

# The Sufficiency of Scripture to Diagnose and Cure Souls



By David Powlison

How do destructive people become constructive? How do out-of-control people become fruitfully self-controlled? How do rigid people become flexible? How do drifty people learn focus? How do hopeless people grow in hope? How do angry people learn to make peace? And even before we can ask How? we must ask, Why are troubled people troubled? What's wrong with us?

In modern society, Scripture's way of explaining and engaging people has been largely displaced. What must be done to recover the centrality of Scripture for helping people to grow up into the image of Christ? How can face-to-face "helping" relationships be reconfigured to serve as instruments of the only enduring wisdom and the only true humanity?

To recover the centrality of Scripture for the cure of souls demands two things: *conviction* backed up with *content*. The conviction? Scripture is about understanding and helping people. The scope of Scripture's sufficiency includes those face-to-face relationships that our culture labels "counseling" or "psychotherapy." The content? The problems, needs, and struggles of real people—right down to the details—must be rationally explained by

the categories with which the Bible teaches us to understand human life.

Conviction alone simply waves a flag and eventually degrades into sloganeering. But convictions demonstrated in action, convictions shown to be penetrating, comprehensive, and subtle, will edify the teachable and even persuade the skeptical. The church needs persuading that the conviction is true. A key ingredient in such persuasion will be to parade the riches of Scripture for curing souls.

In the pages that follow, we will look first at the *conviction* that Scripture is about "problems in living." We will then explore one small bit of content, the term, "lusts of the flesh." This phrase is central to how God explains us. It cuts to the root of our problems in living, but it has languished in near uselessness.

## **Conviction: Systematic Biblical Counseling**

What is a genuinely biblical view of the problems of the human soul and the procedures of ministering grace? Such a view must establish a number of things. First, we must ask, does Scripture give us the materials and call to construct something that might fairly be called "systematic biblical counseling." In fact, we do have the goods for a coherent and comprehensive practical theology of face-to-face ministry. Scripture is dense with explanations, with instructions, with implications. We have much work to do to

---

*\*David Powlison is editor of the Journal of Biblical Counseling. He counsels and teaches at CCEF and teaches practical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary.*

understand and to articulate the biblical “model.” But we don’t have to make it up or borrow from models that others have made up as ways to explain people.

In many places, the Holy Spirit reflects on the sufficiency of the treasure that He has created through His prophets and apostles. For example, in one classic passage Scripture proclaims itself as that which makes us “wise unto salvation.” This is a comprehensive description of transforming human life from all that ails us (2 Tim. 3:15-17). This same passage goes on to speak of the Spirit’s words as purposing to *teach* us. The utter simplicity and unsearchable complexity of Scripture enlightens us about God, about ourselves, about good and evil, true and false, grace and judgment, about the world that surrounds us with its many forms of suffering and beguilement, with its opportunities to shed light into darkness. Through such teaching, riveted to particular people in particular situations, God *exposes* in specific detail what is wrong with human life. No deeper or truer or better analysis of the human condition can be concocted.

God’s words reconstruct and transform what they define as defective. He speaks as He acts, to *straighten out* wrongs through the corrective power of grace. To promote any solution but God’s is to offer opiates to the masses, the stuff of dreams, not the stuff of real answers for real problems. And this God *continues* to personalize what is true, performing His wisdom-renewing work in an ongoing process. The net result? We begin to live like Jesus Christ Himself.

Scripture accomplishes our renewal in the image of Him who is wisdom incarnate, so that we become equipped for every good work. Biblical teaching addresses countless topics. One crucial topic is the area of human motivation—the interpretation and evaluation of our desires. The Bible’s view of what is disordered in human motivation sharply challenges all secular pretenders to explanatory wisdom about why we do what we do.

### **Content: “Lusts of the Flesh,” A Case Study in Systematic Practical Theology**

The simplest way to discover why a person does, says, thinks, or feels certain things is to

ask, “What do you *want*? What *desires* made him do that? What *yearning* led her to say that? What *longings* animate me when I follow that train of thoughts and fantasy? What did they *fear* when they felt so anxious?”<sup>1</sup> Such questions are plain common sense. Abraham Maslow sensibly described matters this way:

The original criterion of motivation and the one that is still used by all human beings... is the subjective one. I am motivated when I feel desire or want or yearning or wish or lack.<sup>2</sup>

So, pose the question, “What do you want?” to yourself and others. Then pay attention to the answers. If you listen to people, they’ll often tell you exactly what they want. “I got angry because she dissed me, and I want respect.” “She became tongue-tied because she yearns for acceptance.” “He feels anxious because money’s tight, and he fears that poverty will prove he’s a failure.” “Those fantasies of heroism and success play in my mind because I long to be important.” Even when a person is inarticulate or unaware, you can often deduce the answer with a high degree of accuracy if you watch and listen closely, and if you know yourself well. Part of knowing any person well is learning what he or she typically lives for—the pattern of desires.

