

## A THORN FOR EACH OF US: A Look at Our Desires as Spiritual Formation

A working definition of spiritual formation, or more simply termed discipleship is a lifelong process of deepening one's relationship with God and becoming more Christ-like (2 Cor 3:17-18). It involves learning and practicing spiritual disciplines and developing the right relationships with the personhood of God, His word, others, and one's self.

Any good disciple will regularly take into consideration the practice of contemplative prayer, scripture meditation, silence and solitude, and spiritual fasting. The goal and benefit of these are communion with God that births hopefulness, compassion, understanding, and a sense of purpose and meaning, inspiration and appreciation, and peace of mind.

Because we experience God as embodied human beings, this journey includes our minds, what we know, and also our emotions, will, personality, and body. God wants to transform all of who we are to be formed by the Holy Spirit in this way requires both participation and intentionality (Rom 12:1-2).

Formation is an organic, lifelong, and holistic process that includes right thinking (orthodoxy), right behaviors (orthopraxy), and right feelings (orthopathy) of individuals. Therefore, the focus of spiritual formation is the Holy Spirit, who guides the ongoing journey towards union with God. The ultimate response is submission.

One of the most overlooked and understudied concepts is that desire is at the core of our spiritual formation and the core of our very lives. Desires can lead to the development of our character, and increase in faith, and the promotion of service. But they can also lead to self-centeredness, narcissistic pursuit, and spiritual infidelity (**James 1:14-15**).

The Bible says that desires can be good or bad depending on whether they are centered on God or on self. Desires that are centered on God are good and fulfill their intended purpose (**Ps 37:4-5**). Desires that are centered on self are evil and are an act of idolatry (**James 4:1-3**).

When our desires are God-centered, they are good and fulfill their intended role (**Mt 6:33**). But when they are self-centered when our desires are captured by the things of the fallen world and the sinful nature (the flesh), they are evil (**1 Jn 2:15-17**). These have been called disordered loves.

We must come to understand that little has more bearing on who we are becoming than how we relate to our desires. Certainly, what a person does with their desires invariably shapes who they are, where they are going, and who and how they will love. Christ included.

Because our longings are a central component of the human experience, How we desire has as much consequence as what we desire. At times it is good to hope that God will give us the desires of our heart. But there are also times when the desires of our heart are distorted, untrustworthy, and even deadly.

This is why we each, like the Apostle Paul, have a thorn of our own; some desire that we internally deal with that shapes our faith, our pursuits and our living. Whatever those desires are, spoken or smothered by delusion, at some point, we need to analyze them and treat them accordingly (**Ps 51:6-10**).

Laying our desire bare before the Spirit who “searches all things” (**1 Cor 2:10**) is a part of God’s deep work, or spiritual formation in our lives. If we choose instead to ignore our desires, we run the risk of doing great harm to others and possibly even greater harm to ourselves.

As Christians our desires need to be checked and weighed against the plan and purpose of God for our lives; unlike the *desires du jour* of the culture. Instead, the Christian call is to follow the One who made us out of His desire and gave us our own; ultimately we would in turn desire Him.

There is an unbelievably large amount of scripture given towards the concept of our desires and how they are placed or misplaced (**Jn 1:37-39; Mk 10:35-38; Lk 9:11-13**).

God made us to be desiring creatures. Scripture shows us that desire is not inherently evil but is good or bad depending on whether it is God-centered or self-centered. However, His intention in doing so was for our desire to be focused upon Him and His will and that by free will we choose Him above all (**Lk 9:23**).

Because, as St Augustine once wrote, “Our Life is a gymnasium of desire,” the goal of this study is for Him to be the freely chosen supreme love and desire of our hearts, the sole object of our worship, and for His will to be our will. (**To Be cont'd**) ...

## A THORN FOR EACH OF US: A Look at Our Desires as Spiritual Formation Pt. 2

If we consider spiritual formation as the process by which we grow into a deeper relationship with God and become more Christ-like we must examine desires. Because our human desires can determine the trajectory of our lives they should be a part of our routine self-examinations.

Holistic transformation and perpetual spiritual growth can remain out of reach for all of us unless we curiously and lovingly examine the desires of our hearts. Often times, in these desires, we can identify the very place where God wants to meet and heal and transform our hearts.

While we can agree that desire in and of itself is not a bad thing, we have to learn how to discern what desires lead us closer to God and which drive us away (**Rom 8:5-8**). Most times, we'd prefer to not even think about our dark or challenging desires. Instead, we'd rather erase them and move on, or as in the garden, we'd rather cover than confess (**Gen 3:6-7**).

The invitation is to know our desires intimately so that we can properly appropriate them; embracing the healthy ones and casting down the vain ones (**2 Cor 10:5**). The truth, as David said, "In the inward parts", will set us free; pretending won't and ignoring our desires only empowers them (**Jn 8:32**).

Not to oversimplify this, but; What do I want and why do I want this for myself or my life is a great way to begin the process. When we begin to ask these questions of ourselves, the *why* becomes important because the *what* of our desires will change with the seasons of life.

