



Making the Most of Our Desires

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

Back when the Apostle Peter wrote these words, the war being waged for the souls of those receiving his letter was overt and dramatic. They were undergoing persecution and losing their jobs, family relationships, any sort of meaningful status in society, and even life itself. And while many in our world experience such sudden trials because of their faith, most of us face a more gradual challenge. Our commitment to Christ and our resolve to follow him is more often undercut by slow, steady erosion than overwhelming catastrophic force.

It reminds me of when I was offered the chance to increase my responsibilities, hours, and pay at a job during seminary. The idea was attractive. I felt affirmed by the management, liked the idea of stepping into a leadership role, and, well, making more money sounded good, too. However, the choice became clear when one of my professors asked me what my long-term goals were or, to put it another way, what God's long-term call for my life was. Once that was the primary question, everything else began to fall into place. Attractive and even good as the job opportunity was, it would have distracted me and slowed me down in the pursuit of my call to ministry.

Desire is not a bad thing in the Bible. It was the Stoics, not the Jewish and Christian teachers, who urged people to do away with desire altogether. What the Bible teaches is that we need to be careful with our desires, direct them toward God and God's good purposes, and resist allowing them to become unbridled and self-centered. As Peter H. Davids notes in his commentary on this passage, it isn't that we shouldn't desire and enjoy our supper; the problem is that we want our neighbor's supper, too. In my situation described above, it wasn't that my desire for more responsibility, or to lead others, or even to make more money were inappropriate desires. It was just that those desires in that situation were tempting me to back off on my pursuit of God's greater call in my life.

Usually when we see a phrase like "abstain from the desires of the flesh", our thoughts immediately go to issues like sexual immorality, substance abuse, and the like. Yet, while those issues are no doubt included in what Peter is getting at, it is clear from the context that he is challenging his readers to consider desires beyond those "usual suspects". In our staff's discussion of the text, we talked about how our desire for comfort and hope can lead us toward other "gods" besides the one, true God. We spoke of how shopping, food, television, and any number of other things can become the focus of our desire and distract us, weakening our resolve and our mental and spiritual discipline. We admitted how insecurity and our desire for safety, respect, and relational and financial stability can lead us to envy, unhealthy actions, and harmful reactions. What desires "wage war against the soul" in your experience?

As Peter makes clear, we need to abstain from desires that lead us away from God's good purpose. Of course, abstaining is not enough; abstaining simply frees us to pursue God's call, something Peter has a lot to say about, too. For now, though, Peter's exhortation about managing our desires is worth reflection. What desires motivate and drive you? How you are doing at managing them? Are you thanking God for them and praying for God's help with them? Are there some you need to abstain from? How can you better direct your desires to move you toward God and God's call? God desires fullness of life and joy for you. Seek first his kingdom and righteousness; all the rest and far more will be yours as you do.

Prayer:

God, thank you for loving me. Help me not to become too comfortable in this world. Help me not to become conformed to the ways of this world. Forgive my selfish desires and grant me a heart that desires to love you and to do your will above all else. By the way I live, the words I speak and those I refrain from speaking, the actions I take and those I refrain from taking, may I bring honor to your name, good to our world, and love to my neighbors, through Jesus Christ my Savior and Lord. Amen.

Suggested Verses for Meditation and Memorization:

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

1 Peter 2:11-12

Some Thing(s) to Try:

- Talk and pray with God, and a trusted friend if you are so inclined, about how you are managing and going to manage your desires, giving thanks for them, directing them, even abstaining from some of them, so that you can more fully pursue God's desire for you.
- Talk with God or another person, or journal, about ways you understand yourself to be an alien and an exile in this world because you belong to God's great kingdom.
- Talk with God about those desires you might do well to nurture and encourage in yourself that can help you toward God and God's call.
- Think of a difficult situation and/or person in your life where it is challenging to be "honorable." Talk with God and prepare ahead of time to step up to the challenge to do "honorable deeds" that glorify God whether anybody notices or appreciates it in this life or not.

Suggested Further Readings:

- Isaiah 6:1-13
- Psalm 138
- 1 Corinthians 15:1-11
- Luke 5:1-11