

Lord of Our Desires



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Genesis 1, 2; Rom. 1:3; 6:1-7; 8:3; 2 Cor. 5:17; Phil. 2:8; Col. 2:12, 13; 1 Tim. 3:16; 1 Pet. 1:13-16; 1 John 2:1.*

Memory Text: “For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh” (*Romans 8:3*).

Key Thought: God created humans with powerful desires for our enjoyment. We, as Christians, need to keep those desires, which we should still enjoy, under divine control.

Submitting our desires to the will of God. The apostle Paul warned that in the last days people would be “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (*2 Tim. 3:4, NKJV*). Talk about a perfect description of this generation! The guiding principle for many today is: Satisfy your own desires. Christian values are discarded as old-fashioned, unreasonable, and hopelessly out-of-date. The basic sentiment is: As long as you desire to do something that doesn't hurt anyone else, then there's no reason why you shouldn't do it.

In contrast, those who live under the lordship of Christ are called to submit all their desires to the will of God. Our Lord Himself declared, “For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (*John 6:38, NKJV*). Jesus set the perfect example of submission to the will of God when He prayed, “Not what I will, but what You will” (*Mark 14:36, NKJV*). This is our mandate, as well. Our will, our desires, must be surrendered to the Lord.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 23.*

Flesh and Spirit

The Christian faith began and spread amid Greek culture and philosophy. Though the Greek Empire itself had fallen to the Romans (see *Daniel 2*), its influence remained long after its political and military dominance faded.

Sin influences the human body with disease, old age, and so forth. But the body cannot be evil, because Jesus put on a human body when He came to this earth. Greek culture also taught that the spirit is something within us that is always fighting the body. But in Romans 8:4, 5; Galatians 5:24, 25; and Galatians 6:8, the spirit is our attitude of surrender and obedience to Jesus. People who live “in the spirit” are people who have surrendered their sinful natures to the Holy Spirit.

What’s the greatest example we have from the Bible that the human body, in and of itself, isn’t evil? *Rom. 1:3, 8:3, Gal. 4:4, Phil. 2:8, 1 Tim. 3:16.*

Although now affected by sin, the human body can’t be evil, because Jesus Christ assumed a human body. But what about those New Testament texts, especially in the writings of Paul, that seem to pit flesh against the spirit, such as Romans 8:4, 5; Galatians 5:24, 25; 6:8?

The basic issue here is not that our body, our flesh, is of itself bad. Again, Christ’s humanity proves this point. Paul’s emphasis, instead, deals with control of our flesh, the keeping of its desires under the control of God. Ephesians 2:3 helps clarify this point: “Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.” Paul talks about not letting the things of the flesh, that is, the carnal nature of fallen beings, dominate the Christian, who has died to this carnal nature, where passion and lust rule, and who now lives in the “spirit,” that is, in an attitude of faith and submission to Christ.

Part of the problem stems from the use of the word *spirit*, which, in Paul’s writing, isn’t this eternal holy entity that lives in constant tension or battle with the flesh. In the Bible, *spirit* can mean “mood,” “attitude,” or “feelings.” Oftentimes in the New Testament, *flesh* is simply the word used to symbolize the fallen carnal nature, while *spirit* symbolizes the attitude of submission and obedience to Christ. Those who live in “the spirit” are those who have yielded themselves to the Holy Spirit, which brings the desires of the flesh under control.

How can you know if you are walking after the “flesh” or after the “spirit”?

The Creation

Review the Genesis Creation account of humanity (*Genesis 1 and 2*). What evidences do you find there that God intended for human beings to enjoy the physical creation He had made?

Even the most simple reading of the Creation account reveals nothing of the notion that the physical world, especially the human body, is bad. On the contrary, God created man and woman to interact closely with what He had made. Man came directly from the ground, which God had just created, and woman came from the man. Thus, humankind and the earth are intimately linked. Together, man and woman, living on this earth and drawing sustenance from it, were to be “fruitful, and multiply” (*Gen. 1:28*); they were to be involved in the process of creating more human beings, more human flesh. God gave them “every herb” (*Gen. 2:5*) for meat, and He gave them every tree that “is pleasant to the sight” (*Gen. 2:9*), and that was “good for food,” indicating they were to enjoy what they ate, that it would not only nourish but please them. Truly this was a paradise, and what helped make it a paradise was how well it pleased their human senses.