### **The Meaning of Our Desires**

But naming what you want is the easy part. The harder part is this: how should you now *interpret* what you’ve identified? Naming is not the same as understanding what your wants mean and how you should evaluate them. The meaning of our desires is not common sense at all. Instead, it’s a battleground for contending theories of human nature, competing interpretations of the underlying dynamics of human psychology. Abraham Maslow, for example, went on to explain our desires this way:

It is these needs which are essentially deficits in the organism, empty holes, so to speak, which must be filled up for health’s sake, and furthermore must be filled from

<sup>1</sup> A fear is simply desire turned on its head: “I *don’t* want.”

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1968), 22.

without by human beings *other* than the subject, that I shall call deficits or deficiency needs.<sup>3</sup>

Is it true that we have these “needs” for respect, acceptance, money, or significance that must be met from outside? Many other great psychologists—B. F. Skinner, Alfred Adler, Sigmund Freud, Victor Frankl, Aaron Beck, Carl Jung, and Virginia Satir, to name a few—didn’t think so at all. They disagreed fiercely with each other, too!

The God who reveals His way of thinking in the Bible doesn’t agree either with Maslow or with any of the others. In fact, no one ever rightly understands and weighs desires without God’s self-revelation in Scripture. Neither lowbrow common sense nor highbrow personality theory gets it straight. God must show us how to properly interpret our wants, because we are compulsive misinterpreters: we don’t *want* the true interpretation. It’s too

subordination to passionate love for God that claims my heart, soul, mind, and might. Our desires are often idolatrous cravings to get good gifts (overthrowing or ignoring the Giver). Sometimes they are intense desires for the Giver Himself as supremely more important than whatever good gifts we might gain or lose from His hand. That’s the first unique thing God shows us about human psychology. This cosmic battleground is something none of the secular psychologists have seen or can see, because they can’t see that deeply into why we do what we do. Their own motives give them reasons not to want to see that deeply and honestly. It would mean admitting sin.

To examine desires is one of the most fruitful ways to come at the topic of motivation biblically. New Testament authors repeatedly allude to life-controlling cravings when they summarize the innermost dynamics of the human soul. Which will triumph, the natural

---

## New Testament authors repeatedly allude to life-controlling cravings when they summarize the innermost dynamics of the human soul.

---

threatening to the pursuit of God-less autonomy that is our deepest, darkest, most persistent, and most inadmissible passion.

### God’s Interpretation and Intervention

“What do you crave, want, pursue, wish, long for, hope to get, feel you need, or passionately desire?” God has an interpretation of this that cuts to the marrow of who you are and what you live for. He sees our hearts as an embattled kingdom ruled either by one kind of desire or by another kind. On the one hand, what *lusts of the flesh* hijack your heart from God’s rule? On the other hand, what *holy passions* express your love for God?” Our desires are not a given, but a fundamental choice. Desires are most often unruly, disorderly, inordinate affections for XYZ, a good thing that I insanely need. Sometimes they are natural affections for xyz, made sane and orderly by

deviancy of the lusts of the flesh or the restored sanity of the desires of the Spirit? Christ’s apostles have the greatest confidence that only the resources of the gospel of grace and truth possess sufficient depth and power to change us in the ways we most need changing. The mercies of God work to *forgive* and then to *change* what is deeply evil, but even more deeply curable by God’s hand and voice. The in-working power of grace qualitatively transforms the very desires that psychologists assume are hard-wired, unchangeable, morally neutral givens. Christ’s grace slays and replaces (in a lifelong battle) the very lusts that the theories variously explain as “needs” or “drives” or “instincts” or “goals.” That’s the second unique thing God shows us about human psychology. We can be fundamentally rewired by the merciful presence of the Messiah. None of the secular psychologists say this or can say this. They have no power to address us so deeply, and they don’t want to address us at the level of

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

what we (and they) live for. It would mean confessing Christ.

We will use a series of fifteen questions to probe the world of our desires.

