

## Defining Enough

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A friend reminded me recently that one of the purposes of ministry is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. Well, this sermon is definitely on the “afflict the comfortable” side of that spectrum. Such “afflict the comfortable” sermons are usually aimed at the most backsliding, sinful, depraved hypocrites in the room and in this case (and in almost all cases) that group includes me.

I do these sermons because they help me refine what my highest values are. Expressing my struggles with those values—in such a public forum—keeps me honest. Over the next weeks and months when there's a decision to be made related to this sermon, I'll find myself asking, “What did I say about that in that talk I did?” It keeps me honest.

I say all that because if what I'm about to say leaves you feeling a little afflicted, or squirming in your seat, or maybe a little defensive, please just know up front that I am right there with you. This is me struggling to align my life with my own highest values.

When our kids were small, they were typical kids in that they they wanted as much candy and sweets as they could get. And we were typical parents in that we weren't going to allow that; we wanted to set a good example of healthy healthy diet and food consumption. Somewhere along the line, one of our kids had an idea: just for an experiment, let's one time have candy for dinner. Candy for dinner! Just imagine!

We would switch dessert and the main course. We would have candy for dinner and vegetables for dessert, but the usual rules would apply. Take as much as you want—as much as you can eat. You can have seconds if you want, but don't take anything that you don't think you can finish. You don't get to have dessert until you've finished everything that you took. Okay, pretty normal rules. Probably many households have similar rules.

We got out the family candy jar, and there were carrots and broccoli as the dessert offering. Our kids went nuts. They piled their plates high with the most colorful still-life of m&m's and chocolate bars and Reese's. It was a childhood fantasy: candy for dinner. Before too long of course, their stomachs didn't feel very well, and their mouths were just so coated with that sticky sweetness that they were begging for dessert. This even though there was no way they were going to finish what was on their plate. I remember one of our

kids tearfully *begging* for a carrot or some broccoli.

For many years, I've used that story to illustrate how kids are not very good at considering the consequences of their choices. They don't seem to plan ahead very well. They'll thoughtlessly pile their plates when candy is what's on the menu. In more recent years I've started to realize that I'm not that much better at it. It's just a different sort of equation on a longer time scale.

If you ask a homeless person, "What would *enough* look like in your life? How would you define enough? What would make it so that you could say, 'Okay, I'm satisfied; now I have enough?'" They might say, "You know, if I could just have a secure home and a bed to sleep in at night, where I'm not constantly being roused by passers-by or the police, that would do it. That would be enough."

If you ask someone who lives in a stable home what enough would look like for them, they might say, "If I could just have a reliable car that would get me back and forth to work, without the risk and the insecurity of being stranded by the side of the highway, that would do it. That would be enough for me."

If you ask a middle class professional with two brand-new cars what enough would look like to them, they might say, "Enough for a secure retirement; enough to know that I'm not going to be destitute sometime before I die."

You can see this pattern, right? Can we skip right to the top and ask a multi-billionaire? "What would enough look like to you, multi-billionaire?" At least three of them have said, "Going to space." It's clear to me that at least for people in our society—maybe for humans in general—we're not good at ever being satisfied. We're not good at defining enough in a way that's durable, that stays the same as our circumstances change.

So I have to ask myself how I would define enough. By "enough" I mean wealth, comfort, and convenience. What *is* enough wealth? What *is* enough comfort? What *is* enough convenience for me personally? When you start to do this, when you start to try and figure out what would enough look like for yourself, you very quickly run into the problem of the difference between *wants* and *needs*.

When I got to that point, I remembered Maslow's hierarchy of needs. You may have seen this before. It's usually graphically expressed as a pyramid and the bottom level of needs is physiological needs—just basically meeting your body's needs. Above that is safety, love and belonging, esteem, and then the

little triangle at the top is self-actualization.

