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Obesity

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-- *Commentaries from past newsletters* --

SUMMER 2003

I never have much trouble finding a subject to write about for my commentaries since I am always dealing with some new problem in my practice. I am constantly reading or rereading literature on various subjects to be able to maximize the effectiveness of my therapy. I hate to see people suffer, and I do everything I can to find ways to relieve that suffering. Long ago I realized how impotent I often felt when a patient who I knew should get well did not recover in spite of my best efforts. That was the reason I dedicated my life to research and teaching because I felt my desire to be the best psychiatrist I could be could best be achieved if I did. That is the reason why even at age 80 I am still seeking understanding of some aspect of a psychiatric problem. Recently I learned some new concepts that I want to share with you in this letter. They are some things that apply to all of us.

Most of us do not realize that when Paul the Apostle talked about us being slaves to sin he was deadly serious because he knew he was right. In Romans 7:14, 15 he lamented, "We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." When I deal with sin in my patients I find that what he is saying is all too true. They really are slaves to sin because they are morally paralyzed and cannot quit. The world is so full of temptation that in spite of their resistance they succumb and go back to sinning. I don't know how many alcoholic and drug addicts I have seen who tried to convince me that they can quit anytime they want. The same is true of sexual addicts, but they keep on sinning. In this newsletter there are book reviews of three books that relate to sexual addictions and they illustrate how totally helpless the sinners feel in the face of their sin and how they suffer. They cannot stop sinning even though they desperately want to quit. They are slaves to their sin.

All of us are slaves to sin before we become Christians, and even after our salvation we may think we are no longer sinning and living a nice, sweet, kind life, but we are wrong. If we say that we do not sin we are liars (1 John 1:8). Our sins are almost all denied so most of us regard them pharisaically. Jesus described their attitude when he told this parable. "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on

me, a sinner'" (Luke 18:10-13). Jesus said that the tax collector went home justified because he was humble before God and did not exalt himself. Sadly, too many of us exalt ourselves.

Theoretically, we are all set free of our sin at the time of our salvation, and it is true that many are. Five weeks ago I had a young man in his 20's consult with me about the profound feelings of depression that he was suffering. In the past he had been a heavy user of ecstasy, and had been a long time user of marijuana. He also smoked cigarettes and occasionally used large quantities of alcohol. He could not stop any of these activities. His habits and poor judgment had gotten him into serious financial difficulties. He was accompanied by his female domestic partner and their three month old child. As I ended the interview before I told him what I was going to do, he wistfully looked at me and plaintively said, "Doctor, please help me!" My heart went out to him at that moment. It did not matter to me that he had what looked like diamond earrings in both ears, a gold chain around his neck, tattoos all over both arms and clothes that were extremely mod. He was in agony and more than anything else at that moment I wanted to help him. I knew he was a rank sinner and he could not stop sinning, and I had to help him find a way out. I started him on an antidepressant and told him to come back the next week so I could get more information about his early life and understand his problem better.

He and his domestic partner and child came back the next week and he was improved, but still in agony. After I collected the rest of the information I needed, I told him that I could help him. I plainly told him I thought his problem was for the most part spiritual. My treatment for that was to offer him Christ as a way of relieving his depression and his addictions. After I explained what Christianity was all about both he and she eagerly accepted the Lord. His child who had been quiet during the time we were together went, "goo, goo, goo" just as his mother finished her prayer for salvation. I don't know if the baby was like John the Baptist when he leaped in his mother's womb when Mary came to visit Elizabeth, but it seemed like he wanted to participate in the great event too.

Five weeks later they were in my office and he had used no marijuana, quit smoking and drunk no alcohol. They have begun to get their finances straightened out, and he has no more depression. They are planning to get married in the next few weeks. He has been set free of his slavery to his most obvious sins and become a new person. God sets men free if they surrender to him.

But there are many who are not set free, and I spend most of my time working with them to find out why, and then free them. It is a tough job, though. There are some of them that are afraid of letting God run their lives. This is true because the human will does not tolerate the imposition of another will above their will. It will only submit if an appeal is made to it that promises freedom. Most people want to stay in control of their lives, so they will not submit to anyone if they

cannot retain control. These persons have usually been dominated and controlled by their father throughout their childhood and when they think they are free they want to keep their freedom. Persons who have been reared like this usually have a distorted image of God and see him as a tyrant who will punish them if they get out of line, or he will withdraw love. Others see God as absent. They do not believe that He will not do anything even if they commit their life to Him. This group is hard to help too. There are many distorted images of God because we usually view God as we view our earthly father. Interestingly, the church does not really teach us what God is like. Years ago I tried to learn what God's attributes were, but I only found them described in theological terms that did not help me. It was only after I read the first volume of Thomas Oden's systematic theology book entitled *The Living God* that I finally had a good view of what God was like. To get some people to surrender I have to teach them that we have a loving Father who provides us with an understanding of who we are, a loving Father who provides us with security, and a loving Father who will come and live within us and will never leave us. Our God gives real meaning to our lives, and guides and directs us in a dangerous and hostile world. Our God provides us with every need and a few of our wants. He gives us the kind of freedom that we all desire.

