

## Our Desires: What Should We Do with Them? (Prayer is the Expression of Desire)

- We are full of desires. We feel their constant tug. Wherever I go, whatever I do, I'm inundated by a wide variety of desires. I want food, I want rest, I want something to do, I want peace, I want happiness, I want pleasure, I want to be a good man, I want revenge, I want what's best for a child, I want to hurt the person who cut me off....I want.
  - As a man striving after Christ's will in our lives, what are we to do with these desires? Suppress them? Fulfill them uncritically? Let them direct us? Ignore them? These desires are quietly, but strongly, at work in our lives, largely directing our day. It is good for us to be aware of and in control of them.
- In order to probe this question we start from the foundation: God created all things and therefore all created things are good, fundamentally speaking. Look at the Garden of Eden. After God created all things, he stopped, took it all in and said, "it is good" and when He say "it", He meant everything. Thus, we can say that our desires, as a part of us, must be fundamentally good. Desires are things given to us by God to call us to Himself. God is ultimately the object of all our desires, that is to say, He is what we really desire when we desire other things. The Catechism puts it this way: "The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for..." CCC 27
  - So to recap then, our desires, at their root, are not bad but are in fact something good given to us by God to draw us towards Himself.
- So then the obvious question becomes, what happens? Why does it seem that our desires often lead us into sin? And why are we about to take part in a season (Lent) that asks us to curtail our desires, to keep them in check?
  - We can go back to the Garden of Eden for our answer. Simply put, man chose his will and his way over God's when he grabbed at the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. He said, in essence, "I know what you have said Lord, I know how you have ordered the world, and I know what you want for me but I want what I want. I have a desire and I want to exercise it, fulfill it, in the way that I want! I want to be lord of my life. I do not trust that your way will be best."
  - From this point on we have inherited a nature, an existence, that is disordered, that is inclined towards sin. Thus, our desires, while meant to lead us to God, often lead us away from Him. We were created integrated, our souls possessed dominion over our body, ordered our passions and desires correctly. Then, after the Fall, we became disintegrated. Things "came apart" if you will.
    - Here's how Frank Sheed puts it: "Each of our powers seeks its own outlet, each of our needs its own immediate gratification; we have not the subordination of all our powers to reason and of reason to God which would unify all our striving: **every one of us is a civil war...**" Civil War!! He continues..."Passions are good things given for man's service; but in our actual state they dominate us as often as they serve us - more often indeed, unless we make an effort at control which costs us appallingly. They were meant to be instruments which we should use; instruments should be in our grip; only too often we feel as if we were in theirs." Frank Sheed, *Theology for Beginners*).
- What does this all mean: it's not our desires that are bad, or the strength of them that is bad, is the disordering or the wrongful orientation of them that is. We have desires for the infinite within us but seek to satisfy them on finite things. When those finite things don't fulfill our infinite desire, we seek more of them or we seek them in disordered ways. We ask of them something they cannot do, fill us, and so then our search to fill this infinite hole with finite things becomes perverse. A couple of examples to illustrate this:
  - Sexual desire is a good thing. It is a God-given gift for the good of others and one's self. Now, sexual desire can either be ordered by chastity or disordered towards lust. Let's imagine a married man. If his sexuality is expressed in a chaste way his sexuality becomes an act of self-giving love to his spouse whereby he participates in and manifests Christ's self-giving love. It also becomes a gift to his spouse as he communicates his complete acceptance of her and his total giving of himself to her. Now, if his sexuality is manifested in lust, his sexuality becomes a means that takes from his wife for his own selfish desires. Thus, man acts like Adam in the Garden and not like Christ, by grabbing for himself. He also takes from his wife, communicating, not love, but lust, and that her value is that she is an object for his pleasure. In chastity we say with our bodies to our spouse: "This is my body given unto you" whereas with lust, we say just the opposite, "this is your body for me to take purely for my gratification." Again,

to reiterate, the desire and the pleasure that comes is not bad, its the orientation that is. Am I giving of myself and am I receiving gifts as if from God with gratitude.

