

### M and M Theology

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, July 14, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 25:19-34; Psalm 119:105-112; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Social scientists once conducted an experiment on four year old children to study the effects of deferred gratification. Deferred gratification - the ability to postpone immediate pleasure and satisfaction for a future reward. A child sits at a table in a room across from an adult. The adult offers the child a bag of 'M and M' chocolate candy - the kind that melts in your mouth, not in your hand. The adult opens the package and pours out the contents on the table in front of the child. Then the adult says, "I have to run an errand. If you don't eat any 'M and M's while I'm gone, I'll give you another bag when I get back." The adult leaves the room with the 'M and M's enticingly displayed before the child.

It takes agonizing discipline for a four year old to turn down 'M and M's. Some cover their eyes. Some sing to themselves. Some reach out tentatively with one hand for an 'M and M' only to have their other hand drag it back. Some pick up an 'M and M', smell it, hold it to their mouth, lick it but don't eat. Others wait for a painful minute or two and then, reluctantly, take just one 'M and M'. A few moments later you can see from their expression that they're thinking, "Oh, what the heck" and they gobble down the rest of the candy. When the adult comes back, those who didn't eat any 'M and M's are rewarded with another bag. Follow up research showed that the children who were able to defer gratification were more likely to

develop leadership skills. They seemed better adjusted, more confident. And they scored much higher on aptitude tests.

In our second Scripture lesson, St. Paul talks about deferred gratification. He talks about "walking in the Spirit". When he talks about walking in the Spirit he's not talking about ghosts floating around like Casper. He's not talking about living some kind of super spiritual. The Spirit represents the desire to postpone immediate gratification for some future reward. The Spirit tells us, "Pay now, enjoy later."

St. Paul also talks about "walking in the flesh". The flesh represents our wishes, our desires, our feelings that demand instant gratification. Living according to the flesh means thinking with your hormones rather than with your brains. The flesh says I want something now - money, a new car, maybe a new spouse, maybe even a religious experience. I want it now! I don't care how I get it. But I've got to have it now - no matter what the cost.

Our first scripture lesson offers us a good example of what it means to live according to the flesh. Esau traded his birthright for a bowl of soup. He traded away his future for the immediate gratification of his hunger. And Jacob, also, was living according to the flesh when he took advantage of his brother's weakness to enrich himself. The flesh tells us, "Buy now, pay later". The Spirit says, "There is no gain without pain."

The Spirit really refers to the Spirit of the Risen Christ. Jesus chose to die on the cross rather than to let us all go our

merry way to hell. Jesus was living by the Spirit when he refused to turn stones to bread and the devil's behest; and when he refused to leap from the pinnacle of the temple or gain the world's allegiance by bowing down to the devil. Jesus deferred gratification for something better - obedience to God.

Now Jesus certainly was no kill-joy. He enjoyed life. Some people criticized him for eating and drinking too much. He enjoyed being with people - all kinds of people. And all kinds of people enjoyed spending time with him - especially people who weren't particularly religious. When Jesus touched lepers rather than avoid them he was walking in the Spirit. He was walking by the Spirit when he ate and drank with sinners rather than shun them.

Saint Paul wrote, "Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace."

We, as a nation, have chosen to live according to the flesh rather than according to the Spirit. Just take a look at the health of the nation. The U.S. Surgeon General spoke at a news conference last week. She strongly implied that most Americans have been eating too many 'M and M's. She encouraged us to defer instant gratification. She urged us to exercise and diet in order to enjoy future rewards - longer and more healthy life. She was really playing a variation on St. Paul's theme that to live according to the flesh leads to death.

On a more serious note, Os Guinness writes, in The American Hour, "The hedonistic revolution came to full bloom in... the eighties... with 'toys' being to the American rich what drugs were to the poor.... Possession (of things) became consumption and consumption addiction - to things and style. Saving was eclipsed by spending, and discipline and deferment by permissiveness and gratification.... Concern over salvation shifted to concern over self-realization...."

We have largely rejected the principle of deferred gratification as individuals and as a nation. For example, increasingly, state and local governments look to lotteries to raise funds. In the last few decades, 47 of our 50 states have joined Nevada in legalizing gambling. But what does gambling teach us? It teaches that with a little bit of luck and no work we can enjoy instant rewards at little cost. But we're going to have to pay for it down the road. Lotteries and gambling augur disaster especially for poor people. It's living according to the flesh.

The church, too, follows suit. The flesh often masquerades as a religious impulse - think about that - we desire instant, immediate, spiritual kicks that require no change in the direction our life is taking - just immediate, raw, spontaneous religious experience.

This has not always been so. For example, many years ago, a German named Max Weber wrote a famous book, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. He observed that Protestantism - especially Calvinism - encouraged our ancestors to work hard and

forego pleasure in the here and now with the hope of future pleasure here on earth and afterwards in heaven. Today that Protestant work ethic has become completely secularized. God is left out altogether. The modern, secularized work ethic says, "Work hard, make all the money you can now, spend it now, because you only go around once."

St. Paul says that we have a power, not in our own wills, but a power given to us by the Spirit of the Risen Christ to delay instant gratification in order to enjoy unseen, future joys and pleasures that benefit us, our families and our communities. The future blessing might be a really good marriage. It might be a community free of poverty, homelessness and crime. But it happens only when we postpone immediate pleasure and satisfaction for something better in the future.

The flesh tries to get us to believe that we can't defer instant gratification. The flesh tells us, "Don't risk losing an immediate pleasure for something in the future which you can't see and you don't even know for sure exists." The flesh screams in our ears, "You have no real choice. You're driven by unseen, invisible forces. You're powerless to fight against your genetic make up. You can't resist your powerful hormones. You really have no choice."

"That's a lie", Paul says. "You're not in the flesh" - meaning, "Don't believe those lies that you can't go against peer pressure in order to do what you know is right. You're in the Spirit", St. Paul says, "since the Spirit of God dwells in you."

When I was in college I volunteered to work with young men on the South Side of Chicago. I attended a large African American Church on the South Side. The worship lasted for hours. I asked the minister, "How come your worship services are so long?" He said, "All week my congregation hears the world say to them, 'You're condemned to a nowhere life. You're nothing! You're powerless! You're poor! You're victims! You're weak! You're worthless if you don't have lots of money, fancy clothes, cars, boats and big houses.'"

He said, "It takes at least three hours of singing and preaching to get those lies out of their heads; to convince them that the Spirit of God lives in them. I got to tell them over and over, 'You're not condemned to do what your hormones and your blind-impulses-tell-you-to-do. You're free men and women. The Spirit of God dwells in you.'"

I have to tell them, "You're not helpless. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. Yes! Our flesh *is* weak, our wills are weak, but God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh."

"Don't listen to the flesh! Don't listen to lies! Listen to what the Spirit says! Don't set your mind on the flesh! That's death! Set your mind on the Spirit! That's life! That's freedom! That's joy! That's peace!"

Let us pray: Almighty God, we thank you for planting in us the seed of your Word. By your Holy Spirit, help us to receive it with joy, and live according to it, that we may grow in faith and hope and love; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.