

GOD INVITES EMPTY PEOPLE**ISAIAH 55:1-2; JOHN 7:37-39;
REVELATION 22:17**

You've heard, right? They're back! Twinkies are back on your grocery store shelves as of July 15. You may recall there was much nationwide grief and consternation among junk food lovers when the long time maker of Twinkies, Hostess, declared bankruptcy in May of last year. Production of Twinkies stopped last November. But thanks to Apollo Global Management and Metropoulos & Co Twinkies and the other Hostess snack brands were saved at a cost of \$410 million. Now, we can all once again enjoy the highly nutritious, healthy and hunger satisfying taste of Twinkies! Hooray!

Because you're a physical being, you require physical nourishment. Some things nourish your body and some don't. You can eat dirt, but who wants to? It doesn't taste good and it doesn't provide nourishment. But just because something tastes good doesn't mean it truly nourishes your body. Twinkies might taste good to many of us, but if that's all you ever eat, you'll probably die. Junk food is poor nourishment. Because you're a spiritual creature, you also require spiritual nourishment. Your soul needs to be fed just as much as your body. Your inner spirit needs to be satisfied just as much as your stomach. People can fill up on spiritual junk food – spiritual Twinkies - that never fill up the spiritual emptiness inside. Spiritual junk food doesn't nourish you spiritually.

The Bible uses this analogy between physical nourishment and spiritual nourishment a lot. Three examples. The prophet, Isaiah, who lived some 700 years before Jesus used it. The people of Israel were trying to satisfy their spiritual hunger and thirst in other ways than following Yahweh, the one true God. Jesus Himself used this same analogy. We don't have too many droughts in Ohio. We're usually blessed with an abundance of water, but that's not the case in the land of Israel. Water is scarce there. During this festival the people thanked God for the gift of water which represented physical life to them. In effect, Jesus was saying, "You're praising God for water. True, it quenches your thirst and sustains your physical bodies. But I can give you a different kind of water – spiritual water. That water will quench the thirst of your soul and sustain your inner spirit." You see this same analogy in the last chapter of the last book of the Bible. The Spirit there is the Holy Spirit and the bride is another name for the Church – not a specific, local church but instead all those past, present and future who have put their faith and trust in Jesus.

I hope you noticed something else in those three passages. Each one of them included the word "come." That's the universal word of invitation: "come." We're in the midst of a message series entitled "Our Inviting God." God invites people to come to Him. God invites people to turn away from their sin, their rebellion against Him, their trust in self or in other people or things – and come to Him in repentance, in surrender and put their faith in Him for today and eternity. Then God does something else. God invites those who have come to Him to become

human channels of His divine message to other people who haven't come yet. That's you and me. God invites us to invite other people to Him.

We're providing you a specific way to do exactly that. We're asking you to thoughtfully, prayerfully and intentionally invite unchurched family and friends to join us next week in the National Back to Church Sunday event. I'm praying and hoping for a great day! Our own Ed Kapustin will share a personal testimony. Real Life, the Campus Crusade praise band at Ohio State, will be leading us in worship. Come early at 10:15 and enjoy some additional music. We're serving "walking tacos" after the service in an effort to promote an "open house" atmosphere where you can chat and tour the building if you desire.

So what kind of people does God invite? People who are spectacularly unworthy of His love and grace. Today, I want to remind us that God invites empty people – spiritually hungry, thirsty and malnourished people – to Him. There are all kinds of food and beverages available to you, but a lot of that stuff will not nourish your body. By the same token, there's all kinds of spiritual nourishment offered out there, but a lot of it won't feed your soul. Let's identify, then, ...

THE NOURISHMENT THAT LEAVES YOU EMPTY.

Empty nourishment offers you a deceptive variety of options. This world offers a bewildering buffet of stuff - like the biggest and best smorgasbord ever - promising to meet the needs of your soul. At least five options stand out to me. The first one you could call consumerism. This is the constant encouragement our culture give us to accumulate stuff. The idea is that if you buy this or somehow get that, then, surely the emptiness in your soul will be filled. Much of our advertising and marketing industry relies on offering you this option in as tempting a way as possible. It suggests, "Of course, you're miserable and empty inside. You don't own this yet. You don't have that yet. If you would just buy this, then you would be so happy, so content, so full."

The second option you could call the pursuit of pleasure. Yeah, it's right there in the Declaration of Independence! It says that all of us have the right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Now, the Declaration of Independence is a great document, but it's not the Bible. Nevertheless, many Americans certainly believe that the pursuit of happiness or pleasure however personally defined will somehow fill up the spiritual emptiness inside. A third option might be called accomplishments. Setting and achieving lofty goals in life – that's how you fill the emptiness inside! It might be a career goal, a financial goal or an educational goal. To their credit, people who pursue accomplishments want their lives to make a difference, to count and to matter. That's great, but accomplishments – no matter how great and noble – don't fill you up spiritually.

Relationships is a fourth option. This is a very deceptive choice because it's much closer to the truth. Building and maintaining great relationships with other

human beings – spouses, parents, kids, friends – can and do enrich life immeasurably and bring joy to life in countless ways. But great relationships are few and far between. Many of our close relationships will either blow up in our faces or slip away through time and neglect. Focusing on relationships is wonderful, but they can't relieve spiritual emptiness all by themselves.