### 1. What is the most common way that the New Testament talks about what's wrong with people?

*Lusts of the flesh* (cravings or pleasures) is a summary term for what is wrong with us in God's eyes. In sin, people turn *from* God to serve what they want. By grace, people turn to God from their cravings. According to the Lord's assessment, we all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and the mind (Eph. 2:3). Those outside of Christ are thoroughly controlled by what they want. ("Of course I live for money, reputation, success, looks, and love. What else is there to live for?") And the most significant inner conflict in Christians is between what the Spirit wants and what we want.

But the term "lust" has become almost useless to modern readers of the Bible. It is reduced to sexual desire. Take a poll of the people in your church, asking them the meaning of "lusts of the flesh." Sex will appear first on every list! Greed, pride, gluttonous craving, or mammon worship might be added in the answers of a few of the more thoughtful believers. But the subtleties and details get washed out, and a crucial biblical term for explaining human life languishes. In contrast, the New Testament writers use this term as a comprehensive category for the human dilemma! It will pay us to think carefully about its manifold meanings. We need to expand our understanding of a term that has been truncated and drained of significance. We need to learn to see life through these lenses, and to use these categories skillfully.

The New Testament repeatedly focuses on the "lusts of the flesh" as a summary of what is wrong with the human heart that underlies bad behavior. For example, 1 John 2:16 contrasts the love of the Father with "all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life."<sup>4</sup> This does not mean that the New Testament is internalistic.<sup>5</sup> In each of these passages, behavior intimately connects to motive, and motive to behavior.

Wise counselors follow the model of Scripture and move back and forth between lusts of the flesh and the tangible works of the flesh, between faith and the tangible fruit of the Spirit.

### 2. Why do people do specific ungodly things?

*Lusts of the flesh* answers the WHY question operating at the heart of any system attempting to explain human behavior. Specific ruling desires—lusts, cravings or pleasures—create bad fruit. Inordinate desires explain and organize diverse bad behavior and mental processes: words, actions, emotions, thoughts, plans, attitudes, brooding memories, fantasies. James 1:13-16 establishes this intimate and pervasive connection between motive and fruit this way:

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.<sup>6</sup>

In modern language such sinful cravings often masquerade as expectations, goals, felt needs, wishes, demands, longings, drives, and so forth. People talk about their motives in ways that anesthetize themselves and others to the true

<sup>4</sup> See also Rom. 13:14; Gal. 5:16-17; Eph. 2:2 and 4:22; James 1:14-15; 4:1-3; 1 Peter 1:14; 2 Peter 1:4. The Old Testament typically focuses on idolatry as the way people go astray. This doesn't mean that the Old Testament is externalistic. Visible idolatry simply registers, for all to see, the failure to love the Lord God with heart, soul, mind, and might; it registers an internal defection. There are places where the problem of idolatry is turned into a metaphor for the most basic internalized sin (e.g., Ezek. 14), and visible idolatry always expressed a defection of heart from God. There are places where the human heart is described as insane (Eccl. 9:3), evil (Gen. 6:5), full of cravings and lies (Num. 11-25), uncircumcised, hard, blind, and so forth. The New Testament also equates sinful desires with idolatry, metaphorically, on several occasions (e.g., Col. 3:5; Eph. 5:5). Idolatry can summarize every false, life-controlling master (1 John 5:21).

<sup>5</sup> We often hear warnings against externalistic religion. But internalistic religion creates equally serious problems. Christians often seek some experience or feeling, some sense of total brokenness, some comprehensive inward transformation – and miss that biblical change is practical and progressive, inside and out.

<sup>6</sup> See also Gal. 5:16-6:10; James 1:13-16; James 3:14-4:12.

significance of what they are describing.

### 3. But what's wrong with wanting things that seem good?

What makes our desires wrong? This question becomes particularly perplexing to people when the object of their desires is a good thing. Notice some of the adjectives that get appended to our cravings: *evil, polluted* lusts.<sup>7</sup> What do such strong words describe? Sometimes the object of desire itself is evil: e.g., to kill someone, to steal, to control the cocaine trade on the Eastern seaboard. But often the object of our desire is good, and the evil lies in the lordship of the desire. Our will replaces God's as that which determines how we live. John Calvin put it this way: "We teach that all human desires are evil, and charge them with sin—not in that they are natural, but because they are inordinate."<sup>8</sup> In other words, the evil in our desires often lies not in what we want but in the fact that we want it too much. Natural affections (for any good thing) become inordinate, ruling cravings. We are meant to be ruled by godly passions and desires (see Question 15, below). Natural desires for good things are meant to exist subordinate to our desire to please the Giver of gifts. Grasping that the evil lies in the ruling status of the desire, not the object, is frequently a turning point in self-understanding, in seeing the need for Christ's mercies, and in changing.