Persons who are afraid to surrender to God may surrender most of their lives, but many of them will not surrender some part. This is particularly true of persons who have sexual problems. In my last newsletter I quoted John Oswalt about pagan religions, but there was another significant statement in his book, *Called to be Holy*, that was illuminated by the Holy Spirit as I read it. It stated that many people surrender to God, but they do not surrender some part of their being. He specifically mentioned sex as an area that is held back. The end result is that those who do not surrender their sexuality continue to sin in that area of their life.

But sexual activity that arises out of lust is not the entire problem. Greed is so rampant in our society today that we can truthfully say it, too, is an addiction. **Greed is excessive or reprehensible acquisitiveness.** For example, I recently read a long article about Warren Buffett. This man is one of the richest men in the world and even in his 70's he desires to get richer. He decided recently that he wants to own only big corporations instead of medium and small ones. He really does not need to own anything. What will he do with all the money he has accumulated? There are no U-Haul-Its that can be pulled along behind a hearse. Oh, to be sure he can leave it in a foundation for some charitable purpose, but it is highly likely that the purpose he leaves it for will be perverted and will not do what he wanted it to do. If he leaves it to his children (if he has any) they will either blow it in living a life of luxury, or will hoard it. They are not certain to be happy because their wealth keeps them from becoming vocationally creative.

Then there were the people involved in the Enron scandal. Not only were they greedy, but they had to lie to make it appear that they were making more money than they really were. The same is true of the people in the World Com mess. To

top it all off, Arthur Anderson also was accused of complicity (lying) in the accounting scandal at Enron, and this led to the eventual demise of their company, too.

Greed is also the basis for a gambling addiction. Not all people who gamble do so compulsively. Those who are compulsive gamblers may spend all of their income on gambling while their families go without food, clothes and housing. Years ago my wife and I were in Reno and went to the casinos to see what was going on. There were little old ladies there who were mindlessly standing in front of slot machines putting quarter after quarter in the machines. Their hands were black with silver salts. (This was when coins were still silver.). They spent hours putting money in the machines. As we went through Harrah's and other casinos, we saw person after person who were losing large sums at the Black-Jack tables or Roulette Wheels. What motivated these persons? It was greed. They hoped to strike it rich at games where you cannot possibly win.

Why do people spend large amounts of money on lottery tickets? The answer is that they, too, hope to get rich. When I lived in Panama they had the Lotteria Nacional. Old women sat on every corner of the streets selling tickets that cost 50 cents apiece. The people who bought them were usually the poor. They hoped to win enough to escape the poverty they lived in, but the number who achieved their purpose was few, for only one ticket could win the jackpot. Many of the persons who bought tickets bought a large number of them from different vendors in the hope that they would win, but they really could not afford to buy those tickets. Most of these people were not compulsive gamblers. Instead, they were looking for a way out of poverty. Even so, they are motivated by greed.

Gluttony is another addiction. It is also a sin! In our society we have an abundance of food at all levels of society. God has provided abundance. And most people have too much of it available to them. Poverty is said to cause people to lack food. I am, though, bothered by the fact that there are enormous numbers of obese people among the poor. Wherever I have gone in the world it seems that there is more than enough food. Even in the poorest areas of the third world you will find obese people. Why are they obese? The reason is that they are gluttonous. In our society we are trying to blame obesity on junk and fast food. Obesity is not related to the availability of these foods, it is related to the fact that people eat more than they need. There is no difference in a Big Mac cooked at McDonald's and a big hamburger cooked in my home. If I put all the condiments out that we do when we have guests in our home and they put them on their hamburgers, the calorie count is the same. If they eat two hamburgers in either place they really "pig out."

It is easy for people to overeat. Almost all restaurants give you too much food in a serving. You do not get four or six ounces of steak, instead you get eight or twelve ounces. Then there is a baked potato that is the biggest they can buy. You put lots of butter and sour cream on it, and eat a piece of Texas toast with

butter and have a salad with lots of dressing and you have had too much food. But you will not stop there, for you may have some obscene dessert like a giant brownie topped with lots of ice cream smothered with chocolate sauce and you will really have pigged out. Since the meal is going to cost \$25.00 you are going to eat it all. If you do this often enough you will slowly get into the habit of eating too much at every meal and you have become a glutton.

It does not take long to get obese. I have witnessed some real gluttons at a local restaurant that has a breakfast buffet. One morning I was eating there and three men all weighing more than 300 pounds were sitting at the next table. I watched as each one of them ate three heaping plates of food. Their plates were not filled, they were stacked.

Still, we cannot blame McDonald's or the Outback Steak House or even our homes for our sin. We alone are responsible particularly if we respond to Satan's temptations. God has told us how to deal with this and that is to eat to live and fast from time to time. Still we sin. Just observe the people coming in and out of church.