A fifth choice is spirituality. By now, most of us know that's the new catch word for people who reject religion and opt instead for spirituality. Many people have a genuine interest in God, but they're turned off by the organized church or any organized religion for that matter. They seek to find answers for the emptiness they feel inside through things like practicing meditation, doing things for and giving money to worthy causes, or being environmentally conscious. It's kind of like building your own burrito at Chipotles. A little of this, a dash of that – whatever you like and tastes good to you. Jesus might even be one ingredient among many in this spiritual burrito. Empty nourishment offers a deceptive variety of options. It suggests that many things can produce soul contentment. If one thing doesn't work, try something else.

Empty nourishment doesn't deliver on its promises. It promises that consumerism, pursuing pleasure, accomplishments, relationships and spirituality will fill up the emptiness inside. In the end, it doesn't. Consumerism is the most obviously untrue, but we still fall for it so many times. Look around! So much money, time and effort gets focused on obtaining and sustaining homes, cars, clothes, technological gadgets and upgrades, dream vacations and the like. Are those things evil and wrong? No, but just accumulating stuff cannot nourish an empty soul. Pursing pleasure or happiness cannot nourish an empty soul. An empty soul isn't nourished by accomplishments either. Sure, all of that can be fun and stimulating for awhile, but it's like spiritual junk food. You can't live on it and be spiritually healthy and whole.

What about human relationships? Sometimes even the most wonderful relationships fall short or go sour for some reason. It seems the older I get and the longer I'm a pastor, the more I discover that there are very few families that don't have some very sad, painful relational failures. Relational brokenness is rampant. Many marriages are strained. Some of them end in divorce. Parents and kids become estranged. Friendships blow up. No, even great relationships with other human beings can't fully nourish an empty soul. And neither can do-it-yourself, build your own burrito spirituality. Empty nourishment doesn't deliver on its promises. At the end of the day, every form of empty nourishment has the same characteristic: it gives low satisfaction at a very high cost. When you chase the wrong things in life – however well intentioned - there's a cost involved. The cost is an even greater emptiness inside.

Potato chips, cheese curls, and candy may be some of your favorite things to eat, but for a few mule deer in Arizona's Grand Canyon National Park, those foods proved to be deadly. Park rangers had to kill over two dozen mule deer

because they became hooked on junk food left by visitors to the park. Once they get a taste of the sugar and salt, the deer develop an extreme addiction and will go to any lengths to eat only junk food. The result is the animals ignore the food they need, leaving them in poor health and on the edge of starvation. Because of junk food cravings, the deer lose their natural ability to digest vegetation. One park ranger called junk food “the crack cocaine of the deer world.” You can develop a craving for the nourishment this world offers. Not only will it leave you empty, it keeps you from hungering for the things of God. A diet of spiritual junk food will never nourish your soul. Your inner spirit will wither and die. Fortunately, there’s an alternative. Let’s switch gears and talk about ...

THE NOURISHMENT THAT LEAVES YOU SATISFIED.

The Bible passages we read earlier point us to at least six things that result in real, lasting nourishment of your soul. First of all, satisfying nourishment is discovered ultimately in a Person: Jesus Christ. Empty nourishment preaches that you have a wide variety of choices that can fill up your soul. God says there is only one choice. Only one relationship can truly fill up your inner spirit. This is what Jesus was getting at when He said in the passage we read earlier, “... ‘Anyone who is thirsty may come to me! Anyone who believes in me may come and drink!...’” (John 7:37-38 NLT) God is a Person who created you with a built in need for a connecting relationship with him. It’s been pointed out that every person has a kind of God-shaped inner or spiritual space in his or her soul. When God fills that space with Himself, the emptiness begins to end.

Second, satisfying nourishment is available to anyone. Jesus said, “... ‘Anyone who is thirsty may come to me! Anyone who believes in me may come and drink!...’” (John 7:37-38 NLT) How did Isaiah, the prophet, put it? “‘Is anyone thirsty? Come and drink—’” (Is 55:1 NLT) In the last chapter of the Bible, it says, “...Let anyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who desires drink freely from the water of life.” (Rev. 22:17 NLT) All are invited. Everyone can come – rich, poor, educated, uneducated, people of every color, race and ethnicity, people who’ve gone to church all their lives and people – especially those people – who have yet even to step through a church door. The only requirement is that you recognize your spiritual thirst and ask Jesus to quench it. Are you hungry? Are you thirsty? Frankly, not everyone is. Are you empty inside? Not everyone will admit he or she is. God invites empty people. Anyone. Anywhere. Anytime.

Third, spiritual nourishment is free. Through Isaiah, God makes that very clear. “‘Is anyone thirsty? Come and drink— even if you have no money! Come, take your choice of wine or milk— it’s all free! Why spend your money on food that does not give you strength? Why pay for food that does you no good?...’” (Is. 55:1-2 NLT) It’s also very clear in the Revelation verse. “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ Let anyone who hears this say, ‘Come.’ Let anyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who desires drink freely from the water of life.” (Rev. 22:17 NLT) Jesus didn’t attach a price tag to the offer He made there in John 7 either.