Here's the why! We have desires because God *desired*... and we are created in His image and made in His likeness (**Gen 1:26-27**). We believe in the solitariness of God; that God stands alone in His majesty, is unique in His excellency, and peerless in His perfection.

And because He sustains all but is Himself independent of all and He gives to all but is sustained by none He did not need to create anything to be God. God, in love, created out of desire. Everything exists because God desired it to exist. We exist because of divine desire.

God did not create the cosmos because he had to out of compulsivity or necessity or out of boredom, sadness, a need for companionship, or some existential crisis. His wants or desires are not like ours that are birthed out of lack or deficit. Divine wants are birthed out of love and the desire for something or someone to receive that love (**Jn 3:16**).

In other words, God desired friendship, relationship, and intimacy with His creation. He desires to create, desires to sustain, and desires to bless a world out of sheer love and joy

that they might enjoy face to face relationship with Him. He has invited and welcomed creation to be a part of the mutual love relationship of the Trinity (**Mt 28:18-20; 2 Cor 13:14; Col 2:9**).

In its essence, the Trinity is an eternal relationship between three co-equal, co-loving, co-submitted persons, which theologians coined the term *Condilectum* or “equal longing” to describe this. This is to say that God is in and of Himself a relationship of mutual love, service, and desire. The Christian life, then is entering the Trinity’s hospitable desire.

What should be exciting for each of us is that we are alive, and here, and loved and in relationship with Him because God desired it to be so (**Mk 3:13-15; Eph 1:3-6; Jn 17:24**). God desires a relationship with his creation because it is part of His inherent nature to love and share his goodness.

It is both His desire and His expectation that through this special creator-creation union, we as image-bearers would reflect His character through our actions and choices. And that this would inspire others to desire to join Him in this love relationship that He purposed.

The fact that God desires to build a family with His creation and experience the joy of fellowship with us is the greatest blessing and one that should drive us to our knees in humble adoration. We can never do anything to deserve it for it is His gift of love, mercy, and grace to us, yet, we are called to become sons and daughters of the Living God (**Rom 9:25-26**).

This is why it is essential that we examine our desires, check those that are unchecked, and make sure they align with the plan and purpose of God for our life with Him; because sin birthed out of ungodly desires ultimately separates us from God and thwart the relationship that He, and us alike, really want.

## A THORN FOR EACH OF US: A Look at Our Desires as Spiritual Formation Pt. 3

There is always a challenge and an opposition that is postured to hinder and thwart our efforts to grow deeper in our relationship with God and into the likeness of Jesus Christ. If it is not merely our natural desires as human beings, it's the contrary desires of our common enemy.

We've have discussed the truth that we are here because God himself desired; desired friendship, relationship, and intimacy with His creation. And, in His image, we have come to learn to desire ourselves. Yet, our desires must be checked, wrangled, and at times extinguished to stay in line with His (**Gal 5:17; Col 3:5**).

It's not simply *that* God desires, but that He has also left us some of the specifics of His desires throughout the scriptures; including the ones we can infer (**Ps 40:6; Ps 51:6; Mt 9:12-13; 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Ptr 3:9**). We ought to be thankful that God has the omnipotence to make His desires His will and bring them to pass.

Unfortunately, part of that very creation has become the antagonist to everything that God intends to do in our lives; and has done so by the perverting of *desire* (**Gen 3:1**). Because the serpent as the enemy has already rebelled against God he is now found in the garden coaxing Eve (Adam) at the point of her desire (**Rev 12:9**).

And because of this, from the beginning, we have been drafted against our own will into a *war for our wants*. Remember desire itself is not bad. However, we also understand that while the serpent certainly knows how to pervert, manipulate and influence; he, as an enemy to God and us, is not an equal.

God is an eternal creator, and in Him we have the gift of eternal life. The serpent is a temporal creation and his eternal destiny is set (**Rev 20:10**). Because He is crafty, more than any other creature God has made, we can assume that he's craftier, wiser, more cunning than we are (**2 Cor 11:14**).

It is evident that He is also a wanting, longing, desiring creature which is what led Him to rebel against God (**Is 14:12-14**). It's also why he perpetually tries to get creation to do the same. In his pride, he desires to be like God; powerful, in control, worshipped by those whose disregard for God and disconnection from Him would permit.

Contrary to God's desire, Satan's desire is always to take what wasn't his, kill God's good creation and creature, and destroy the works of God (**Jn 10:10**). He wants to steal what we long for, to get us to kill who we are supposed to help, and to tempt us to destroy what we are called to rule.

This is why for generations he has led people astray; clergy, laymen, unbelievers, and anybody else that he can get to focus on their desires over God's decrees (**Jn 8:44**).

Contrary to popular opinion the enemy does not just work in the *sons of disobedience* “out there”. Cunningly, he can work in the sons of righteousness in here (**Eph 2:1-3; Acts 13:4-12**).

Clearly being “religious” or “spiritual” does not make us immune to lurking, devilish desires or powers externally or the ones on the inside. In fact, Eve and Adam were nearly perfect human beings in a nearly perfect setting and the enemy was still able to seduce them by making them believe that there was more than what they already had.

