

Pastor's Column



Recently I was reading a periodical I get each month which deals with religion and culture. In it were a few thoughts from Peter Whybrow, who is a professor of neuroscience and human behavior at UCLA, and author of the book *American Mania: When More Is Not Enough*. He writes:

It is the paradox of modernity that as choice and material prosperity increase, health and personal satisfaction decline. That is now accepted truth. And yet it is the rare American who manages to step off the hedonistic treadmill long enough to savor his or her good fortune. Indeed, for most of us, regardless of what we have, we want more, and we want it now.

The roots of this conundrum—this addictive striving—are found in our evolutionary history. As creatures of the natural world, having evolved under conditions of danger and scarcity, we are by instinct reward-seeking animals that discount the future in favor of the immediate present. As a species, we are biologically ill-suited to handle the seductive prosperity and material riches of contemporary America. A novel experience, it is both compelling and confusing.

Brain systems of immediate reward were a vital adaptation millennia ago when finding fruit was a rare delight, and dinner had the habit of running away or flying out of reach. But living now in relative abundance, when the whole world is a shopping mall and our appetites are no longer constrained by limited resources, our craving for reward—be that for money, the fat and sugar of fast food, or the novel gadgetry of modern technology—has become a liability, a hunger that has no bounds. Our nature has no built-in braking system. More is never enough.

For a brief moment during the exuberant years of the dot-com bubble in the 1990s, the American dream was made material. We focused on immediate gratification, ignoring future consequences. Shopping became the national pastime, and at all levels of society we hungered for more—more money, more power, more food, more stuff.

This incarnation of the American dream was dangerously addictive, and unsustainable. Before 1985 Americans saved on average about 9% of their disposable income; by 2005 the comparable savings rate was 0 as mortgage, credit-card, and other consumer debt rose to 127% of disposable income. With Uncle Sam similarly awash in red ink, America had transformed itself from the world's bank to a debtor nation. Adam Smith's invisible hand had lost its grip.

Someone once said that every human being has a God-shaped hole in their heart, and that our problem is that we constantly try to fill that hole in our hearts

with everything BUT God. I think that explains why as choice and material prosperity **increase**, personal satisfaction **decrease**. Having more and more stuff, doesn't fill the hole in our hearts, but only makes us more dissatisfied. Think about it. How much "stuff" fills **your** garage, **your** attic, **your** closet? Does owning more and more "stuff" make you happy? Does the immediate gratification of your desires really make you happy? Yet, this is the message that pervades our culture—more, more, more, now, now, now.

The message of the Bible is quite different. The Bible understands that human beings need various material things to be happy—like food, clothing and shelter. Without the basic material things we need to survive, we rapidly become very unhappy. But the Bible never confuses the material basis for happiness with happiness itself. Instead, the Bible is very clear that happiness is a blessing from God, not from material goods. To paraphrase Psalm 1:

Happiness does not come from following the way of the wicked,
or from following the well-worn path that common sinners take,
or from hanging out with those who scoff at God's ways,
No, happiness comes from taking delight in God's teachings,
from meditating on God's Way day and night.
People who follow God's Way are like trees planted by a river,
who bring forth fruit in its season,
whose leaves never wither—even during seasons of drought—
Because their happiness comes from God,
who makes them prosperous in all they do.

The Bible understands that the only thing that can fill the hole in the human heart is God. The only way to truly be happy is by following God's Way, seen in Jesus Christ.

This summer I got to enjoy many blessings that had nothing to do with the immediate gratification of my material desires. At the beginning of the summer I got to enjoy the immense joy of seeing our son Ian graduate from high school. No material possession could ever measure up to the pride and deep satisfaction I have in being the father of our four beautiful children and helping them to grow, mature and find their own way in the world.

At the end of June I helped my two sisters throw a surprise 80th birthday party for my father, attended by all my aunts and uncles. It brought me immense joy to see the look on his face when we all yelled, "Surprise!" No possession could ever take the place of the memories I have of both my parents, my deep appreciation of how they raised me and the deep mutual love we have for one another. The party was one way my sisters and I could express our gratitude to our father and his generation.

At the beginning of July I went backpacking with our sons Ian and Eric through

the extremely beautiful Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne river in Yosemite. Being surrounded by such spectacular and incomparable beauty only earned by the vigorous physical labor of backpacking could never be replaced by hanging a picture of Yosemite I bought at a store on my wall. Tackling this strenuous physical challenge with two of my sons created a bond between us and a lasting memory that no material possession could have created.

And for the past two months I have gone blackberry picking at least 8 times in order to make blackberry cobbler. While the labor of picking blackberries usually means that my fingers get stung with thorns, and my arms and legs get scratches that sometimes draw blood, I derive great joy from hand-making a cobbler and inviting friends and family to eat it with me. Picking the berries, making the dough and assembling it myself connects me with memories of my two grandmothers, who both were cobbler makers extraordinaire. Buying a cobbler at the store just wouldn't be the same.

What truly makes us happy are not the material possessions we accumulate during life, or the money we have. Of course, we are also physical beings. We do need material possessions to survive and thrive. For instance, I take great pride in our house and all the work we have done to it since we bought it 10 years ago. But it is not our house that truly makes me happy, but the home it provides for our family. And there are certain material things that I own that mean a lot to me, like my grandfather's pocket watch, my wedding ring, the pictures of our children as babies and toddlers and the wedding photos of Lynn and me in our living room. But the reason these possessions mean so much to me is because they remind me of the people who are dear to me and how blessed I am by their love. I also appreciate what money allows our family to do, like pay our regular bills, provide college tuition and take occasional vacations together. But it is not money itself that brings me happiness, but what it allows me to do. That is why the Bible says *the love of money* is the root of evil, not money itself.

When you think about what being part of our congregation means to you, I hope you think about how it helps support those invisible and intangible, but deeply important parts of your life. Where else can you come to hear God's Way proclaimed every week? Where else can you be reminded of what is truly important in life? Where else can you go to receive the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ — the love of God — and the fellowship and power of the Holy Spirit every week? The happiness offered by God when you are part of the church is different than the so-called "happiness" offered in the "real world." It doesn't fill your house with "stuff." Instead, it fills your heart with grace and peace.

I hope you also have "counted your blessings" this summer, like I have. And as we enter a new fall, I look forward to working with you on what is truly important in life!

Grace & Peace

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Hans". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'H'.