Consider this example. A woman commits adultery, then repents. She and her husband rebuild their marriage, painstakingly, patiently. Eight months later the man finds himself plagued with subtle suspiciousness and irritability. The wife senses it and feels a bit like she lives under FBI surveillance. The husband is grieved by his suspiciousness because he has no objective reasons for it. "I've forgiven her; we've rebuilt our marriage; we've never communicated better; why do I hold on to this mistrust?" It emerges that he is willing to forgive the past, but he attempts to control the future. His craving could be stated this way: "I want to guarantee that betrayal never, ever happens

again." The object of desire is good; its ruling status poisons his ability to love. The lust to ensure her fidelity places him in the stance of continually evaluating and judging his wife, rather than loving her. What he wants cannot be guaranteed this side of heaven. He sees the point, sees his inordinate desire to ensure his marital future. But he bursts out, "What's wrong with wanting my wife to love me? What's wrong with wanting her to remain faithful to our marriage?" Here is where this truth is so sweet. There is nothing wrong with the object of desire; there is everything wrong when it rules his life. The process of restoring that marriage took a long step forward as he took this to heart.

Are preferences, wishes, desires, longings, hopes, and expectations always sinful then? Of course not. What theologians used to call "natural affections" are part of our humanity. They are part of what makes humans different from stones, able to tell the difference between blessing and curse, pleasure and pain. It is *right* that we don't want the pains of rejection, death, poverty, and illness, and we do want the joys of friendship, life, money, and health. Jesus was no masochist; of course He cried out, "Let this cup pass from Me!" The moral issue always turns on whether the desire takes on a ruling status. If it does, it will produce visible sins: anger, grumbling, immorality, despair, what James so vividly termed "disorder and every evil thing" (James 3:16). Jesus was no idolater; He entrusted Himself to His Father and obeyed. "Nevertheless, not My will but Yours be done." But Jesus was also no stoic or Buddhist aiming to flat-line human desires. His desires were strong, but mastered by love for His Father. If natural affections remain submitted to God, such faith will produce visible love. For example, if you wish your son or daughter to grow up to be a Christian, and your child strays, it may break your heart, but it will not make you sin against either God or your child. Anger, obsessive anxiety, suspiciousness, or manipulation gives evidence that desire for a good thing has grown monstrous. Wise parenting demonstrates that the desire, a passionate and broken-hearted love, is aligned rightly.

### 4. Why don't people see this as the problem?

Consider a second adjective that Scripture attaches to the phrase "lusts of the flesh":

---

<sup>7</sup> Col. 3:5; 2 Peter 2:10.

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press), 604.

*deceitful* lusts.<sup>9</sup> Our desires deceive us because they present themselves as so plausible. When natural affections become warped and monstrous, they blind us. Who wouldn't want good health, financial comfort, a loving spouse, good kids, success on the job, kind parents, tasty food, a life without traffic jams, control over circumstances? Yet cravings for these things lead to every sort of evil. The things people desire are delightful as blessings received from God, but terrible as rulers. They make good goods but bad gods. They beguile, promising blessing, but delivering sin and death.

Some sins are high-handed, done with full awareness of choice (Ps.19:13). Other sins reflect the blind, dark, habitual, compulsive, hardened, ignorant, confused, instinctive insanity of sin.<sup>10</sup> One of the joys of biblical ministry comes when you are able to help turn on the lights in another person's dark room.

## 5. Is the phrase "lusts of the flesh" useful in practical life and counseling?

Apply the term to twentieth-century experience, redeeming the evasive language people substitute. People frequently talk about what they want, expect, wish for, desire, demand, need, long for. Pop psychologies typically validate these needs and longings as neutral givens. Little do people realize that much of the time they are actually describing sinful usurpers of God's rule over their lives: inordinate desires, lusts of the flesh, cravings. They are being honest about what they want, but they aren't interpreting their experience rightly. For example, listen to children talk when they are angry, disappointed, demanding, contrary: "But I want. . . . But I don't want. . . ." In our family we began teaching our children about the "I-wantsies" before they were two years old. We wanted them to grasp that sin was

---

Couples who see what rules them—cravings for affection, attention, power, vindication, control, comfort, a hassle-free life—can repent and find God's grace made real to them and then learn how to make peace.