As many theologians throughout history have pointed out, Satan appears to be creating a kind of disruption particularly in the realm of human desire. Before the fall, humans trusted God's word and God's command. Now it's in doubt, today more than ever before. This is the first step in Satan's *methodia* (**Eph 6:11**).

His ultimate angle is to undermine our trust in God's authority by awakening deep and dark desires. He seeks to cause us to despise God for his commands, to question God's wisdom, and to reject what God has said in the name of our own “autonomy” and “freedom” without us ever discovering that “freedom” isn't free (**Jn 8:34-36; Mk 10:45**).

One of the serpents most effective tools is the weaponization of our desires against us. Like an abuser, he studies us and grooms us until he knows exactly how pervert our desires. Unfortunately for him God as our heavenly father has a love that is entirely common eternally, and endlessly perfect and the enemy cannot give us anything that God hasn't already provided in Christ (**2 Ptr 1:3**).

Imagine being in the garden having all of their needs met; a garden, animals, creation, relationship with God, sex, food, everything. Without having to work for any of it. And in slithers the enemy Arousing in them New and novel desires for the one thing that God said they couldn't have.

Though dangerous the tree itself was good. So they were tempted and their desire was peaked because it was good for food, pleasant to the eye and desirable for wisdom (**Gen 3:6**). Satan is good at arousing human desire to use good things in ways God does not bless. Just because something is desirable and good does not mean it's for us.

From David and Bathsheba, Samson and Delilah, Achan and the Babylonian garment to our modern-day personal desires the enemy knows how to influence, manipulate, and pervert. His temporary victory in the garden seems to have overtaken us since then, but we are certain that Christ has overcome Him and so can we (**Mt 4:8-9**).

## A THORN FOR EACH OF US: A Look at Our Desires as Spiritual Formation Pt. 4

The *war for our wants has begun* as our fore parents are banished from the Garden of Eden as a result of their inability to keep their desires aligned with God's purpose. Of course, in our own experience, we have come to understand that this is much easier said than it is done.

Every human being has either missed out on, squandered, or utterly ruined a God-given moment, experience, or opportunity by following our own desires over His (**Num 20:8-12; Jam 1:14**). This is usually the result of our inability to surrender and or control our disordered desires.

The disordering of our desires is what led to the banishment from the garden where we were not only displaced geographically, but relationally. Oddly, *shâlach*, the Hebrew word for banished is also used to depict a *divorce*. This great divorce is what began to twist our desires.

"If we insist on keeping Hell...we shall not see Heaven: if we accept Heaven we shall not be able to retain even the smallest and most intimate souvenirs of Hell" -**The Great Divorce, C.S. Lewis**

Unhitched from God's sustaining presence, human desires slowly and possibly perpetually, corrupt, pervert, and invert (**Rom 1:25**). Desire itself is a rabbit hole; a strange, confusing, or nonsensical situation or experience that is typically difficult to extricate ourselves from.

Desire needs an object and without God, our God centered desires become human centered. Because we were created to long for and desire the person and presence of God, it is a true displacement of spiritual longing to want anything else over and above Him and the desires that He has for us.

The deepest longings of human desire can only be truly satiated by God as the endless, infinite source of life and love, which can never be *locally sourced*. As a need, the absolute highest level of intimacy that a human being can experience is communion, or oneness, with God.

When that euphoric experience or feeling is interrupted or broken, we typically yearn for a return to that feeling and when we can't find it we turn to what we think is the next best thing. Unfortunately, created things, e.g. the universe, human beings, nature, material things etc. will always let us down.

When we as human beings cut ourselves off from living God-ward and seeking expression in Him our human spirit turns to lesser realities to find sustaining meaning. When human desire is *divorced* from God's presence, it turns inward and appeals to our flesh.

Be mindful, the body (*sōma*) and the flesh (*sarx*) according to scripture can be two completely different things. Yes, flesh includes our physical anatomy, which God deemed “good” (**Gen 1:31, Rom 12:1-2; 1 Cor 6:19**). But the flesh that we struggle with or in speaks to that dimension of invisible, evil, rebellious desires within us.

The flesh is where Satan appeals to and influences our desires (**Rom 8:1-5**). The enemy knows that not even conversion and baptism can annihilate or do away with the desires of the flesh. This is why the Christian experience is among other things, a conflict of desire and we have to choose which side we will stand on (**Gal 5:16-17**).

Even after faith, ungodly desires can still swirl around inside the believer. Thankfully, both residing and presiding faithfully in the middle is the ever-sustaining, never-changing, fully present Holy Spirit who speaks life and peace to us. This is evidenced by the fact that there is an ongoing war of desire between the flesh and the Spirit.

The battle itself, ironically, is the sign that we're walking in the spirit. The absence of a battle is where there is need for concern. Struggling with the “flesh” is good. Surrendering to it is not. To be certain, experiencing the flesh's desires isn't a sin. Following them is.