- One more. We have a desire to eat. Now, this is easy to see that this is a good thing. Likewise, it is easy to see how this becomes twisted, or disordered, in gluttony. I'm eating a piece of cake at my kid's birthday party. I'm a little restless. I start eating the cake to take away my restlessness, to bring me comfort, and grab at the pleasure of it, instead of receiving it. Now, halfway through the piece of cake, I'm already thinking about the next piece. I become a bit like an animal and eat more and more. This is gluttony. The purpose of eating has become distorted. What would ordered eating look like? I'm simply enjoying this celebration of my kid's life, grateful to God that I can be his father and know him. A piece of cake is offered. I gratefully accept it to take part in the celebration and because I want to enjoy the taste of it as well (there is no harm in this). I enjoy the cake, tasting it, and receiving its goodness. I savor it. Halfway through I start to think about having more but I stop myself and seek instead to be grateful for what I have left and what I have had already. I receive the richness of the cake as a gift from God and I thank Him in my heart, for eating, for the cake and for my son. Somehow they all lead me to gratitude, to rest in God a little more, to see the cake as an example of the sweetness of resting in God.
- Take a second, can you imagine a desire/passion and a proper ordering of it?
- Thus, we can see, that even though desires get twisted, when we scratch away the surface, or untwist the twisting, we can see that behind every disordered desire is an unmet pure and holy desire, is a desire ultimately for God.
  - Here is how CS Lewis puts this: "It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased." CS Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*
- So then, so what? What do we do?
  - Well, we're entering into Lent. Let this Lent be a time of reordering our desires, of untwisting what has become twisted, of becoming more integrated. Why? So that we can be full and content. So that those around us are not hurt by our actions and thoughts. When we live according to God's plan, joy, peace, and order follow.
  - We have strong desires, let us begin by recognizing that. Let us begin by realizing these are good gifts from God that we are stewards of. This can be point #1, recognizing our desires as gifts.
    - "Ignoring desire doesn't work. Suppressing desire doesn't work. Replacing desire doesn't work. Sabotaging desire doesn't work. Living from disordered desire doesn't work. What does? Living a life of true desire is what works. Jesus says in, in John 10:10 "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Jesus came that we may have Abundant Life! Sounds like Desire to me!" (<https://www.catholicstand.com/desire/>)
  - Then, we must attend to our desires, be aware of them, and ask, what do they reveal? This can be point #2. What do our desires tell us? What are your strongest desires? What aspect of God am I yearning for? And how do I misdirect these desires?
    - I'd encourage you to pray about this. In prayer, allow your desires to surface and then evaluate them. Let the Lord reveal your deepest desires. St. Thomas Aquinas says that "Our prayer ought also to be ordered as our desires should be ordered, for prayer is but the expression of desire." Too often we think that prayer is about the suppression of desire, the removal of desire. However, prayer is about allowing the deepest, truest desires to come forth, recognizing them, and then properly orienting them towards God. Again, God is ultimately the object of all our desire. More on this later.
  - Point #3 is to trust that God has more for you than you do for yourself, that His plans are better than your own. Adam didn't trust that God had his best well being in mind. Christ trusted completely in the desert and on the cross that the Father would take care of Him and knew what was best.
  - Point #4, and these aren't necessarily in chronological order but this is the most important one, is to take a step towards that ultimate goal of ordering our desires and finding God at the end of them. We do this by turning to God over and over.

- The Church has consistently proclaimed that Christ is the new Adam because He is the undoer of Adam's Original Sin. Whereas Adam, a creature, chose himself and tried to become lord of his own life, Jesus, the Creator, chose the Father and let Him be the Lord of His life. Man sinned in Adam, choosing to leave God but God became man in Jesus, did not sin, and thereby chose to cling to man. God became one of us, man, and did what we could not do, He was completely obedient and restored man's relationship to the Father! Just as death came into the world through a tree in a garden, it was fitting life was restored to us on a tree in a garden. Christ untangles Adam's sin to such an extent that the situation in which we find ourselves today is even better than what Adam and Eve had.
- As St. Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans: "18 Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. 19 For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous."
  - Now, one further question, did Christ have desires and passions? Of course! He was fully man. What is the difference between Him and Adam? Christ was in possession of His desires and ordered them to loving God and His neighbor. He oriented them towards the Father.
- Thus, let us God to God in prayer, as we've already mentioned. It is here that God will slowly start to bring about the untangling of our tangled passions. He will work in ways that we cannot imagine and, in fact, cannot do without Him. Please, above all, turn to God in prayer. This will bring about more than anything else.
- But also we must cooperate. As we enter into Lent tomorrow, we realize that this is what we mean to do in our Lenten season when either give something up or do something extra. We mean to untwist that which is twisted within us, to cooperate with the work God is doing within us. We mean to stop asking something of things around that they can't provide, namely ultimate satisfaction, and instead be in relationship with them as they truly are, as a means to an end, to the End (God).
- Frank Sheed helps us here. He says. "Whatever the soul in charity loves, it loves for what of God is in it, the amount of God's goodness it expresses or mirrors. This is true love, since it means loving things or persons not for what we can get out of them but for what God has put into them, not for what they can do for us but for what is real in them. It means loving things or persons for what they are, and it is rooted in loving God for what he is." Theology for Beginners by Frank Sheed
  - Thus, when we curb our desires through ascetic practices we are trimming them, reordering them to proper ends, we are ordering them towards love. This will mean that some desires cannot be expressed (i.e. sexual desires show a desire for unity and self giving but cannot be expressed at all times as in before marriage, outside of marriage, celibacy, etc.) but many can be exercised but just in an way that is aimed at union with God. Let us be children of Jesus and not of Adam.
- Now we will have time for quiet reflection, a chance, if you want, to work through these proposed steps, to look at our desires with the Lord. I've provided some guiding questions on the handout you have. This is completely optional, I do not mean to control your prayer time, but if you'd like, there is guidance available. There are also additional Scripture passages and other Church teachings that I found to be relevant.