I happened to be having a problem, a decision involving a lawn mower so looking at this pyramid, I wondered, "Where does a lawnmower fit on Maslow's hierarchy of needs?" Nowhere. I mean, you could stretch and make an argument that there's a safety need somewhere in there, but i'm not buying it. And yet, almost all of us here in Pennsylvania either have a lawnmower or we pay someone else to use a lawnmower. So do we need a lawnmower? Where does a lawnmower fit in Maslow's hierarchy of needs?

When I was about eight or ten, my parents made a decision that turned out to be really pivotal, in my childhood but also in my life. My father left his well-paying job as an engineer at Kodak to start a small bulk food business. Just a small food store. My parents were also Shaklee distributors, which is a multi-level marketing thing.

What I'm getting at here is that for the next handful of years, money was really tight for our family. It was completely different than what we had experienced before. When any of the four of us kids complained about how we didn't have new shoes, or new clothes for the first day of school, or, you know, how we just didn't have what other kids seemed to have, there was a frequent answer. My parents would say, "We live luxurious lifestyles of deep convenience and comfort compared to kings of old.

It's true. You only have to go back about 300 years—maybe 400—and even the wealthiest nobility throughout Europe and the world didn't have anywhere near the comfort and luxury that pretty much all of us take for granted now. When it was hot on a hot summer day, they were just hot. There was no alternative. Compared to not-that-long-ago, we live lives of incredible luxury, convenience, and comfort.

How would you define enough? More importantly, what would it take for you to answer that question with, "I already have enough. *This* is enough." Do you know *anyone* who would authentically answer the question that way? My guess is that there aren't many, and that those people are special in some way.

I think that not having a definition of enough is a kind of spiritual depravity. Because if you don't have a definition of enough you can never be satisfied. Not being able to be satisfied interferes with my ability to live in a state of gratitude. If we don't define enough, we can't share our excesses. We can't share our surpluses with others because there *are* no excesses! There are never any surpluses, because there is never really enough.

Not having a definition of enough is spiritual depravity because it distracts us from the sources of true happiness. It puts us on a consumerism treadmill that keeps us away from spending time with our families. It keeps us from doing other activities

that help us meet the higher levels of Maslow's hierarchy, like belonging, and self-actualization. Things don't help with that.

Not having a definition of enough is a spiritual depravity because our comforts and our conveniences have *costs*. Our culture of consumerism has habituated us—at least for middle-class Americans—to a habit of offloading our discomforts and inconveniences onto others. It's depraved because that requires a certain level of self-deception in order to remain comfortable; we have to blind ourselves to those costs that we ask others to bear for us. Let me just give you a few examples.

When it's really hot in the summertime and my house is filled with the discomfort of heat and humidity, I switch on the air conditioner. What that machine literally does is it removes heat and humidity from the inside of my house, and it puts it outside of my house. It can't just make it cold; the laws of physics say that the heat has to go somewhere. So the air conditioner puts it outside of my house, where it raises the heat and the humidity for every other creature and person that doesn't have air conditioning. That includes my neighbor who simple can't afford it, but also all the wildlife that lives out there.

If I lived out in the middle of a forest somewhere with not many other people, it would be negligible, but if I live in the suburbs or the city, me switching on my air conditioner contributes to the heat island effect. It's very measurable, and it literally makes everyone else who doesn't have air conditioning more uncomfortable. They are bearing the cost of my comfort when I switch that thing on.

Another example. I happen to really enjoy the cordless convenience of having the whole world of information right here in my pocket. When it comes time for me to get a new phone, I may prefer not to know—or not to remember—that the cordlessness of this thing requires a battery. Or that that requires a certain amount of cobalt. About a third of the world cobalt supply comes from the Democratic Republic of Congo where UNICEF estimates that cobalt mining is done largely by about 40,000 children. Children in extremely hazardous, sometimes lethal conditions. I'd rather not think about that when it comes time to buy a new phone or a new battery for my phone.