At the moment of conversion, instantaneously, we receive a new nature. Sanctification, on the other hand, is the process by which God develops our new nature, enabling us to grow into more holiness through time. This is a continuous process with many victories and defeats as our new nature battles with the “tent” in which it abides, i.e. the old man, old nature, flesh.

Because we are now spiritual beings having a human experience, in this life, our Spirit will always wrestle with our flesh (**1 Jn 2:15-17**). Yet, this does not mean that we cannot or do not have power over it. Contrary to popular belief, we are not supposed to wrestle with it, we're supposed to crucify it (**Gal 5:24; 1 Cor 9:24-27**).

We don't win by improving the flesh. We win by crucifying the flesh; And all out, lifelong, bloody assault on the desires of the enemy that have corrupted our old selves (**Gal 2:20**). Christ likeness is found in the daily work of laying down our desires of the flesh for the sake of faithfulness to Jesus Christ as our Lord.

**(To Be Cont'd)**



## A THORN FOR EACH OF US: A Look at Our Desires as Spiritual Formation Pt. 5

Knowing that spiritual formation is an organic, lifelong journey we are also coming to the understanding that our desires have a big influence on how that journey turns out. More importantly, we know that our Godly desires will lead to life and our fleshly desires lead to death. The choice between the two has always been ours (**Deut 30:15-20**).

In short, in God's own sense of desire, His desire is that we would choose Him and what He desires over and against any other desires that may arise apart from Him. As simple and succinct as this may sound it's not always so easy. Because, not only are we confronted by the enemies desires flaunted before us, we have our own intrinsic desires also.

Intrinsically, there are two harsh realities that we are forced to acknowledge and forced to live with. The first, is that at times our desires for God and the things of God, wane. The second is that we will always have to struggle with some undesirable desires that we can't seem to get away from.

Unfortunately, even as faithful believers it is completely possible that our interest and desire for God, His will, and His Word are lessened, whether gradually and naturally or by the external forces of life. First, because we don't have a natural inclination toward the life of the Spirit (**Ps 51:5; Eph 2:3; Rom 8:6-7**).

Secondly, because in this internal battle between the flesh and the Spirit our interests are piqued, we are enticed, and eventually drawn away by things that are "other" (**Jam 1:14-15**). More often than not we desire what we desire and if we are honest, God and the things of God don't always make the cut.

In a general sense, the western world, appears at the present to be losing its desire for God, not just as a cultural phenomenon, but also as a personal dynamic. The real pandemic in recent years is that many have allowed every excuse, obstacle, and challenge to diminish our once deeply held desire for God.

If, as previously stated, God desires that we desire Him, when we fail to embrace the idea that God desires us our corresponding desire for will lessen. Understanding that God has a desire for relationship with us and has gone to extreme measures to initiate that relationship is what converts us to its possibility in the first place.

God created us through his own personal desire. But it's our reciprocity of desire for God's grace and His mercy that inaugurates our transformation. This is why our spirituality comes with perpetual conversions, certainly once at salvation, but repeatedly when we consider our need to pursue the God whom we love.

The truth is that for most of us, there will be times when we don't have the same felt desire for God we used to have. To be converted is in essence, to return our desire to God.

Augustine once said, “God made us without our permission, but he will not save us without our consent”.

This means that we have to want what God wants for us, as challenging as that can be to discern, and stay fixed in this posture and in this position. Fortunately, many of our Christian virtues, expressions of love, and acts of service are birthed out of duty and can at times carry us when our desire wanes.

With duty, the desire isn't always there from the beginning. Sometimes we accept duty out of compulsion and a sense of obligation. Nonetheless, duty can help cultivate, reignite, and stoke the flames of desire. When desire is absent, duty can help structure our lives so desire might return. Desire *can* be the fruit of duty.

Those who have ever been married (relationship) understand the difference between desire and duty in some seasons. Desire is usually more present when things are going well. Duty, at times, has to take over to keep the relationship amicable and harmonious until desire returns.

Whether it is marriage, friendship, vocation, or a career path this translates, often, to our relationship with God. We love God while we're attracted to Him. He is pleasing to our senses and wishes. We are into Him. But, as soon as He is no longer attractive we seek a better option. We often love God for his grace, but then run from him for his commands.

Because desire for God looks different in different seasons, we should be thankful that, a changing desire is not necessarily a dying desire. Most of us at salvation experienced what J.I. Packer called “an arousal of affections God-ward”, meaning God initially awakened our affection and our desire for Him (**1 Jn 4:19**).

But in order to continue nurturing those desires we will need help from people who can guide, love, and support us toward God as desire has dissipated remembering that God desires to steal in both experiences. He wants you, whether you feel like you want Him or not, from season to season.

Desires change. But, as Paul wrote, love remains (**1Cor 13:8,13**). A distinctive mark of Christian maturity is our ability to continue following Jesus, even if but by duty, when our desires have abandoned us. The grace of God is that His desire for us is so demonstrable that it is what makes us love and desire Him in increasing measures.

## A THORN FOR EACH OF US: A Look at Our Desires as Spiritual Formation Pt. 6

The truths that we have discovered thus far about desires are monumental in our understanding of our spiritual formation. First, God has desires that by His sharing of them have become His expectations of us. Secondly, created in His image, we were created with desire. Thirdly, His expectation is that we grow to desire what He desires.

