

D.G. for Lent

Most of us remember the research carried out at Stanford University that was called “The Marshmallow Experiment.” The experiment began by bringing each child into a private room, sitting them down in a chair, and placing a marshmallow on the table in front of them. At this point, the researcher offered a deal to the child. The researcher told the child that he was going to leave the room and that if the child did not eat the marshmallow while he was away, then they would be rewarded with a second marshmallow. However, if the child decided to eat the first one before the researcher came back, then they would not get a second marshmallow. So the choice was simple: one treat right now or two treats later. The researcher left the room for 15 minutes.

As you can imagine, some kids jumped up and ate the first marshmallow as soon as the researcher closed the door. Others wiggled and bounced and tried to restrain themselves, but eventually gave in to temptation a few minutes later. And finally, a few of the children did manage to wait the entire time.

Have you noticed how hard it is to postpone an instant treat for a greater one later on? Have you noticed that children love to do homework in the subjects they enjoy first and then, in agony, have to tackle doing homework in the subjects they hate? All the time, while they are enjoying doing homework in the subjects they like; in the back of their mind, is the nagging realization that they have to face the inevitable that they hate? Of course, it would be much better to do homework in the subjects they hate first; realizing that enjoyment is delayed only temporarily when they do homework in the subjects they enjoy. Fear not! Who has to will power to attempt such an outlandish suggestion?

The same can happen with food. We eat the food on our plate that we enjoy first and push the rest aside. If we are told, what we pushed aside is good for us; we have an excuse. “We are full already!”

I remember years ago when living in Hattiesburg, frequenting Morrison’s Cafeteria in the mall on occasion. As I stood in line, the first items on display were the desserts, puffed up with chocolate, rich cream and calories. The temptation was great to grab one. Many did; only later to feel a little guilty. They soothed their guilt by ordering a diet drink that they hoped would compensate for their pangs of guilt.

Will power! Do we choose the pain of discipline over the ease of distraction? Is that what delayed gratification is all about?

The old saying says, “Great things come to those who wait.” Delaying gratification is a choice. One can choose to have something now, or one can choose to have something bigger or better at a later time. Delaying gratification improves our willpower and ultimately helps us reach our longer-term goals faster. One can eat a greasy hamburger or an apple. One can spend now or save now. One can smoke now or not smoke...

Lent is a wonderful time to practice delayed gratification. Still Lent isn’t popular but is needed. Lent conjures up ideas like sacrifice, mortification, discipline, self-sacrifice, change, Yet, society reminds us that we should not entertain such archaic ideas. Look around you. Credit cards, technology, and human weakness all contribute to the epidemic of instantaneous gratification we see today. It makes no sense to wait. Buy it now with your credit card. Order it now online with a click of a button.

Delayed gratification is the realization that there is a pleasurable moment at the end of the tunnel and it doesn’t involve being run over by an approaching train.

Obviously, there are lots of hidden benefits associated with practicing delayed gratification. Food tastes so much better when we wait for it. The movie is enjoyed more when the work is done. When the homework we hate is done first, the homework we enjoy doing will be more enjoyable. When we forgot the one marshmallow for a greater treat later; we are blessed because we decided to wait.

So, if we embrace the uncomfortable challenges of Lent to mortify, to sacrifice, to change, it will become a gratifying experience. If we accept our own Good Friday first, then we can enjoy our Easter Sunday later. At the end of it all, we will be able to say TG for giving us a DG opportunity.