

STUDY GUIDE: LIVING THE CONTROLLED LIFE (MODULE 201)

Lesson #2 – Controlling Our Exposure: The Numbing Effect

There is an obvious fact about our human nature. Whatever becomes common becomes “invisible.” Our culture offers abundant quantities of things and experiences that can and will numb our spiritual sensitivities.

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

The verse he read was Ephesians 4:19, “*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 was that last line, “*with a continual lust for more,*” that gave him pause. The end result of this moral depravity, according to Paul, was a “*continual lust for more.*” Did I show signs in my life of a “*continual lust for more,* he asked himself?”

What a good question for all of us to ask ourselves. In this verse Paul gives us the progressive decline that leads a person to 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. It would do us all well to be aware of the following three step progression of failure so we can do everything possible to avoid inadvertently falling into its subtle clutches.

The First Step: Callousness

“lost all sensitivity”

There is an obvious fact about our human nature. Whatever becomes common becomes “invisible.” Our culture offers abundant quantities 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, the crude, the greedy, the violent, the selfish, the blasphemous – it 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 come from excessive use of some part of your body – hands, feet, fingers, etc. Once a callus has formed, the feeling in that area of your body is gone.

There is a little song I sang as a child that cautions against becoming calloused. You may know it. It is entitled, “Oh be careful little eyes what you see...” The other verses tell 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 what we are exposing ourselves to.

This numbing effect of the things of this world is no better illustrated than in Jesus' assessment of the believers in the church at Laodicea in Revelation 3:15-18, *"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would 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, that you may become rich, and white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see."*

John Calvin said, "Prosperity inebriates men, so that they take delights in their own merits. Nothing is more dangerous than to be blinded by prosperity." These believers had become so numbed 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 slowly over time to become numb to their own materialism to the point of blindness. Have we, like them, become numbed by the appeal of the world so that we too are unaware of our own spiritual blindness?

The way to avoid this downward spiral is to do whatever we can to avoid being injected with the numbing Novocain of worldliness and materialism.

The Second Step: An increasing indulgence in our physical appetites *"indulge"*

Once we are adequately and spiritually numbed 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 are now muffled or silenced altogether, we will become like the believer in James 1:22-24, *"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."* He is no longer inclined to respond. He is rather inclined to forget. The numbness has done its work.

Now, sufficiently numbed to spiritual reality and truth, we can blindly pursue, partake of 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 things, wear things, watch things, eat things, drink things and say things totally oblivious to our spiritual inconsistency and opposition to the ways of God. Satisfying our appetites/pleasures can easily become a major focus, if not the *primary* focus of our lives.

The Third Step: Addiction

“a continual lust for more”

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

If we would be completely honest with ourselves, we would all 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 and on. The only real difference between us is which of these addictive tendencies we personally struggle with.

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). And 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 is warning us to avoid.

*“It’s a slow fade when you give yourself away
It’s a slow fade when black and white
have turned to gray
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 traps of worldly addictions is to first do everything we can to stay away from the “needles of worldly Novocain” that are anxiously waiting to inject their numbing influence on us – hoping that after we have been fully anesthetized we will painlessly and naively wander 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 and numbing effects of the world as we journey on towards eternity.

#1: Be alert: I Corinthians 16:13 tells us, *“Keep your eyes open for spiritual danger; stand true to the Lord; act like men; be strong...”* (TLB)

#2: Be serious: I Peter 5:8 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 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 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, *“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!

STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. Do you find yourself struggling with a continual lust for more of anything? Discuss Ephesians 4:19, "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."
2. As believers, why do you think it is so very easy for us to become numb in this world?
3. What needles of worldly novocain do you allow to numb your spiritual sensitivities?
4. Have you personally seen the statement, "Whatever becomes common becomes invisible" to be true in your regular exposure to what is worldly or evil?
5. In what areas of your life do you find you have become "callous?"
6. Do you find yourself using a phrase that you forbid your children to use a few years ago? Why has crude "toilet" and "sex" talk become so commonly accepted?
7. Considering John Calvin's words, "Prosperity inebriates men, so that they take delights in their own merits," how have you taken your prosperity for granted? "Prosperity inebriates men, so that they take delights in their own merits."
8. Look back over the past 10-15 years of your life and consider how you have developed an "indulged" attitude? How have you experienced lifestyle creep?
9. We all have addictive tendencies. Have you identified yours? What effective strategies have you developed to avoid the enticing and numbing effects of the world?
10. What is going to change in your life going forward because of this lesson? What are you going to start doing differently?