

WATCHING OUR CONSUMPTION

Tiana cleared her throat and turned off the screen on her phone. She had been hollering at it for the past thirty minutes. It had become the evening ritual. As she watched each clip pulled from the news, she could feel the curiosity and shock rise within her, eventually turning to irritation and anger.

Now, her voice was a little sore. She realized that she could have easily woken her six-year-old in the next room.

Tiana tried to turn her mind to time with God. She would have read from her Bible, but her heart wasn't in it. So instead, she rested in God's presence, even though her mind was still on the news. She was still angry.

"I'm sorry, Lord," Tiana said aloud. She quieted herself again.

Slowly, Tiana began to feel the love and peace of God envelop her. She began weighing the experience, feeling as if God's Spirit was ministering to her soul. "This much negativity and conflict was not good for her. Even though following the news wasn't all bad, it was making her an angry person.

"A fast from the news? That could be good," Tiana heard herself say. It's the sort of thing her daughter would notice. Her mom would be a lot less preoccupied.

- 1 When has something *good* occupied too much of your attention?
- 2 What distinguishes healthy discipline from unhealthy obsession?
- 3 How can we use things we love to connect with the Lord?

⁸ But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself. ⁹ Now God had brought Daniel into favour and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs. ¹⁰ And the prince of the eunuchs said unto Daniel, I fear my lord the king, who hath appointed your meat and your drink: for why should he see your faces worse liking than the children which are of your sort? then shall ye make me endanger my head to the king.

¹¹ Then said Daniel to Melzar, whom the prince of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, ¹² Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat and water to drink. ¹³ Then let our countenances be looked upon before thee, and the countenance of the children that eat, of the portion of the king's meat: and as thou seest, deal with thy servants. ¹⁴ So he consented to them in this matter, and proved them ten days.

⁸ But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. ⁹ Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel, ¹⁰ but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you."

¹¹ Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, ¹² "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³ Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." ¹⁴ So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

Faithful in Exile

Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, were taken to Babylon from their home country of Judah. They didn't ask for this fate. For many years, Judah was weakened and corrupted by inadequate kings. God allowed Babylon to lay siege to Jerusalem and to send many people into exile.

Daniel and his friends are young and capable, which is why they have been chosen for future service in the courts of King Nebuchadnezzar. They would learn the language and customs of Babylon.

Over time, their identities are expected to shift and to change, and they receive new Babylonian names to match.

These servants-in-training are fed well, with food and wine from the king's own table. Their position is meant to help them adapt to new lives, exiled far from their homeland and families. For three years, they would be apprenticed in this role.

But in verse 8, Daniel makes a hard decision: not to “defile himself” with all these fancy things to eat. It could mean several things. Perhaps the food did not fit the requirements of Israel's covenant agreement (see Lev. 11). Alternatively, the royal food might have been offered to idols and false gods. Or, perhaps Daniel notices that accepting rich food would signal disloyalty to his people, who were struggling and starving. Whatever the reasons, Daniel wants to remain a faithful servant of the one, true God. By taking a stand, he invites his friends to join his commitment to faithfulness.

Even as a slave in the court of a foreign king, Daniel is treated with respect by the chief official (Dan. 1:3). He lives in such a way that others notice and show “favor and compassion” (Dan. 1:9). But the king's chief official is concerned that Daniel and his companions will look thin and unhealthy if they eat only vegetables and water (v. 12).

Thus Daniel devises a test. He and his friends shall eat this restrictive diet for ten days, after which time their appearance can be compared to the rest. If these exiles of Judah remain faithful to God, they expect God to be faithful in return, meeting all of their needs.

1 What are some reasons that Daniel might choose not to eat food from the king's table?

2 What are ways that we can cause outsiders to look upon us with favor, instead of suspicion?

3 What might have given Daniel confidence to devise a “test” of his diet?

¹⁵ And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat.

¹⁶ Thus Melzar took away the portion of their meat, and the wine that they should drink; and gave them pulse.

¹⁷ As for these four children, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom: and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.

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⁷ But refuse profane and old wives' fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness. ⁸ For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.

¹⁵ At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food.

¹⁶ So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.

¹⁷ To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

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⁷ Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. ⁸ For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.

Faithful in All Circumstances

In each age, God invites His people to be faithful. When ancient Israelites were worshiping Baal, Elijah hears that seven thousand servants remain, kept safe by God (1 Kings 19:18). When fearsome armies threaten, God promises that a remnant shall endure (Isa. 10:21–21). And in Daniel's time, the exiles to Babylon step into the role. They must pay attention to what they do and say, even what they eat in a foreign land.

