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January 21, 2019

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Christianity Today, December, 2010
WRESTLING WITH ANGELS | CT MAGAZINE

Can't Get No Satisfaction

Addiction is the spiritual disease of our time.
CAROLYN ARENDS / POSTED DECEMBER 9, 2010



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I've never met a potato chip I didn't like. Actually, I've never met a potato chip that didn't call my name from behind the pantry door until I was forced to eat it and every one of its salty companions. So when I heard the phrase "carbohydrate addiction," I knew nutritionists were on to something. It turns out there are foods that can actually *increase* your hunger when you consume them, creating an escalating, recurring need for the very substances that intensify the problem.

The reality of carb addiction is accepted more widely in popular culture than in scientific communities. But most people can verify anecdotally that some food only makes them hungrier.

It seems to me that this phenomenon symbolizes much of what plagues the human condition. We drink liquids that dehydrate us. We buy objects that require us to buy more objects. We make some money, ratchet up our lifestyle in response, and find we need more income to sustain us. The harder we work, the more work there is to do. And the harder we play, the more elusive the fun. Ask anyone working in Hollywood special effects, or in extreme sports, or in the sex trade industry, and all will tell you the same thing: Yesterday's thrill is today's old news. We always need *more*.

One of the hallmarks of addiction is "tolerance"—the experience of requiring an ever-increasing amount of a particular substance or behavior in order for it to satiate us. We recognize that dynamic indisputably in chemical dependencies. But it's harder to spot for those of us who are compulsive about work, food, approval, ministry, possessions, intimacy, social media, security, or any other number of more culturally acceptable addictions.

Gerald May was a psychiatrist whose work with chemically addicted people convinced him of two things: Addiction is, at root, a spiritual issue; and every human is addicted to some variety of substances, behaviors,

and thought patterns. In his classic *Addiction and Grace*, May argues that each of us has a profound desire for God. When that desire is inevitably frustrated or misdirected in a fallen world, we experience pain. We deal with that pain in two ways. We repress the longing, or we attach it to something else.

According to May, attachment “bonds and enslaves the energy of desire” to certain people, things, or behaviors until we are obsessed by unworthy masters who can never truly satisfy. Tragically, our attachment to anything other than God (even to things that are not themselves bad) uses up our desire for God. It truly “wastes” us.

May calls addiction “the spiritual disease of our time,” but it’s not an exclusively modern phenomenon. There’s a passage in Haggai that seems so shockingly current that it’s hard to believe it was written over 2,500 years ago. The Israelites had returned from their Babylonian exile to find the temple in ruins. They intended to rebuild it, but had their own places to fix and fields to replant; they were too busy.

“Is it a time,” God asked through the prophet, “for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin? ... Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it” (Hag. 1:4-6).

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Work that is unproductive, food and drink that don’t fill or quench, money that doesn’t last. The Israelites, to quote a much later poet, can’t get no satisfaction. God tells them that life is a treadmill of diminishing returns because they have neglected the temple, and the only way to enjoy the sort of productive, satisfying existence he intends for them is to spend time in that holy place once more.

Throughout Scripture, God continually develops the concept of the temple as the place he meets with his people. By the New Testament, it’s clear that the temple is now inside of us. So I read Haggai and begin to understand: Satisfaction comes only when I spend intentional time with God. It comes when that original longing for God—a desire that’s been mutated into a thousand splintering directions—gets redirected back to him.

Six hundred years after the Babylonian exile, Jesus addresses every problem Haggai describes. Crops don’t grow? Christ is the Vine, and we are the branches. Food and drink don’t satisfy? Jesus is the Bread of Life and Living Water. Clothes don’t warm? The Messiah alone can cover our sin. Wages disappear? Store up your treasures in heaven.

The desire for fullness, wellness, wholeness, productivity, security, and satisfaction turns out to be a desire for ... Jesus. All substitutes, even salty, crunchy ones, only intensify the hunger.

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