The answer to our sin is rather simple. It is to be absolutely surrendered to the Lord. Now the thing that I learned from John Oswalt is that if I am sinning I have to surrender that part of my life to Him. The interesting thing is that I do not easily do this. The reason it is not easy to do is that we have strongholds that are indelibly engraved in our souls and it is very difficult for us to eradicate them. The genesis of a stronghold often can be traced back to early life. Let us use gluttony as an example. If you were like me you grew up in a home where there was plenty of food. As a child your mother and/or father wanted to make sure you ate enough food. Therefore, they gave you adult helpings of food and told you to clean your plates. (If this did not happen to you, you were blessed.) If you resisted you were not allowed to leave the table till you ate it all. Eventually, you got to the point that you would eat it whether you wanted it or not. If on the other hand you went out to eat, you were expected to eat everything served to you especially if you went to a friend's home. Of course your hostess encouraged you to eat seconds so you continued the process. In my day we were physically active because there was no television and the radio had only soap operas so you expended a lot of energy in physical activity; consequently we did not get fat. This continued until you got to middle age and if your work did not keep you active, you slowly decreased your physical activity and your waistline continued to expand. You were now living to eat because you had become affluent and often went to fine restaurants where you ate too much. You had long ago developed a stronghold.

The stronghold you developed is comprised of your mother's repeated admonition to eat everything on your plate, plus the memory of having to sit there until you eat it when your siblings and the neighbor kids are out in the yard playing, the desire you have to please your hostess when she asks you to have

seconds, and the memories of the cost of the food that you bought in a restaurant. It was interesting that after I had written most of this I went out to dinner at a local seafood restaurant. Even though I knew that I did not want to eat too much, I ordered a dish that I knew had more food on it than I needed. I have a stronghold to be sure. These strongholds are why over 50% of our population is obese. This is compared to the 25% that were obese in 1960. Obesity has considerable psychological impact, but it also shortens a person's life, and causes a morbidity and poorer quality of life than smoking, problem drinking, and poverty. Obesity increases the probability of diabetes by eightfold, of hypertension by sixfold, of arthritis fourfold, of asthma threefold, and the probability of having fair to poor health by fourfold. Obesity is quite clearly a major health problem for people in and out of the church.

God has, however, provided us with a way out. "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." God does not want us to be obese. He knows that sampling everything on the table at a church potluck supper is not good for us. He wants us to be in good health and an obese person is not in good health or if not now, in time they will not be. We should then marshal the weapons we have been given and do something about it. (Physician, heal thyself.)

Our first weapon is to surrender our appetites to the Lord. Jesus demanded absolute surrender and we need to include our appetites. We need to surrender our appetites to Him whether they are for food, drink or sex and let him control them. Now this is not an easy thing to do. Remember that our stronghold is made up of multitudes of ideas and accompanying emotions that are deeply ingrained into our soul. We do, therefore, have to surrender our appetites over and over again before we can get any degree of mastery of them. It is something that we have to do several times a day if we hope to succeed. In dealing with our strongholds we also have to repudiate the lies that were taught us in our childhood.

Our next step in management is to learn how to deal with temptation. We live in a morally polluted environment, and it is easy to get infected with sin. Temptation is the way we get infected. If we continue using gluttony as an example, we will recognize that we are constantly bombarded with pictures of gourmet foods, advertisements for fine wines, and invitations to eat at restaurants that have delicious foods and, of course, large helpings. Temptation arises out of our biological drives. When they are channeled through our souls, the way we are going to satisfy them is determined by the ways we have learned to satisfy them. If we have a stronghold we will use it, for it has greater power than the knowledge we have of the right way to satisfy it. "I know I should not eat that dessert, but I eat it anyway." When I do, I sin and I cannot lose weight, or I get more obese.

Next when we sin we have to repent and ask for forgiveness. In the early church believers repented everyday. They confessed their sin, told God they were sorry and asked for forgiveness. As I have told you before, repentance is made up of two components. First, there is a godly sorrow and second a resolve to amend our ways. A godly sorrow arises out of a realization that our sin added to Jesus' suffering on the cross and our resolve to amend our ways means we will focus our will on changing.

To further overcome our sin we must develop and maintain our spiritual immunity. Spiritual immunity is not something you hear much about because we do not look at sin as disease, and believe that it is infectious. Satan uses its infectious character to gain entry into our lives and lead us into sin. Since sin is an infectious disease, we need to develop an immunity to it. We do this in several ways. Our salvation provides us with our primary vaccination, but we need to have boosters after that. To get these boosters we first need to practice the means of grace regularly. Oden in his book, *The Living God*, mentions this and Costa Deir emphasized the concept in a series of lectures he gave at a conference I attended. If we regularly pray, are into the Word, celebrate the Eucharist and worship regularly we will maintain our spiritual immunity. Doing this brings us into encounters with Christ and renews our power. We are thus immunized against temptation and against Satan's efforts to lead us astray.

Finally, we have other weapons to use when we are tempted. These are the name of Jesus, the blood of Jesus, hymns and songs of praise and thanksgiving. "Pop" prayers are also useful. There is one that is attributed to a Russian monk that goes like this. "Jesus, Son of the living God have mercy on me a sinner." When we feel tempted we can use any of these to help us ward off infections or satanic attacks. We can be more righteous if we work at it because we will be continuing our salvation.