

“Too Much of a Good Thing”  
by Rev. James C. Ramsey

Texts: Isaiah 58:1-12  
1 Corinthians 2:1-12

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[IMAGE – dunkin doughnuts]

I like doughnuts. Double Chocolate from Dunkin. Blueberry Cake from Donut Connection. Original Krispy Kreme when I want Hot Donuts Now! Any flavor and filling combination from Valencia Donuts.

[IMAGE – doughnuts and coffee]

A donut with your coffee in the morning is a good thing. Two donuts on your way home from work is better. Four donuts to break up a late night study marathon is perfect. (I did that more than a few times while in seminary!)

[IMAGE – doughnut eating contest]

I like donuts so much I let my friends once talk me into trying to break the infamous record of our mutual friend, Pipeface. (It’s a nickname – I can tell you that story some other time.)

Anyways, Pipeface always claimed he had won a donut eating contest in high school by downing 21 donuts in one sitting...we had no reason to think he was lying. Who would make something like that up?!

[IMAGE – donettes]

and these doughnuts Pipeface had consumed weren’t puny, fluffy donettes either, he assured us, these were real, cake Dunkin’ Donuts!

[IMAGE – two boxes]

So, one night, when we surely had better things to do. We all headed out to Dunkin’ Donuts and purchased me two dozen assorted donuts, with at least a third of them being Double Chocolate, my favorite flavor. We brought them back and everyone gathered round as I opened up the top box. The first five or six went down easy, as I remember. The next three or four were a bit tougher. By the time I got to that last donut of the first box I was slowing way down, and my friend, Clover, suggested I take a brief respite and maybe get a drink of water.

[IMAGE – eating donuts]

Two donuts into the second dozen, my friends could not contain their amusement. They said my skin began to take on a kind of sugary glaze, much like what was now caked onto the glass of water I was sipping. I ate the next three donuts ploddingly and uncomfortably – they were like swallowing boulders. I rested briefly and number 16 went down a bit easier and the crowd surrounding me began egging me on, believing that the Pipeface record might just fall. I downed number 17 and started on 18, but hit what seemed like a brick wall. I was done. My official tally was recorded as 17 ½, four shy of beating the record. I can tell you that record was never in jeopardy! I didn't get a good night's rest after all my effort...and I'll not try that again.

I still like donuts...but I am here to tell you, that you can have too much of a good thing!

Too much of a good thing -- More and more people are starting to say that about their cell phones.

[IMAGE – father with cell phone]

Jake Knapp felt that his iPhone always absorbed his attention. For him, it was an occupational hazard, since he worked as a design partner with Google Ventures. But he woke up one day realizing his smartphone addiction had started to encroach on time with his kids. He decided he had to do something. He deleted every app that distracted him: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. “It was a huge relief,” he says. Although he thought it would be a short-term experiment, those apps remained off his phone for the next six years.

[IMAGE – stressed with phone]

Sarah Lawrence, a graphic designer, decided to make her phone experience unpleasant. “For two weeks I used my iPhone screen in color,” she says, “and for two weeks I used it in gray scale, which is designed to be irritating.” She found that gray scale reduced her usage and eliminated aimless scrolling.

[IMAGE – percentage checking cell phones]

Jake and Sarah are examples of techies who have tried to break their smartphone addictions. They dumped a lot of phone usage to take back their minds.

[IMAGE – staring at phones question]

It's not uncommon today, to hear people rant about their need to unplug in order to regain some peace and balance in their life. Such an approach would seem to match the message of the Apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, where he challenges them to eliminate distractions and focus their attention.

[IMAGE – 1 Cor 2-2]

“For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ,” says Paul, “and him crucified”  
As is our passion for smartphones, so was Paul’s passion for Christ and his cross — the cross, because it enshrined for Paul the very wisdom of God!