The additional, less inspiring, truth is that because life happens to us all in seasons and under certain circumstances, our desire for Him can wane (lessened). Also, we come to realize that in these same scenarios, our desires can simply change for better or for worse. By the grace of God, there is always an invitation to return to Him (**Jer 3:1; Rev 2:4**).

Realizing the waning or shifting of our desires leads us to consider that we will have at times, desires that we don't fully understand and desires that we don't want. So much so that if gone *unchecked* these types of desires can lead to mental and physical addictions and disorders.

We all have desires, often unspoken of, that we wished didn't have because unwanted desires are a fundamental part of human experience. Philosophers who study desire, call these unwanted desires coming from mysterious places "fleeting desires". These are the desires that the media and marketing have learned to tap into, manipulate, and even extort.

Jonathan Edwards in his *A Treatise on Human Affections* argues that there's a difference between our emotions and what he calls "affections". Emotions vacillate and are fickle, coming and going without our permission or our will. But affections, are deeper and have a greater capacity reformed and redirected by the Holy Spirit (**2 Sam 11**).

With great caution, we should manage our emotions well enough that they don't become our affections and when they do, because they will, we must surrender them to the Spirit. This is how we must handle these fleeting desires that come and go, sometimes out of nowhere.

Not all unwanted desires are bad. And with them, God has the capacity to translate them into something that is used for His purpose and for His glory (**Acts 9:1-9**). On that Damascus Road, God awakened a desire within Paul that would make his life much more difficult. Even when He didn't want it to happen (**1 Cor 9:16**).

Each of us will encounter a complex set of desires when we take time to consider the matters of our hearts. Some that we are aware of and embrace and some that we aren't and can't get rid of. The *Parable Of The Wheat And Tares* in **Matthew 13** speaks plainly about the human experience around fleeting desires.

While we may seek to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit and a life of virtue, it can often feel as if weeds that we didn't sow keep growing throughout our lives. This is the life of faith and the journey that we are on and, though it's difficult at times, by His grace we can grow in spite of the weeds of fleeting desires.

Realistically speaking the path to holiness and virtue goes through both, not getting everything we want, and having to deal with things we didn't ask for. It's usually the more mature believers that know what it's worth to deny ourselves and to embrace the adversities that seem to plague us (**Phil 4:10-13**).

What if God's brilliant design is to make us holy through disappointment? Or through not getting what we desire and having to embrace the things that we never asked for? That's how the Apostle Paul grew to understand the all-sufficient grace of God working far more than even his prayer request being granted (**2 Cor 12:7-10**).

A.W. Tozer, author of *The Pursuit of God*, says, "It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply" believing that suffering is a necessary part of God's preparation of saints. This is the idea that God tests people to prepare them for greater use in the Kingdom of God.

With our own thorns, and desires helping to spur on our spiritual formation, we'll begin to see that the thing that creates the most pain is often the place where God makes Himself known to us. It's in the painful, difficult, angering places of our lives that we are most being formed into Christ's image (**2 Tim 2:11-13**).

Uncommon is the idea that even painful experiences can be a gift from God, especially when the gift of life is born on the other side of it. None of us should desire them but embracing them as such can prove fruitful. Repetitively the healing power of Jesus restores our capacity to feel pain again, but more importantly to grow again.

The myth that true happiness results from fulfilled desire can be seen in nearly every aspect of human existence. That's a myth. In our world, happiness is getting everything one wants. In the Kingdom of God, happiness is fully in everything God wants (**Mt 26:39**).

Hard things are not always bad things. As we try to lay our desires down, even the unwanted ones assault us around every corner, we find a savior who showed us the way. Unwanted desires can, no doubt, make us frustrated, tired, and even resentful. But the glory these struggles bear and the life on the other side is simply unimaginable (**Rom 8:18**).

## A THORN FOR EACH OF US: A Look at Our Desires as Spiritual Formation Pt. 7

Understanding our desires, the subtle nuances included, and how they can and will impact our spiritual growth, development, or formation is a lifelong journey. Because our desires come and go, shift and change, increase and decrease as we grow it creates an unending need for introspection.

And this reoccurring look within should help us grow in such a way that we can discern, progressively, what is the source and or what prompts them. Over time we should be able to have a better sense of control over the desires that we can, whether they are deep-seated or fleeting.

In either instance, this becomes possible the more we live surrendered to and guided by the presence of the Holy Spirit (**Gal 5:16-17**). Surrendering our hearts to the Holy Spirit within is the safest and surest way to avert yielding to unhealthy or unholy desires (**Jer 17:9**).

By the leading of the Holy Spirit and the fruit that His presence bears in our lives there are many things that we are able to control (**Gal 5:22-23**). Without the Spirit's *restorative* work, we will continue in these disordered loves; loving evil things over good things, good things over ultimate things, or created things over eternal things.