There’s no question: God created us as physical beings, and He gave us physical desires, which, in and of themselves, can’t be bad precisely because God gave them to us. The problem is not our basic desires but rather how we as fallen beings use them, how we keep them under control in order that we don’t allow them to take us where God never intended us to go. We can do this only through knowing what God’s will is for us and then surrendering our sinful selves to Him so we can have the power to keep our desires within that will and not enter into the paths of self-destruction.

Despite the ravages of sin, in what ways can you see, even now, indications of how wonderful the original creation was? What are some of the things we have been given that we should enjoy, and how do these reveal to us the Creator’s love?

The Fall

The Lord placed our parents in a paradise, a garden filled with things that delighted their senses, things that they, in their physical bodies, could enjoy. Unfortunately, some of these same things were used against them by Satan in order to cause the Fall.

Read Genesis 3:1-6. How did the devil use the physical senses to deceive the woman and get her to flagrantly disobey God?

It should be a powerful warning to us that, even in their unfallen state, Adam and Eve allowed their senses to turn them away from God. Satan knows that our senses, our appetites, though God-given, are a powerful means to control us. That's why the Bible tells us to keep them under control; otherwise, Satan will use them to destroy us.

Read 1 John 2:16. How do you see the principles here reflected in the story of the Fall? Notice, is it saying the eyes and the flesh themselves are bad, or is it saying something else? If so, what?

All around us we can see the results of humans who have allowed these wonderful God-given gifts to control them and their lives. God gave us sex, and we became pornographers. God gave us material possessions, and we became greedy and selfish. God gave us music, and we became punk rockers. He gave us fire, and we became arsonists. He gave us food, and we became gluttons. He gave us words, and we lie and we curse. He gave us grapes, and we became drunks. It's hard, really, to think of any God-given gift that we, as humans, haven't, one way or another, perverted or abused because of sin. The effects are seen everywhere.

Try to imagine a world where our God-given senses are in perfect harmony with the world around them (kind of sounds like heaven, does it not?). What do you think it would be like? And though you can't have that world now, what changes do you need to make in order to bring your desires and senses into closer harmony with the world as God originally meant them to be? Why would doing that make your life better now?

Times of Solitude

Read **Matthew 4:1, 2** (*see also Mark 1:12 and Luke 4:1, 2*). **Why do you think Jesus fasted for so long? What’s the message here for us?**

“Many who profess godliness do not inquire into the reason of Christ’s long period of fasting and suffering in the wilderness. His anguish was not so much from the pangs of hunger as from His sense of the fearful result of the indulgence of appetite and passion upon the race. He knew that appetite would be man’s idol and would lead him to forget God and would stand directly in the way of his salvation.”—Ellen G. White, *Confrontation*, p. 51.

How fascinating that though Satan caused our first parents to sin on the issue of appetite, Jesus—in His first major conflict after His baptism—would go over the same ground and succeed where Adam and Eve failed. What a message His self-denial should have for us, we who are often enslaved to our appetites and passions.

Read prayerfully and carefully **1 Peter 1:13-16**. **What is the essential message to us regarding our desires and lusts? How do his words “gird up the loins of your mind” focus us on last week’s study, and why is this crucial to keeping our desires under control?**

Amid these exhortations is the call to be holy. That’s a pretty intense command for beings who, at their core, are sinful and fallen. And yet, it’s obviously an attainable goal; otherwise, why would the Bible more than once call us to holiness? And, in this context and others—holiness, which basically means to “be set apart”—deals with the control of our lusts and passions. It says to be holy in all manner of conduct, behavior, and lifestyle. Though we have been given these basic desires by God, we are to be separate from the world and the world’s indulgences and abuses and perversions of these desires.

How much self-denial do you allow yourself to go through? In other words, when your desires are leading you where you know you shouldn’t go, how do you respond? What does your answer tell you about how well you’re following what the Lord tells us about the control of these desires?

Yield

It's one thing, of course, to read the Bible admonitions to keep our desires under control; it's another to do it. Though we want to do what is right, sometimes it's so easy to surrender, not to the will of God but to our lusts and passions. Perhaps this problem was best expressed by Augustine, who once prayed, "*God give me power over my passions—but just not yet!*" Who, to some degree, can't relate?

Nevertheless, there is great hope for us as Christians. We can have victory over the things that can, otherwise, destroy us, but we can have that victory only through the power and Spirit of God working in a soul that yields to that power. In the end, we all yield: The question is—to what? To our passions, which bring death, or to God, who brings life? There are no other options.

