

Desire and Spirit

August 5, 2022



Beloved, I urge you as foreigners and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul. - (1 Peter 2:11)

This is our natural state, apart from God, our “fleshly lusts . . . wage war against the soul”. Here “soul” should be understood as the whole person, and the war involves the very center of the person, the human heart, will, or “spirit.”

Our spirit is different from unrestrained flesh with its singular focus on satisfying desire. The spirit is able to consider alternatives, and God prompts us to have an interest in what is better and best. It is our God-given ability that gives us an interest in what is better and best. It takes a broad view of the possibilities before us, not just of one desire and its object, but of other desires and goods. That is where choice comes in. Choice involves deliberation between alternatives, with a view to what is best. The conflict between the flesh and the human spirit is the conflict between desire—what I want—and the will for what is best. It is, in fact, the conflict between desire and love, for love is always directed toward what is good, and not at simply having my desires satisfied. Love is the will-to-good of its object.

The relationship between the good that love seeks and our fleshly desires is revealed in Jesus’ teaching about anger and cultivated lust in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew. 5:21–30). The desire embedded in both anger and sexual lust is not at all concerned with the good of the object, but only with its own satisfaction. In the case of anger, it is the desire to have the object suffer in some way. In the case of sexual lust, it is the desire that the object provide sensual pleasure. Desire says, “Let’s have sex.” Love says, “A greater good is at issue here: the purity of human love and faithfulness toward other human beings.” In both anger and lust, love—which is the essence of all the laws of God and which is to be the driving motive in all our actions—is absent, and the “flesh” is enthroned.

We might also think of the flesh in terms of our confidence in our own power—what is sometimes called “willpower.” The basic nature of sin is to trust only oneself. When you turn from God, your will becomes blind and helpless before the hammerings of desire. Even when we do not have confidence in our own powers, we put our trust in them because we think they are all we have. When our abilities are the only things we know to trust, and when we are living with them as ultimates, we are living “in the flesh.” We are living in dependence upon the God-given drives of our human personalities rather than in the God who gave them to us. That is life in the flesh, the frightful story of which the apostle Paul described repeatedly.

That is a strong claim. As long as our desires are paramount in our lives, we cannot have faith in God. Because faith is a gift of God. If faith is a gift of God, and God gives me faith while I am still treating what I want as my ultimate concern, what will I do? I will use my faith to get what I want.

REFLECT

If my ultimate point of reference is thinking simply of getting what I want, my focus will not be on the glory of God nor the good of others. For example, If my desire is to have people recognize the good that I do or think well of me, and I am destroyed if they do not, then I would use my gift of faith to glorify myself. If I have faith and I want to dominate others above all else, then I would use my faith to do just that.



As you reflect on the examples above, can you think of ways you’ve misused faith to get what you want?

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