[IMAGE – Cell phone cover]

There’s a lot of good, obviously, in those amazing phones we carry around. They hold our music, our banking, our calendar, our cameras, all of our contacts, our GPS. They are our encyclopedias, our restaurant guides, and our entertainment hubs. I have several apps that are tools for deepening and expanding my faith. But our phones are more often distracting and even dominating of our time and attention, dissuading from what’s really important.

[IMAGE – which wisdom influences]

They keep us in touch with what’s happening in the world, but much of what we get through our phones is shaped by the wisdom of the world, which can be good...to a point. But too much of a good thing, can be overwhelming. And, as Paul points out, the wisdom of the world is often at odds with the wisdom of God.

[IMAGE – Corinth plaza]

The Corinthians were sophisticated people, and the apostle Paul knew it. They were residents of a Roman city in Greece that was cosmopolitan, intellectual and prosperous. It must have been a grand place in Paul’s day, filled with plazas and temples. If iPhones had been available, they would have had the latest versions. If Twitter had been invented, you can only imagine the tweet-storms.

[IMAGE – ancient temple]

But Paul did not insist that the Corinthians abandon their cosmopolitan lifestyle. Instead, he begins in a self-deprecating way. He came in humility, not boasting. He tried to keep his preaching about Jesus plain and simple, so that Christian faith might rest entirely on the power of God.

[IMAGE – the message of Christ]

Paul knows that the message about Jesus will never be as flashy as something that pops up on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram or YouTube. The story of sacrificial love, grace and forgiveness won’t go viral based on a pithy tweet. It’s straightforward and real. Paul intentionally avoids the sophisticated language of Corinth, speaking instead only about “Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”

This message may appear weak, even stupid to many, “but to us,” as Paul says, “ ... it is the power of God.”

[IMAGE – Holy Spirit as gift]

Because the Spirit has been given to us, we have the ability to understand what Paul is saying to us about Jesus Christ and the crucifixion. We may never be without our cellphones. We will always be inundated with the wisdom of the world...but we can learn to turn off the distractions...to look past all of the flashes and buzzes of our devices. We can appreciate the good in them, but also be aware that too much of a good thing, is, well...not so good! For our brains, our relationships, and certainly our souls.

[IMAGE – cell phone users]

Too much of a good thing – that can apply to doughnuts, smartphones...and it can also apply to our religion. As we cling to Jesus, his life and death and resurrection...as we seek to be faithful people in a world often dismissive of faith, how we live and worship and serve makes a big difference for us and matters to God.

[IMAGE – raise your voice]

The people of the Prophet Isaiah’s time were faithful, religious folk. They took their festivals and their worship very seriously. But it seems they took things too far, took themselves too seriously, took a good thing, their practice of the faith...and well, lost their bearings.

[IMAGE – Isaiah 58-3]

They sincerely believed they were seeking God, they thought they delighted in knowing God’s ways...but they had drifted from their core beliefs...and God’s true ways...and they were feeling distance from God. They loved to fast, to show their devotion...but it turns out they were more about serving their own interests, not those of God. All the while they believed themselves to be faithful, they were quarreling and oppressing their workers, and speaking evil.

They did a lot of fasting, too much fasting – fasting can be an effective spiritual practice...but too much of a good thing, as they say.

[IMAGE – Isaiah 58 homeless man]

Isaiah explains to them, and to us, the kind of fast that impresses God...to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into your house, to remove from yourselves evil talk, and to satisfy the needs of the afflicted. You can’t have too much of those good things. Isaiah’s list

sounds very much like Jesus' list of those things done by those who are blessed by God. Do you remember Jesus' words?

[IMAGE – act justly]

<sup>35</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup>I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ... 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these...you did it to me.'

[IMAGE – EU cross at sunset]

You know, Isaiah's list sounds too very much like the mission programs at East Union Church!

I'm still a fan of a doughnut or two, on occasion. I think we should keep our cell phones, but work at using them wisely, maybe more sparingly. I'm all for religious ritual. But too much of a good thing takes us away from God, and the message of Christ on the cross – the mercy and the love and the compassion for God's people. Let that be our focus, our passion, our dedication.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