---

People usually don't see their desires as lusts. Our souls awaken as the light of God's analytic gaze disturbs our ignorance and self-deceit. Souls are then comforted and cured by the love that shed substitutionary blood to purchase the inexpressible gift.

I have yet to meet a couple locked in hostility (and the accompanying fear, self-pity, hurt, self-righteousness) who really understood and reckoned with their motives. James 4:1-3 teaches that cravings underlie conflicts. Why do you fight? It's not "because my wife/husband..."—it's because of something about *you*. Couples who see what rules them—cravings for affection, attention, power, vindication, control, comfort, a hassle-free life—can repent and find God's grace made real to them and then learn how to make peace.

---

<sup>9</sup> Eph. 4:22.

<sup>10</sup> Gen. 6:5; Ps. 19:12; Eccl. 9:3; Jer. 17:9; Eph. 4:17-22; 1 Tim. 1:13; 2 Peter 2:10-22.

more than behavior. For example, analyze any argument or outburst of anger and you will find ruling expectations and desires that are being frustrated (James 4:1-2). The language people typically use day-to-day gets you into the details of a person's life, but it usually comes with a distorted interpretation attached. Wise counseling must reinterpret that experience into biblical categories, taking the more pointed reality of "lusts, cravings, pleasures" and mapping it onto the "felt needs" that underlie much sin and misery. The very unfamiliarity of the phrase is an advantage, if you explain it carefully and show its relevance and applicability. Behavioral sins demand a horizontal resolution—as well as vertical repentance. But motivational sins have first and foremost to do with God. Repentance quickens the awareness of relationship with the God of grace.

## 6. Does each person have one "root sin"?

With good reason, the Bible usually refers

to the *lusts* (plural) of the flesh. The human heart can generate a lust tailored to any situation. Again John Calvin powerfully described how cravings “boil up” within us, how the mind of man is a “factory of idols.”<sup>11</sup> We are infested with lusts. Listen closely to any person given to complaining, and you will observe the creativity of our cravings. Certainly one particular craving may so frequently appear that it seems to be a “root sin”: love of mammon, fear of man and craving for approval, love of preeminence or control, desire for pleasure, and so forth, can dictate much of life! But all people have all the typical cravings.

Realizing the diversity in human lusts gives great flexibility and penetration to counseling. For example, one lust can generate very diverse sins, as 1 Timothy 6:10 states: “The love of money is a root of all sorts of evil.” Every one of

They don’t assume all people have the same characteristic flesh, or that a person always does a certain thing for the same reasons. The flesh is creative in iniquity.

#### **7. How can you tell if a desire is inordinate rather than natural?**

By their *fruits* you know them. Human motivation is not a theoretical mystery; there is no need to engage in a long, introspective archeological dig. Evil desires produce bad fruits that can be seen, heard, and felt (James 1:15; 3:16). For example, a father who wants his child to grow up to become a Christian reveals the status of that desire by whether he is a good father or is manipulative, fearful, angry, and suspicious. In a good father, the desire is subordinate to God’s will that he love his child. In a sinful father, the desire rules and produces moral and emotional chaos. Similarly, a wife

---

## The Bible calls for a more straightforward form of self-examination: an outburst of anger invites reflection on what craving ruled the heart, so that we might repent intelligently.

---

the Ten Commandments, and more, can be broken by someone who loves and serves money. The craving for money and material possessions is an organizing theme for symptomatic sins as diverse as anxiety, theft, compulsive shopping, murder, jealousy, marital discord, a sense of inferiority or of superiority compared to others, sexual immorality that trades sex for material advantage, and so forth.

On the flip side, a single behavioral sin can emerge from very different lusts. For example, sexual immorality might occur for many different reasons: erotic pleasure, financial advantage, revenge on a spouse or parent, fear of saying no to an authority, pursuit of approval, enjoyment of power over another’s sexual response, the quest for social status or career advancement, pity for someone and playing the savior, fear of losing a potential marriage partner, escape from boredom, peer pressure, and so forth! Wise biblical counselors dig for specifics.

who wants to be loved reveals the status of that desire by whether or not she loves and respects her husband. Visible fruit reveals whether God rules or a lust rules.