The four men pass their self-devised test. At the end of ten days of eating a restrictive diet in the Babylonian court, they appear healthier than all the rest (Dan. 1:15). God's faithfulness goes beyond preserving their physical health: they receive great "knowledge and understanding" (v. 17). And Daniel is singled out for his ability to interpret "visions and dreams."

Because the exiles do not depart from faithful living, God helps them succeed in other things. Like other ancient people, the

Babylonians see dreams as powerful messages from the gods. Their people seek to understand dreams through divination, but Daniel has this gift of interpretation from the one, true God. He can use his skill for the success of his new home (compare Jer. 29:7). But while living in Babylon, he and his friends shall not lose their identity as God's servants.

For the second reading, we move forward more than six centuries. The challenge of walking faithfully with God continues, even after Judah returns to the land. Jews struggle with foreign kings and rulers who disrupt worship of God or who mock those waiting for God's deliverance. But at the coming of Jesus, God's deliverance arrives. *Jesus* is the ultimate demonstration of faithfulness to God's purposes: a servant of God who sacrifices His life for the good of others.

Followers of Christ still live in a kind of exile, in a world not fully reconciled to Him. In a letter to Timothy, Paul encourages his ministry partner. He knows that living faithfully can be a challenge, when culture exercises a powerful influence. Some Christians at the time were reacting by multiplying restrictions, forbidding marriage and certain foods (1 Tim. 4:3). But Paul teaches that faithfulness in this age is not about mere physical things, like what we eat or whether we are married. He tells Timothy to "train" like an athlete might train—to train in godliness (1 Tim. 4:7–8).

What we consume with our mouths is important, since God created the physical world. But training in godliness will have lasting, eternal effects. Pursuing godliness means that we evaluate what we use to entertain ourselves, the stories we tell, and whether we are rejecting the influence of evil (see 1 Tim. 4:1, 7). By turning our minds to God and the pursuit of truth, we demonstrate "hope in the living God" (v. 10), which is the ultimate act of faithfulness.

1 How does God use individuals who remain faithful, in the history of Israel and today?

2 Daniel's act of faithfulness was to restrict his diet. What kinds of faithfulness does Paul advise for believers?

Set Apart

Here's how old I am: when I was in college, my friends and I called each other on a flip phone if we wanted to chat! But things change quickly. Within a few years of my graduation, everyone had their faces on social media, and it became an incredible way for our group to stay connected. My social media intake grew, until I recently realized how much my news and entertainment choices were defined by what I discovered on these platforms.

Part of this is understandable, since I live a long way from my family and several lifelong friends. Remote communication is a great way to keep up to date with everyone. I like to know what's going on in the world—politically, socially, and theologically—and these up-to-the-minute notifications would love to do that for me.

It was last year during Lent that I realized something “not-all-bad” could still cause me harm. I could be envious of what others have when I begin to compare myself to their lives. I can even be overinformed—trying to know every problem in the world, every argument that people are having. The platforms love to push anything that triggers strong emotions.

Because of this, I have started fasting from social media, at least once a year. Putting it aside doesn't kill me, and it helps me act with wisdom if I choose to pick it up again.

I think about how much emphasis I place upon my fitness and physical health, and the same must be true of my spiritual life. If I want to train myself in godliness, to allow the Holy Spirit to shape me, then it can require experimentation. It could mean saying “no” to consuming things that fill me with conflict and saying “yes” to time with God. He has called us to be set apart. We can never just swallow what everyone else is doing, but we lay every decision before Him.

1 What are examples of things that we can consume that are not beneficial for us?

2 What can cloud our judgment about what is good?

3 How might you choose to live in the world, without compromising your values?

Evaluating Our Consumption

In an imperfect world, there are any number of ways that our habits of consumption might not be surrendered to God. By paying attention to our habits, we can honor Him in our daily living.

For the next three days, you are invited to keep track of your intake in one area of consumption (food and drink, entertainment, social media, or something else). Hold your record before God with a prayer:

Father, would any changes be honoring in Your sight?

Be prepared to respond to what God chooses to show you.

Key Text

Exercise thyself rather unto godliness. For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.

—1 Timothy 4:7b–8 KJV

Train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.

—1 Timothy 4:7b–8 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of March 9 through March 14

Mon. Psalm 12—God Will Defend the Needy.

Tue. Luke 12:13–21, 33–34—Do Not Be Afraid to Give.

Wed. Leviticus 19:11–18—Treat the Neighbor with Justice.

Thu. James 2:8–13—The Royal Law of Love.

Fri. Luke 10:25–37—Everyone is Our Neighbor.

Sat. Deuteronomy 15:4–11—Compassion for Those in Need.

Next Week: Deuteronomy 15:4–11; Matthew 25:42–45

We will discuss living “openhanded” to the needs of others. What are some blessings from God that make you grateful this week?