

Today, I'd like to use a car analogy to describe God's role in our lives. He designed and manufactured us and in today's readings he operates as our mechanic. A good mechanic considers the conditions a car is exposed to, how the driver responds to those conditions, identifies what might fail, and then offers options for keeping the car running at its best.

Today's first reading is from Chapter 6 of the book of Wisdom, where God does some maintenance on the kings of the world. He knows they operate in conditions that include a high degree of authority and freedom, and He provides an assessment of how they are responding to this position of power. In the section prior to today's reading He says, "Give ear, you who have power over multitudes and lord it over throngs of peoples! Authority was given you by the Lord" and "Severe judgement awaits the exalted." God sees the kings abusing their power and warns them about their upcoming judgement, in automotive terms, how they aren't going to pass their smog test. But, as a good mechanic, he offers them a solution saying, "LEARN WISDOM and that you may not fall away." Wisdom is the key to theirs and our salvation.

The section we read today covers the effects of wisdom, "Whoever for her sake keeps vigil shall quickly be free from care." Think of this as a maintenance-free battery, once you practice wisdom, your life is in God's care. The next section gets into the details of the remedy for the king's lives. "The first step toward wisdom is an earnest desire for discipline." Discipline is needed to follow God's commandments, a way of life that follows his owner's manual, and leads us to a life with Him in heaven.

How does God operate as a mechanic in OUR lives TODAY. Let's start with the conditions our souls are operating in today.

A few years ago, I was sitting in my office at work in the mid-afternoon, when my sweet tooth starts to kick in. I opened a box of chocolate covered cookies hiding in my desk and began to eat them one-by-one. Pretty soon, I had eaten an entire package, 4 servings, 640 calories, and 28 grams of fat. This is an example of today's condition of constant temptation and how NOT to respond to it!

It turns out God designed us for SCARCITY, but we LIVE in a time of ABUNDANCE. Our desires for pleasure obtained through food, power, and material goods, were meant to propagate the human race under the harshest conditions. Part of our design is a reward process that generates a neurotransmitter in the brain called dopamine. Genetically modified mice without dopamine fail to seek out food and end up starving. So, dopamine and our desires are not evil in themselves, but like the power and authority given to kings of the world it must be understood and managed.

Let's look a little deeper at what the mechanic sees when looking at the conditions of our current time. Dr. Anna Lembke (Lem Kay), a clinical psychiatrist, wrote the book, "Dopamine Nation." In it she describes how our modern world has created dopamine-rich experiences through drugs, food, news, gambling, shopping, gaming, texting, social media, and many other products. She states, "The increased numbers, variety, and potency of highly rewarding stimuli today is staggering." All these opportunities for pleasure can cause us to fall into an unhealthy spiral like what the kings of the first reading experienced.

Think of the pleasure system in our bodies like the tires of a car. When driven too aggressively they start to wear out and we lose traction. When we overload our brains with pleasure, the level of dopamine diminishes over time, and pain in the form of cravings increases more and more. At the extreme, Dr Lembke says, "Hedonism, the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake, leads to anhedonia, the inability to enjoy pleasure of any kind. In an environment of scarcity this state is nearly impossible to achieve, but in our modern world of abundance, it takes both knowledge and discipline just to avoid it. We live in a time when wisdom has become more and more relevant.

Going back to the mechanic analogy, God is up there looking at how the pleasure-centric world of today is affecting us and likely seeing us in various stages of addiction. The wear and tear caused by overconsumption includes isolation from friends and family, a tendency towards dishonesty, and the anxiety, irritability, and insomnia caused by withdrawal.

What is the divine mechanic's recommendation for fixing and maintaining our lives in these conditions? In our gospel reading the "wise" virgins applied discipline and moderation to prepare for the groom's arrival. They carried the load of extra oil needed for the long night out, not focused on their own pleasure, but on their mission to light the way for others. They exercised moderation by "trimming" their lamps," a process of cutting the wick in a way that maximizing the light, while minimizing the consumption of oil, making the most of the resources and avoiding waste.

Another recommendation might be abstinence, a common practice in our faith and the best start for correcting any addictive behavior. A period of four weeks is recommended to get through the symptoms of withdrawal and tune our engines towards happiness based on inner peace. Dr. Lembke makes the point that prolonged abstinence isn't always practical. For example, we all use our phones for productive activities even though they provide access to addictive content. "Self-binding" is another word for moderation, a process of curtailing potentially addictive behaviors by committing to certain limits. For example, "I commit to only eating one serving of cookies on any given day."

Another recommendation that is practiced in Alcoholics Anonymous is radical honesty, being completely truthful in all our relationships, especially with ourselves.

In the words of Dr. Lembke this practice, "Enhances awareness, creates more satisfying relationships, and strengthens our ability to delay gratification. It may even prevent the future development of addiction."

A final suggestion from the book to balance our dependence on dopamine, is to find things that despite being uncomfortable, can lead to a state of peace and even euphoria. Exercise, fasting, meditation, and prayer all have this potential. This may sound extreme, but ice baths are growing in popularity as a way to reset our dopamine dependence. Maybe we should rent a few ice baths for our next senior luncheon!

As we enter the four-week advent period and prepare for the coming of Christ both at Christmas and at the end of time, let's take an inventory of our lives. Look at the pleasures we seek, the addictions we face, and our divine creator and mechanic's advice for overcoming them. The USCCB says, "Advent includes an element of penance in the sense of preparing, quieting, and disciplining our hearts for the full joy of Christmas." Let's pray for each other and our families to receive the grace and wisdom of our Father during this blessed time of the liturgical year.