Disordered desire is similar to the prophetic words of Hosea, who speaks of Israel as a prostitute who chases after many lovers (**Hosea 2:5**). Israel loves, but their love is disordered. The Spirit, then, reorders our desires restoring them to their originally intended nature.

This restoration is not merely the reuniting of sinners with the person and presence of God through the atoning work of Jesus on Calvary. God has, indeed, extended forgiveness to the cross and resurrection of Christ. But atonement doesn't magically disconnect our hearts from their disordered loves.

Restoration not only realigns our relationship with God, but also helps to realign our desires to *want* to do and *want* to be what we know God has called us to do and to be. Free from the formation of the Spirit, our wills become the servants of our desires. But by the Spirit's work, the will slowly becomes lord over desire, as it should be.

This may be what Jesus intended when He taught the disciples that in order to be one of His disciples we must be willing to deny ourselves (our desires) and take up our own cross (**Mt 16:24-26**). Denying ourselves is consciously making the choice to place human desire *under* God's will.

Inevitably, there's a choice (**Mt 7:13-14**). We will either deny our own desires and follow the will of the Lord, or we will deny the will of the Lord to follow our own desires (**Mk 10:17-**

**22).** Some may assume that surrendering is giving up our control, our power, or our freedom to choose. In reality, it's giving up what has been robbing us of life.

Because our spirituality is like a garden, we will grow whatever we choose to water. The heart will either flourish with the most lush, beautiful, life-giving fruits or it can cultivate noxious weeds that crowd out eternal life. Without the ability to nurture the healthy aspects of the gardens of our hearts we will leave room for weeds to grow, and where weeds grow, life and health is choked out (**Lk 8:5-8, 14**).

The lifelong journey of a maturing, growing love for Jesus requires that we pay close attention to the things that grow in our internal selves. It also requires that we learn the skills to nurture those things that align with God's desires and develop the strength and determination to kill disordered desires.

When it comes to killing disordered desires, we have to be careful to not wrongly assume that Jesus' goal for our lives is the absence of desire. It's not. His goal for us is not to be desireless. Instead, it's for us to work to cultivate and nurture good desires. There is no such thing as a spiritual vacuum (**Mt 12:43-45**).

Jesus intimates that a spiritual house can't stay empty. It must be filled with something because the cure for evil isn't spiritual absence. It's the renewed presence of God. We don't just cast out the demons; We also must be filled by the presence, wonder, and desires of God.

This is one of the reasons that it is essential for persons who are translated into the Kingdom by way of salvation, to find a renewed sense of self and of purpose. Or those of us who are delivered from desires, temptations, sins, and circumstances to find something *of the Lord* to be filled with.

Divine filling, divine purpose, and divine service are always a great way to nurture the heart and its desires for the prevention of the return of unhealthy desires. And enroute to a life of purpose and fulfillment we must be careful to guard ourselves from the wiles and schemes of the enemy (**Eph 6:10-18**).

## A THORN FOR EACH OF US: A Look at Our Desires as Spiritual Formation Pt. 8

Having considered all that the idea of *human desires* presents as challenges and obstacles to our spiritual formation, we must look to what the solution is. While the attempts at killing our disordered and or ungodly desires depend on our ability to surrender them to the leading of the Holy Spirit, there must be something more.

Though subject to the wrestling of our own flesh, we are certainly capable of and empowered by His presence to exercise the fruit of self-control. Self-control, however, is not merely managing our desires; it is also the ability to choose between the desires that honor or relationship with God and those that hinder it.

With discernment, a sense of divine determining, we have the capacity to sort through our desires, and those that don't align with God we try to eliminate. Those desires that do align with God and His plan for our life; we must find a way to nurture and feed them so that they become heightened and prioritized.

In the garden is where his words became trusted over God's, and the contentment we had was exchanged for discontentment (**Gen 3:1-7**). Primarily because human desire is pliable, flexible, fluid, and even manipulable. We change our minds. Our attitudes need changing. Our interests are often in a state of flux.

Desire is the first component of our human nature that the enemy attacks and weaponizes, and doing so leads us to pursue *unnecessary* desires. This is in fact, the ideology of the entire culture, in attempts to pull us away from the desires that lead us to divine purpose.

“We must shift America from a needs, to a desires culture. People must be trained to desire, to want new things even before the old had been entirely consumed. We must shape a new mentality in America. Man's desires must overshadow his needs.”

**-Paul Mazur of Lehman Brothers**

Like Satan's attempt, this is the further creation of false needs, and whether we want it or not, our desires are being disciplined and educated. And they are either being formed into Christ's image or what looks more like the serpent's image. If they are being educated, we need to be aware of who's doing the educating (**1 Tim 4:1**).

The same desires that have been formed by God and deformed by Satan must also be transformed by the spirit. This is why the Apostle Paul calls for us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (**Rom 12:1-2**). This is the process of disciplined desire so that we follow Jesus rather than “the cravings of our flesh” (**Eph 2:3**).

Yes, one aspect of the process of sanctification is the external part of our lives being changed: Our actions, deeds, speech, and public lives. But never to the exclusion of the

sanitization of our interior (**Mt 23:25-28**). This is the first and greatest commandment, shaping our entire existence (**Mt 22:37-38**).