## Talk Outline

- “The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for...” CCC 27
- “Each of our powers seeks its own outlet, each of our needs its own immediate gratification; we have not the subordination of all our powers to reason and of reason to God which would unify all our striving: **every one of us is a civil war**...Passions are good things given for man’s service; but in our actual state they dominate us as often as they serve us - more often indeed, unless we make an effort at control which costs us appallingly. They were meant to be instruments which we should use; instruments should be in our grip; only too often we feel as if we were in theirs.” Frank Sheed, *Theology for Beginners* (my bolded emphasis).
- “It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.” CS Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*
- Point #1 - Recognize and accept our desires as fundamentally good gifts from God.
  - “Ignoring desire doesn’t work. Suppressing desire doesn’t work. Replacing desire doesn’t work. Sabotaging desire doesn’t work. Living from disordered desire doesn’t work. What does? Living a life of true desire is what works. Jesus says in, in John 10:10 ‘The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.’ Jesus came that we may have Abundant Life! Sounds like Desire to me!” (<https://www.catholicstand.com/desire/>)
- Point #2 - Attend to our desires, be aware of them, and ask, what do they reveal?
  - “Our prayer ought also to be ordered as our desires should be ordered, for prayer is but the expression of desire.” St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Catechetical Instructions of St. Thomas Aquinas*
- Point #3 - Trust that what God wants for you is even better than what you want for yourself, that His plans are better than your own, even though you may not always understand them.
- Point #4 - Turn to God consistently in prayer. Then cooperate on the material level by some acts of asceticism (Lenten practices).
  - “Whatever the soul in charity loves, it loves for what of God is in it, the amount of God’s goodness it expresses or mirrors. This is true love, since it means loving things or persons not for what we can get out of them but for what God has put into them, not for what they can do for us but for what is real in them. It means loving things or persons for what they are, and it is rooted in loving God for what he is.” Frank Sheed, *Theology for Beginners*
  - “18 Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. 19 For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.” Romans 5:18-19

## Questions for Reflection

- What is it that I most strongly desire (i.e. peace, comfort, affections of others, etc.)?
  - A way to probe for an answer is to reflect on your day and see what is the motivation that often guides your actions. Ask, “why do I what I do?”
  - Or, what is my mind often preoccupied with? What do I spend your time thinking about? Why? What’s the root desire of these thoughts?
- What do these desires tell me about what it is that I most deeply long for? What aspect of God am I yearning for? For instance, if you’re constantly thinking of and searching for relaxation, at the root of this desire may be a longing for the peace and rest that only God can provide.
- How do I misdirect these desires?
- What can I do to reorient, or reorder, what I do with my current desires? (No need to do them all, just one or a few) How can I direct this desire towards its true fulfillment in Christ?
  - Another way to ask this: Are my desires, once recognized, submitted to God? If I’m aware of a desire that’s moving me towards an action, is it directed towards Him or towards yourself? Who am I ultimately trying to satisfy with my actions? Subordinate, submit every desire to God and then that desire will find a true resting place, true satisfaction.