I like perfect red apples with no spots on them, and as Joni Mitchell sang in the 1960s, "Give me spots on my apples, but leave me the birds and the bees." Well, when I buy those perfect round red apples, I am offloading the spots onto the birds and the bees. Maybe we don't use DDT anymore, but we're still using something, right?

Not having a definition of enough security leads us to look the other way while our nation wages drone warfare. I am offloading the dirty work—the moral injury and

the PTSD—onto my fellow Americans, people who are just trying to serve their country. I could go on and on: cheap meat, border patrols—all these comforts and conveniences involve me offloading my discomfort and my inconvenience onto others.

How can we define enough? I came across one approach earlier this summer. I heard a talk by Chuck Fowler who is a retired fisheries researcher. Chuck spent his career really taking an in-depth look at the interconnected food web of marine ecosystems. At some point along the line, he realized that humans are part of that web. We're part of the marine food web and we occupy a niche. Or, we *should* be occupying a niche that's kind of similar to dolphins and seals and other predators that are near the top of that web.

So Chuck made these graphs of how much biomass is used by each of the species in the marine food web, especially focusing on the species that are really similar to us. What he found is that he had to graph these things on logarithmic axes, because, for example, dolphins, who eat the same kinds of things we do, like cod and salmon. What he found is that we are using a thousand, ten thousand, or a hundred thousand times as much as dolphins or seals do.

So one approach to enough, at least on a global scale, would be to ask ourselves, "What do other similar species consume?" That would give us a guideline for how much we could be consuming if we were in a sustainable food web, instead of just broadly taking everything as we are now. We are broadly taking everything because we don't have a definition of enough, and now we are facing the consequences.

Our cravings are infinite, but the earth is finite. And I play a role in that. I can't blame big business. It's easy to point my finger and say big business has to take care of this, but they're doing this because *I pay them* to do it! I can't just abdicate my responsibility as a consumer for paying big business to do my dirty work. So the question remains: how do I define enough?

It's not easy, given that I'm bombarded with advertising 24/7. That global information source (the internet) is almost exclusively funded by advertising. Advertisers know human psychology; they're scientists. They know what motivates us, and they make use of that, which is a real hindrance to defining enough. With big data, now they're able to get pretty specific; they know what motivates JD Stillwater, and they can make use of that.

I saw an ad recently that was just really blatant: big block letters that said, "You deserve a new phone!" The first time I saw it I was like, "But I like my phone... and, what is this "deserve" stuff—you don't even know me!" But you know, after you see the same ad a few more times it's like, "Oh, those new phones do look pretty

snazzy..." It works. It really works.

How do we define enough? How do we even begin? We live in a society that encourages us to have candy for dinner 24/7/365. And it is killing us.

How much comfort and convenience is enough? What will it take for each of us—for me specifically—to be okay with more broccoli and spinach in my consuming? Or, as Jimmy Carter asked us decades ago, "What will it take to just turn down the thermostat and put on a sweater?" Jimmy Carter is about to turn 97, on October 1st. What a guy!

I'm told that every good sermon has an action step, something that people can take home and run with, and maybe make a difference in your life. So here it comes. I'm asking several things of you. The first is to set about trying to define enough for yourself. You don't have to come up with an answer, just try to define it and see where it leads you. Try to seek a process or an answer that is *durable*, something that will still be true if you win the lottery, or get a major promotion. Ask yourself, "What discomforts have I been offloading onto others or onto the earth that I could take back and carry for my own self, as a strong and spiritually mature adult?"

Think about it over the next few days or weeks and send me what you come up with. Better yet, post them on facebook. Let's start a conversation about what enough looks like for each of us. It's fine if they're all completely different. The conversation itself may lead to something profound, something that really does change our lives in some significant way that allows us to feel more satisfied, more grateful, more part of a community.

Let's get better at handling this candy-for-dinner economy of ours. Let's get better at afflicting the comfortable, especially when it's ourselves.

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