The key to true freedom is not just following whatever desires we happen to have but cultivating and nurturing the right desires (**Col 3:1; 1 Ptr 2:2-3**). An inescapable part of Christian maturity is learning to let our relationship with God be what motivates us, and feeding and watering that is what helps us grow (**Jn 15:5-8**).

As Dallas Willard contends, “the spiritual life is a life organized around God. Either I’m the center of my universe, and everything bends towards my desires. Or God is, and we bend toward His. We need a form of desire that is not shaped around us but around God (**Mt 6:33**).

The question becomes, how do we forge our desires around our relationship with God that has been secured for us by the work of Christ on the cross?

1. One of the first steps we can take is to place ourselves willingly in a community where our desires and wants aren't given full reign. For believers, the church should be a countercultural environment that holds us to that pursuit of healthy desires and deters us from the pursuit of those that could be destructive.

Fellowship within a “Jesus-seeking”, “Christ-led” church is paramount. This is the type of environment that forces us to embrace the change that we don't want and can help us be inspired to desire the change that we know we need. This is where our worship within the walls helps to transform our everyday habits outside the walls.

2. Another step that we can take is to learn how to discipline our desires through the practice of simplicity. More often than not, our lives are driven by desires for many things that we do not need and that are inessential to our growth in Christ and the will of God.

Simplicity is akin to selflessness. Our surfacing desires are usually tied to deep-seated desires (**James 4:3**). What if this is why in so many instances Jesus led and taught us to live with the minimal, oftentimes by being willing to give away what we have. The desire to give, and to give away, often alleviates the desire to get (**Lk 3:7-14; Mk10:17-22; Lk 12:33-34**).

3. A third and critical step that nurtures our desires is reading the Gospels. The Gospels provide the framework and boundaries that our desires desperately need. God’s commands serve as that structure and as the basis for receiving the things that ask for, need, and desire.

Mysteriously, when our desires are structured around God's word, they take on a potency or effectiveness that can move the heart of God (**Jn 15:7**). Shaped by God's desires, we will only ask for that which God would want for us anyway. This is how we receive what we asked for because we are praying God's will back to God.



## A THORN FOR EACH OF US: A Look at Our Desires as Spiritual Formation Pt. 9

The healthy desires that are birthed out of and based upon our relationship with God; understanding His plan and purpose for our lives must be nurtured. In order to do we need to practice things like being a part of a community of believers, limiting desires through simplicity, and allowing God's word to create boundaries for our desires.

The ability to form our desires around the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus helps us order our *loves* in a way that reflects God's priorities. It helps us to love rightly. The goal of loving rightly is that it helps us to stay in perpetual pursuit of a life of godliness (**2 Tim 3:1-5**).

The truth is we all have disordered loves; loving something too much, loving something not enough, loving things we shouldn't, or neglecting to love the things we should. Ordering our desires means have the ability to love what we are supposed to, as much as we are supposed to, in the order that we are supposed to (**Deut 11:13-15**).

Nobody can love everything equally. Nor should we. As we acknowledge our limits, fleeting time, and priorities, certain desires must take the back seat. Desiring and loving God is not the problem for many of us. The problem is that some of those that are in the back seat shouldn't be going along for the ride.

Unconfronted desires, wants, and longings, if we aren't careful, can become our identity if we allow them to define us. Without the critical work of structuring our desire around God's, we become oppressively bound to following our desires, which make "terrible masters" (Dallas Willard).

Our Christian witness is what separates our desires from our identity. The essence of who we are is not bound by desires. We have them, but we identify with Christ (**1 Cor 6:17; Gal 2:20**). And in our living in and through Him, our desired can be properly reoriented or reordered.

This is the ability to allow Him to order our inner lives so that we can let our inner lives be what dictates and shapes our outer world (**Prov 23:7; Mt 12:34; Phil 2:5**). The faith within, as small as it may be, can be the kind of saving faith that restores relationship with God and propels us forward in Him (**Mt 17:20**).

One of the most evident attempts at forcing the potential of our desires becoming our reality is the concept of "manifestation". It speaks to the simple power of the desire in all of us to create the world around us. We may be able to manifest our desires but be careful because that's not always a good thing.

Attempting to create our own unchecked and potentially unhinged happiness is a danger that most of us can't afford on many levels. Yes, even theologically, happiness is a great goal as long as it is educated and nurtured around the character, virtue, and truth of Christ.

This is what can help revive our passions; letting them be shaped by God and His word. Desire, while fleeting and often self-sabotaging, can be different from passion. What we really want is for God to ignite in us a passion for Him and the things that pertain to our life in Him. This is what can help prevent us from succumbing to simple human desires.

Desire can be fleeting and more superficial, while passion is a strong, burning feeling that drives action and commitment. Desire can be directed towards a broad range of things, while passion is usually focused on a particular pursuit. Both can be motivators, but passion is more powerful stemming from a genuine love and interest in something.

