

THE NUMBING EFFECT

Have you ever been reading a passage in the Bible about the depravity of unbelievers, when suddenly your own face appeared on the page? This happened to me recently, reminding me that since we are still fallen creatures (albeit forgiven), to the extent we do not allow the Holy Spirit to control and fill us, we are no stronger than an unbeliever.

The verse I read was Ephesians 4:19 (ESV) says, *Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.* It is the last phrase that made me pause. The end result of this moral depravity, according to Paul, was a continual lust for more. “Could I be showing signs of this in my own life,” I thought? What a good question for all of us to ask ourselves.

In this verse, Paul shows us the progressive decline that leads to a person ultimately living a life (consciously or unconsciously) consumed with a continual lust for more. As believers, we are seeking to live a holy life in an unholy world that is bent on our spiritual, moral, and physical destruction. There is a three-step progression to failure of which we should all be aware in order to avoid inadvertently falling into its clutches.

Step One: Callousness **“lost all sensitivity”**

It is a fact of human nature that whatever becomes common becomes “invisible.” Our culture offers an abundance of things and experiences that can and will numb our spiritual sensitivities. If we allow ourselves to be injected with enough carnal Novocain, our spiritual sensitivities will eventually become so diminished that we will no longer even notice the evil, crude, greedy, violent, selfish, and blasphemous things—they will simply become invisible. We can all likely think of numerous examples when we have seen this happen.

Many translations use the word “callousness” in this verse. Calluses appear on the skin from excessive use of some part of your body such as your hands or feet. Once a callus has formed, the feeling on that area of your skin is gone. There is a little song I sang as a child entitled “Oh be careful little eyes what you see,” which cautions against becoming calloused. The verses continue, telling our ears to be careful what they hear, our hands what they do, and our feet where they go. Each time we expose ourselves to the godless things of this world we receive another shot of Novocain. Each shot further numbs our spiritual sensitivity and the ability of the Holy Spirit to protect us from the deadliness of that to which what we are exposing ourselves.

This numbing effect is no better illustrated than in Jesus’ assessment of the believers in the church at Laodicea in Revelation 3:15-18 (NASB),

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. Because you say, ‘I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,’ and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked. I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you

may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.

These believers had become so numb by the things of this world that they were not even conscious of the fact that they were spiritually wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked. How could this have possibly happened? They allowed themselves to become so numb to their own materialism, that slowly, over time, they became blind. Have we, like them, become numb? Are we too unaware of our own spiritual blindness? John Calvin warned, “Prosperity inebriates men, so that they take delights in their own merits. Nothing is more dangerous than to be blinded by prosperity.” Let us do whatever we can to avoid being injected with worldliness and materialism in order to avoid this downward spiral.

Step Two: An increasing indulgence in our physical appetites “indulge”

Once we become spiritually numb, we will find ourselves feeling free to participate in what John McArthur describes as “unbridled self-indulgence.” As the conviction of the Spirit and the Word become muffled (or silenced altogether), we will become like the believer in James 1:22-24 (ESV), *But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.* We are no longer inclined to respond, but rather to forget; the numbness has done its work.

Now, sufficiently numb to spiritual reality and truth, we can blindly pursue and participate in the things of the world without any feeling of contradiction or conviction. We can indulge our fleshly appetites with little or no restraint. We can do things, buy, wear, watch, eat, drink, and say things, totally oblivious to our spiritual inconsistency and opposing the way of God. Satisfying our appetites and pleasures can easily become a major focus, if not the primary focus of our lives.

Step Three: Addiction “a continual lust for more”

When we think of an addict, we might picture a crack user lying unconscious in a back alley or a haggard drunk, staggering home at 2:00 a.m. after getting thoroughly “wasted.” We don’t like to think of addicts as people in suits and dresses, living in nice homes, going to church, running successful businesses, and known as good Christians. We most certainly don’t want to think of an addict as the person who is wearing our clothes, living in our house, and a respected member of our church community.

If we were completely honest with ourselves, we would probably admit that we are quite prone to addictions. In fact, most of our lives seem to be spent continually trying to avoid one addictive extreme or another, be it food, drink, money, possessions, gambling, entertainment, sex, power, fame...the list goes on. The only real difference is the addictive tendency with which we struggle.

We can know we are addicted to something when we just won’t give it up, even when we want to. The rich young ruler wouldn’t give it up (Matthew 19:22). Agrippa wouldn’t give it up (Acts 26:28). Judas wouldn’t give it up (John 12:4-6). The Pharisees wouldn’t give it up (John 9:24-29). Countless millions of others in this world (believers and unbelievers alike) won’t give it up either. The challenge for each of us is to honestly assess what “it” is in our lives. What is our insatiable lust for more?

The chorus of Casting Crowns' song "Slow Fade" poetically expresses what Ephesians 4:19 warns us to avoid.

*It's a slow fade when you give yourself away
It's a slow fade when black and white are turned to gray
And thoughts invade, choices are made, a price will be paid
When you give yourself away
People never crumble in a day*

The key to overcoming the trap of worldly addictions is to stay away from the "needles of worldly Novocain" which are anxious to inject their numbing influence in us. After we have been fully anesthetized, we are in danger of painlessly and naively wandering deeper into the darkness, unaware that we are in the midst of a "slow fade."

The Word gives us four clear directives on how to successfully avoid the enticing effects of the world as we journey on towards eternity:

- #1. Be alert: I Corinthians 16:13 (TLB) tells us, *Keep your eyes open for spiritual danger; stand true to the Lord; act like men; be strong.*
- #2. Be serious: I Peter 5:8 (ESV) says, *Be sober-minded... Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.*
- #3. Be content: Philippians 4:11-12 (NASB) states, *...for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity.*
- #4: Be Spirit-minded: Romans 8:5 (ESV) says, *For 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.*

We do not want to ever forget I John 4:4 (NASB), *You are from God...and have overcome them [the false spirits of this world]; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.* If we stay alert, serious, content, and Spirit-minded, we will overcome. May it be so for all of us!

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