve heard it said, “*If you spend your time doing the do-s, you won’t have time to do the don’ts.*” In other words, if we spend our time loving God and seeking after Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, we won’t have strength left to be toying around with the dangers of pleasure and/or sin! As an example, think about a glass filled with foul/bad air – what is the best way to get the foul air out of the glass? One way would be to vacuum it out. But a better (and easier) way is to simply fill it with something *else* (like water)!

That’s how “seeking God” works to help us overcome sin: the presence of God that we invite into our lives works to expel the sin within us (Read 1 John 4:18 as an example of this). Along these lines, founder of Methodism says that Christian holiness means “*Perfect love..., love excluding sin; love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul*” (Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” §1,¶9, Albert Outler, [John Wesley](#), p. 275.)

22. Read other scriptural examples of this admonition to seek God first in Psalm 27:4 & 8; 63:1; 105:4; 119:2 & 10; and Matthew 6:33.