Lust: Disordered Desire

According to The Free Dictionary, ‘desire is a strong wish, worthy or unworthy, for something that is or seems to be within reach.’ According to this definition, desires may be good or bad. Can you think of God-given desires that are good for us? What do you think is the difference between a good desire and a bad desire? Is it a matter of desiring wrong things, or desiring good things in the wrong way?

Are ‘natural desires’ or ‘physical desires’ good or bad? Take a look at Ephesians 2:1-3. The GNB and REB talk about ‘natural desires’ and ‘physical desires’ here. Other translations are more negative: ‘passions of our flesh’ (ESV); ‘lusts of our flesh’ (KJV); ‘cravings of our flesh’ (NIV). What do you suppose are the objects of such desire? Is Paul talking about sexual lust here or does he working with a wider frame of reference? What other things do people lust after? Paul suggests that at some point everyone has been driven by such desires. How prominent a role do you think desire plays in our society today? What are the negative and/or positive consequences of this? James describes being lured and enticed by desire, which then gives birth to sin and which leads to death (1:14-15). Might he have Genesis 3:1-6 in mind here? How can we guard against being led astray by desire?

Tony Lane suggests that, ‘God created us with natural desires but sin has twisted these into inordinate and disordered desires.’ That is how sin works: it corrupts and distorts something that is good and turns it bad. So, is it possible to view lust as a corruption of love? What is the difference between being motivated by lust and being motivated by love? How are the outcomes different? How can other kinds of desire be distorted or corrupted by sin, and what are the effects of this happening?

Take a look at the following quotations from a range of Christian writers over the centuries. Which of these strikes you as being particularly pertinent or helpful and why?

‘We must regard…worldly things as alien to us, and not desire them. For when we desire to acquire these things, we fall away from the path of righteousness…This age and the one to come are two enemies. This one talks about adultery and corruption and greed and deceit, but that one renounces these things. We cannot therefore be friends of both; we must renounce this one in order to enjoy that one,’ (2 Clement 5.6-6.5)

‘Above all is the desire for someone else’s wife or husband, and for the extravagance of wealth, and for many needless things to eat and drink, and for many other foolish luxuries. For every luxury is foolish and empty for God’s servants. These desires, then, are evil and bring death to God’s servants. For this evil desire is a daughter of the devil. You must keep away, therefore, from evil desires, in order that by keeping away from them you may live to God. But those who are mastered by them and do not resist them will utterly perish, for these desires are deadly. But put on the desire of righteousness and, having armed yourself with the fear of the Lord, resist them. For the fear of God lives in the good desire…If you serve the good desire and submit to it, you will be able to master the evil desire and control it as you wish,’ (*Shepherd of Hermas* 12.2.1-5)

‘Origen taught us…that our minds have a natural desire to know the truth of God and the causes of things, in just the same way as our eyes have a natural desire for light and our bodies for food,’ (Gregory Thaumaturgus)

‘To desire to love God is to love to desire him, and hence to love him, for love is the root of all desire,’ (Jean Pierre Camus).

‘To pray…is to desire; but it is to desire what God would have us desire. He who desires not from the bottom of his heart, offers a deceitful prayer,’ (François Fénelon).

‘God is what we really desire in every simple, spontaneous, disinterested choice of the ideal in our daily lives,’ (Donald M. Baillie).

‘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,’ (C.S. Lewis).

‘All those years I had been trying to suppress my tremendous longing for happiness… but now it started to dawn on me that this persistent and undeniable yearning for happiness was not to be suppressed—but glutted on God,’ (John Piper).

The psalmist says, ‘Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you,’(73:25). Does reading this verse make you want to emulate the psalmist in his longing for God or his capacity to find satisfaction in God, or is this a prayer you don’t feel able to pray or you don’t want to pray at the moment? Who, or what, is it that you desire more than God? Maybe you don’t need to choose: might you regard the object of your desire as God’s gift to you, and love God as the one who has given you such a precious gift?

Psalm 37:44 says, ‘Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.’ Does delighting in the Lord make a difference to what we desire in our heart? If so, why and how is this the case?

‘If only I possessed the grace, good Jesus, to be utterly at one with you! Amidst all the variety of worldly things around me, Lord, the only thing I crave is unity with you. You are all my soul needs. Unite, dear friend of my heart, this unique little soul of mine to your perfect goodness. You are all mine. When shall I be yours? Lord Jesus, my beloved, be the magnet of my heart; clasp, press, unite me forever to your sacred heart. You have made me for yourself; make me one with you. Absorb this tiny drop of life into the ocean of goodness whence it came,’ (Francis de Sales).