God offers you and me the gift of an eternal relationship with Him free of charge to us. Now, it's free to us because it was very expensive to God. Your sin and mine created a spiritual debt payable to an absolutely holy God. The debt was and is death. At the cross, Jesus died in your place and mine. He paid the debt to God that our sin created. Do you see the marvelous irony in all of that? On the one hand, this world offers you at very high prices what can never truly satisfy your soul. On the other hand, God offers at no cost to you what alone can fill up and satisfy your inner spirit.

Fourth, spiritual nourishment is abundant. In the Isaiah passage, God talks about unlimited wine and milk which were considered back then as kind of the ultimate symbols of luxury and extravagance. God says there, "... 'Listen to me, and you will eat what is good. You will enjoy the finest food.'" (Isaiah 55:2 NLT) Jesus in John 7 tells us that rivers of living water – gushing, abundant water – would flow out of us. In another place, Jesus compared Himself to a good and faithful shepherd. He said, "The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life." (John 10:10 NLT) There's nothing cheap and limited about God. God is all about abundance.

So, then, what about stuff? God doesn't begrudge you your possessions. But beyond homes, car, clothes and gadgets, God promises you what money can never buy – love, grace, mercy, forgiveness, peace and – above all – the presence of the Holy Spirit to live in you. He also promises you an eternal home with Him in a place called Heaven when you die. What about pleasure and happiness? God made the world and everything good in it for your pleasure, but never forget what the Bible says about God. "You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever." (Ps. 16:11 NLT). God Himself and knowing Him is the greatest pleasure of all. What about accomplishments and relationships? God made you to achieve, to do important things, to make and accomplish grand, noble goals. Most of all, He invites you to help build His eternal Kingdom by inviting people to Him. God is all about abundance. He fills up empty people with Himself.

Fifth, satisfying nourishments has conditions. Yes, it's free and it's abundant. But when Jesus said, "Anyone who believes in me may come and drink!..." (John 7:38 NLT), what does He mean by that word "believe"? It's more than just believing in the facts – that Jesus lived, that Jesus died, that Jesus even rose from the dead. Believing in Jesus means to put your complete trust in Him for this life and for eternity. Believing in Jesus also means to conform your life to Him; in other words, you begin to do life His way. It means handing over the leadership and control of your life to Him forever. That will be difficult at times, because few of us like to give up control of our lives to anyone. So, it might just depend on how much you're willing to admit your own emptiness. God invites empty people, to be sure, knowing that only those who admit just how empty they really are will come to Him to be filled. There are those who pretend they're

already full and who feel no real need of what only He can give. They're invited, too, but the fact is, they don't come. Those are the terms – take 'em or leave 'em!

Finally, satisfying nourishment has positive effects on others. Jesus said that when you come to Him you end up having streams of living water flowing out of you. Your life begins to overflow. Because God is so abundant, what He gives you can't be contained in you. You can't help but become a channel of His love and grace to others. If you're a follower of Jesus, don't miss the implication. Do you love lost people? Jesus did. Do you love spiritually dirty people? Jesus did. Do you love empty people? Jesus did. Now that Jesus is back up in Heaven, how does He still invite people to Him? Through you and me. Are you praying for anyone who you know is empty inside? Are you cultivating a relationship with someone who is hungry for God but just doesn't know it yet? Will you invite someone to church next Sunday who shows no signs of a relationship with God yet? Will you keep inviting him or her even if they turn you down this time around? Sometimes it takes spiritually empty people awhile to figure out that they're empty. God invites empty people. How? Through you and me.

Judy was a party animal—a big drinker with a self-contented lifestyle. She was someone everybody loved, because she exuded excitement and a thrill for life. When her brother, Steve, a pastor, tried to share Jesus with her over the years, she would laugh it off and keep partying. But at the age of 44, her world caved in. She found out she had breast cancer. She later learned her husband had cancer, too. Then she discovered her husband was having an affair. He subsequently announced he didn't love her anymore and left her. Judy was about as empty as a person can be. She began to ask eternal questions and soon prayed to receive Jesus as her Savior.

With the same gusto she lived life as an unbeliever, Judy now approached her new life in Jesus. Her greatest aim was pointing others to Jesus. She boldly shared her faith even as she had multiple surgeries, praying for a miraculous healing from the Lord. Judy ultimately came to see that the greater miracle would be for her friends and family to come to know Jesus. She talked her way out of the hospital about ten days before her death so she could be baptized and publicly proclaim Jesus as the only way of salvation. Judy invited everyone she knew to come to her baptism service. She powerfully and urgently shared her testimony. Her 84-year-old father came to faith in Christ that night and was baptized—along with her ex-husband, a number of nieces, a college roommate who was a New Age cultist, her aunt, her sister, and others. Ten days later, Judy died. When her brother, Steve, read the message she had prepared for her own funeral service, another 100 people prayed to receive Jesus that same day.

God is indeed an inviting God. He invites empty people into His fullness. He invites us to invite other people into an eternal relationship with Him.