Read prayerfully and carefully the following texts: What's the basic message in them all? What personal experience are they all talking about? *Rom. 6:1-7; 2 Cor. 5:17; Col. 2:12, 13.*

Those who have totally surrendered their lives to Christ will, through the Spirit of God, die to their old selves and be "born from above" (*John 3:3, NRSV*). They have surrendered to God their whole existence, including the desires of the heart and flesh (*see Rom. 6:13*). Now, they live under the power and influence of the Holy Spirit, which gives them a new life in Christ (*see Gal. 5:25*). Unlike before they knew the Lord, those who have died to self and live again in Christ can, through this power, live with their desires under control.

This new existence, however, is a day-by-day existence. Though we sometimes hear stories of those who, having surrendered to Christ, suddenly have their lifelong habit of smoking, drinking, or whatever just simply vanish, for most Christians that's not the case. Plus, too, character doesn't change in an instant. There's a day-by-day battle with sin, with self, with the carnal nature, which, though subdued through the power of God, is always there trying to break through. In and of ourselves, we can't win against our fallen flesh; all we can do is, moment by moment, surrender our wills to Christ and claim His power over our sinful desires. This takes self-denial, vigilance, a struggle, and lots of prayer, but victory is promised. Otherwise, defeat is certain.

How, in your own life, have you experienced what these texts listed today have talked about? Why is knowledge of the Cross so important for you to understand when, at times, you fail?

Further Study: Consider the stories of various Bible characters who failed to yield their desires to the will of God. Note the consequences of their actions. Some of these individuals repented of their sin and trusted in God’s grace for forgiveness and salvation. Others continued in their sin and will be eternally lost.

Bible Character	Consequences
Cain (<i>Gen. 4:3-15</i>)	
Moses (<i>Exod. 2:11-15</i>)	
David (<i>2 Samuel 11-18</i>)	
Peter (<i>Matt. 26:69-75</i>)	
Judas (<i>Matt. 27:3-5</i>)	

“You may live in the Spirit, walk in the Spirit, and bear the fruits of the Spirit; you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Then you will be living channels of light, having your life hid with Christ in God.”—Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 4, p. 49.

Discussion Questions:

- ① As a class, talk about what it means to die to self and live a new life in Christ. Share your own experiences and how some person may have changed your life. What advice would you give to someone who, wanting to be a Christian, admits that he or she never had such experiences with God before?
- ② In our struggle to keep our desires under control, why is understanding the good news of Christ’s substitutionary death so important, especially after we make a mistake and yield to our sinful desires?
- ③ In your own community, where do you see businesses exploiting our fallen condition? Though there are limits, of course, to what you could or even should do, is there anything that, as a class or a church, you could do to help limit the damage these businesses are doing to your community? If so, what?

The Locked Bookcase

J. H. Zachary

From the time he was a child, Juan wanted to know God. While still a teenager, he enrolled in a seminary to become a priest. He read the Bible carefully and began noticing differences between what it said and what his teachers taught. He discovered that the Ten Commandments in the Bible differed from those he studied in class. These discrepancies drove Juan to study the Scriptures even more.

Juan spent many hours in the seminary library. One day he noticed some books locked within a case. A note taped to the case stated that no one was to read the books locked inside.

Juan became curious. *What could those books contain that would be harmful to a seminary student?* he wondered. And who is this E. G. White who had written those forbidden books?

Juan wanted to read those books and decided to make friends with the librarian. For several weeks he built up trust with the librarian. Finally he asked, "Is it possible for me to read one of the books locked in that case over there? I'm curious about them."

The librarian smiled, opened a drawer, and pulled out a key. Together the two walked to the locked case. The librarian unlocked the case, and Juan selected one book, *The Great Controversy*. He took it home and began reading it.

As he read, he began to understand why these books were forbidden. The book spoke about his church, and the accusations were as heresy to him. But every chapter of the book contained scriptural references to back it up. Juan looked up the verses and realized that the Bible supported what this book was saying.

Juan borrowed and read several other books by Ellen G. White. As he read them, he felt the Holy Spirit urging him to draw closer to the Bible and to Jesus.

Juan's questions in class brought hostility from some of his teachers. In time he left the seminary and moved to a distant island in the Philippines. There he met some people who clearly followed the Bible's teachings. After studying the Bible with them for several months, he was baptized.

He praises God for showing him the path of life through those "forbidden books." Juan is sharing his faith with animist people living in the Philippines.

J. H. Zachary was retired from the Ministerial Association of the General Conference.