Most of the scriptural references to our human passions (*pathos GR*, as an affliction of the mind) were generally towards sin and self (**Rom 7:5; Gal 5:24-25; Col 3:1-7**). Thankfully, we are created by a loving and intentional God who has placed in us passions, desires, and dreams. But unless they are under His control, they will be misused and abused, or lie dormant and wasted.

Whatever preferences and passions He gave you are for His purposes. Every God-given passion we have matches a character trait of the Lord Himself and is intended to bring Him glory. Does everyone steward their passion for the Lord – obviously not. However, that doesn't make the statement any less true.

Whatever your passion, it is a means to a Glorious End. The Lord has hidden in each of His children exactly what is needed at this time and place in history to move His Kingdom forward (**Acts 17:26**). Even if your passion doesn't seem to relate to ministry, whatever you do and wherever you go, you are on mission (**Eph 2:10**).

## A THORN FOR EACH OF US: A Look at Our Desires as Spiritual Formation Pt. 10

Our final thought for this series of truths about the lifelong need to consider how desire in and of itself has the capacity to impact our spiritual growth and lead to the need for resurrecting desire. Certainly, there are those that are ours to embrace and those that we need let be crucified with our flesh (**1 Cor 9:24-27; Gal 5:24; Col 3:5-7**).

These verses encourage us as Christians to live by the Spirit, not by the flesh, meaning that this is God's expectation of us now that we are in Christ. By the receiving of salvation and the transforming work of sanctification, we are able to "give up" our old selfish desires and sinful nature and instead live a new life in Christ.

As we've discovered, when it comes to killing disordered desires, we have to be careful to not wrongly assume that God's goal for our lives is the absence of desire. It's not. His goal for us is not to be desireless. Instead, it's for us to try to cultivate and nurture good desires.

The danger of the idea that we can just take a hatchet to our desires without the spirit's lead is that we can eventually kill off desires that don't need to be killed off, i.e. desire itself. This is what happens when our good desires have been weaponized against us.

The enemy in the garden weaponized our desires against us. As a result, the good desire we were created with was shifted from God (**Gen 3:16**). The woman's desires are shifted towards the man, and being cursed to work the ground the man now finds his identity in work. Now his desire shifted toward productivity (**Gen 3:18**).

In the beginning, God gave us good desires. Satan then weaponized those desires. Human desire turns humans against God. Evil desire then seeks humans out. That's where we find ourselves today. Because of this downward-spiraling de-evolution, desire is now in full corruption (**Gen 4:6-7**).

It's interesting that scripturally the Hebrew term for desire, t'shuqah, does not reappear until thousands of years later in the writings of the Song of Songs (Solomon) (**7:10**). It is here that we discover the writer giving us a preliminary glimpse at the idea of a return to Eden, or the restoration and resurrection of God's intention for our desires.

In this we are reminded that God intended the good to bless and never curse. Only evil uses good to curse and only God can take evil and use it to bless (**Gen 50:20**). Inevitably, our good desires get us into a lot of pain, trouble and heartache. To survive we start crucifying those good desires thinking they are the problem.

With these crucified desires, we sometimes hope that the "Sunday morning" of our desires never come. Killing desires, healthy or hurtful is often a path of survival. We often run away from or attempt to stay away from that which causes us pain. It's a survival fear that can save our lives. A healthy fear is a protective fear.

Fear protects the heart as a survival mechanism. The last time you ate at a restaurant, and it made you sick, it created a protective fear. The last time you were in a painful relationship, it created a protective fear. The car accident created out of your own irresponsibility; it created a protective fear.

These lost desires can be our greatest teachers. Because it's there, in those places where desire has died, that God longs to do His greatest healing. Whether we realize it or not, so much of our Christian ministry is about meeting people in their lack of desire for God and trying to inspire them to desire Him more, over and above everything else.

This is the attempt to wake up desire. Whether it is the desire that they don't realize they were created for or the desire that they once had that they have allowed life to diminish. Desire for God needs to be resurrected. Ultimately the idea is that we can and need to shift our thirst.

In medicine, *aprosia*, “nonthirsty,” is a condition where a person almost loses their total sensation of thirst. This is the danger. In a spiritual sense, so many people can lose their thirst or longing for God by allowing their thirst and longing to be focused on those things that will never satisfy.

Because desires come to life in our hearts, enjoying the world's pleasures only makes our souls thirsty and weak. Our souls become corrupted and can never be satisfied. When the water that we have been drinking is no longer filling us, we need to turn to somewhere to be satiated (**Ps 42:1-2; Is 49:10; Jn 6:35, 7:37-38**).

This idea of thirsting, in the spiritual life, is not of one who has arrived, had their fill, or found what they are looking for. The unquenchable thirst of this life is only satisfied by the unquenchable thirst for God. The blessing of our lives is directly and inextricably tied to our hunger and thirst for Him, holiness, and righteousness (**Mt 5:6**).

In the pursuit of God, thirst and hunger are virtues dashed thirsting, longing, hungering, desiring, asking, seeking, knocking. This is the posture of the heart God is looking for. A true saint, or a true disciple, is the thirstiest person in the world (**Rev 22:17**).