## Extra Scripture/Quotes for Prayer

- James 1:12-18
  - 12 Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. 13 No one, when tempted, should say, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. 14 But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it; 15 then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. 16 Do not be deceived, my beloved.<sup>[b]</sup> 17 Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.<sup>[c]</sup> 18 In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.
- Ephesians 2:3-8
  - 3 All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us 5 even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ<sup>[a]</sup>—by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.
- Gaudium et Spes, 13-14 (Document of the 2nd Vatican Council)
  - 13. Although he was made by God in a state of holiness, from the very onset of his history man abused his liberty, at the urging of the Evil One. Man set himself against God and sought to attain his goal apart from God. Although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, but their senseless minds were darkened and they served the creature rather than the Creator.<sup>(3)</sup> What divine revelation makes known to us agrees with experience. Examining his heart, man finds that he has inclinations toward evil too, and is engulfed by manifold ills which cannot come from his good Creator. Often refusing to acknowledge God as his beginning, man has disrupted also his proper relationship to his own ultimate goal as well as his whole relationship toward himself and others and all created things.
  - Therefore man is split within himself. As a result, all of human life, whether individual or collective, shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness. Indeed, man finds that by himself he is incapable of battling the assaults of evil successfully, so that everyone feels as though he is bound by chains. But the Lord Himself came to free and strengthen man, renewing him inwardly and casting out that "prince of this world" (John 12:31) who held him in the bondage of sin.<sup>(4)</sup> For sin has diminished man, blocking his path to fulfillment. The call to grandeur and the depths of misery, both of which are a part of human experience, find their ultimate and simultaneous explanation in the light of this revelation.
  - 14. Though made of body and soul, man is one. Through his bodily composition he gathers to himself the elements of the material world; thus they reach their crown through him, and through him raise their voice in free praise of the Creator.<sup>(6)</sup> For this reason man is not allowed to despise his bodily life, rather he is obliged to regard his body as good and honorable since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day. Nevertheless, wounded by sin, man experiences rebellious stirrings in his body. But the very dignity of man postulates that man glorify God in his body and forbid it to serve the evil inclinations of his heart.
- Romans 5:17-19
  - “17 If, because of the one man’s trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. 18 Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. 19 For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.”

## **From a treatise by St Augustine on the first epistle of John**

### **Our heart longs for God**

We have been promised that we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. By these words, the tongue has done its best; now we must apply the meditation of the heart. Although they are the words of Saint John, what are they in comparison with the divine reality? And how can we, so greatly inferior to John in merit, add anything of our own? Yet we have received, as John has told us, an anointing by the Holy One which teaches us inwardly more than our tongue can speak. Let us turn to this source of knowledge, and because at present you cannot see, make it your business to desire the divine vision.

The entire life of a good Christian is in fact an exercise of holy desire. You do not yet see what you long for, but the very act of desiring prepares you, so that when he comes you may see and be utterly satisfied.

Suppose you are going to fill some holder or container, and you know you will be given a large amount. Then you set about stretching your sack or wineskin or whatever it is. Why? Because you know the quantity you will have to put in it and your eyes tell you there is not enough room. By stretching it, therefore, you increase the capacity of the sack, and this is how God deals with us. Simply by making us wait he increases our desire, which in turn enlarges the capacity of our soul, making it able to receive what is to be given to us.

So, my brethren, let us continue to desire, for we shall be filled. Take note of Saint Paul stretching as it were his ability to receive what is to come: Not that I have already obtained this, he said, or am made perfect. Brethren, I do not consider that I have already obtained it.

We might ask him, "If you have not yet obtained it, what are you doing in this life?" This one thing I do, answers Paul, forgetting what lies behind, and stretching forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the prize to which I am called in the life above. Not only did Paul say he stretched forward, but he also declared that he pressed on towards a chosen goal. He realised in fact that he was still short of receiving what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived.

Such is our Christian life. By desiring heaven we exercise the powers of our soul. Now this exercise will be effective only to the extent that we free ourselves from desires leading to infatuation with this world. Let me return to the example I have already used, of filling an empty container. God means to fill each of you with what is good; so cast out what is bad! If he wishes to fill you with honey and you are full of sour wine, where is the honey to go? The vessel must be emptied of its contents and then be cleansed. Yes, it must be cleansed even if you have to work hard and scour it. It must be made fit for the new thing, whatever it may be.

We may go on speaking figuratively of honey, gold or wine – but whatever we say we cannot express the reality we are to receive. The name of that reality is God. But who will claim that in that one syllable we utter the full expanse of our heart's desire? Therefore, whatever we say is necessarily less than the full truth. We must extend ourselves towards the measure of Christ so that when he comes he may fill us with his presence. Then we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.