It is a serious mistake to engage in introspective “idol hunts,” attempting to dig out and weigh every kink in the human soul. The Bible calls for a more straightforward form of self-examination: an outburst of anger invites reflection on what craving ruled the heart, so that we might repent intelligently. The Bible’s purposes are “extraspersive,” not introspective: to move out toward God in repentant faith (James 4:6-10) and then to move out towards the one wronged by anger, making peace in repentance, humility, and love.

#### **8. Is it even right to talk about the heart, since the Bible teaches that the heart is unknowable to anyone but God? (1 Sam. 16:7; Jer. 17:9)**

No one but God can see, explain, control or change another person’s heart and its choices. There is no underlying reason why a person

---

<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 65, 108.

serves a particular lust rather than God; sin is irrational and insane. And there is no counseling technique that can fundamentally change hearts. But the Bible teaches us that we can *describe* what rules the heart and speak truth that God uses to convict and liberate. Effective biblical ministry probes and addresses why people do things, as well as what they do. Jesus' ministry continually exposed and challenged what people lived for, offering Himself as the only worthy ruler of the heart.

For example, 1 Samuel 16:7 says that man judges by externals while God judges the heart. Yet a few verses earlier, we are told that Saul visibly disobeyed God for a reason: he feared the people and listened to their voice, instead of fearing God and listening to Him (1 Sam. 15:24). His motives are describable, even if inexplicable. There is no deeper cause for sin than sin. Jeremiah 17:9 says that the human heart is deceitful and incomprehensible to any but God, but the same passage describes how behavior reveals that people trust in idols, themselves, and others, instead of trusting in God (Jer. 17:1-8). Scripture is frank to tell us the causes of behavior: interpersonal conflicts, for example, arise because of lusts (James 4:1-2). If anger and conflict come from a lust, the next and obvious question is, "What do you want that now rules you?"

To search out motives demands no subtle psychotherapeutic technique. People can often tell you what they want. The Israelites grumbled—a capital crime—when they had to subsist on boring food. Why? They craved flavor: fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic (Num. 11:5). Later they grumbled when they got thirsty and no oasis appeared. Why? They craved juicy foods, or foods that demanded irrigation: grain, figs, vines, pomegranates, and water (Num. 20:5). In each case the craving reflected their apostasy from God and expressed itself in visible, audible sins. When we see the God-substitutes that claim our affections, then we see how good and necessary the grace of Jesus is in subduing hijackers and retaking the controls.

## 9. Doesn't the word *lusts* properly apply only to bodily appetites: the pleasures and comforts of sex, food, drink, rest, exercise, health?

People follow the *desires of body and mind* (Eph. 2:3). Bodily appetites—the organism's hedonistic instinct to feel good—certainly can prove powerful masters unto sin. But desires of the mind—for power, human approval, success, preeminence, wealth, self-righteousness, and so forth—are equally potent masters. The desires of the mind often present the most subtle and deceitful lusts because their outworkings are not always obvious. They don't reside in the body, but the Bible still views them as "lusts."

## 10. Can desires be habitual?

Paul describes a *former manner of life* characterized by deceitful lusts. Peter tells his readers not to be conformed to their *former desires*.<sup>12</sup> Like all other aspects of sin—beliefs, attitudes, words, deeds, emotions, thoughts, fantasies—desires can be habitual, or typical. You will counsel people who typically and repeatedly seek to control others, or to indulge in the pleasures of sloth, or to be seen as superior, or to be liked. Jesus' call to die daily to self recognizes the inertia of sin. God is in the business of creating new habitual desires, for example, an active concern for the well being of others before God.

Many counseling systems are obsessed with locating the reasons for current problems in the distant past. The Bible's worldview is much more straightforward. Sin emerges from within the person. The fact that a pattern of craving became established many years before—even that it was forged in a particular context, perhaps influenced by bad models or by experiences of being sinned against—only describes what happened and when. The past does not explain why. For example, past rejections do not cause a craving to be accepted by others, any more than current rejections cause that craving. A person who was always accepted by significant others can be just as mastered by the lust for acceptance! The occasions of a lust are never its cause. Temptations and sufferings do push our buttons,

<sup>12</sup> Eph. 4:22, (cf. 4:17-19, which reinforces the notion of a characteristic lifestyle); 1 Peter 1:14.

but they don't create those buttons. That brings huge hope for change in the present by the grace of God.

**11. What about fears? They seem as important in human motivation as cravings.**

Fear and desire are two sides of a single coin. A sinful fear is a craving for something *not* to happen. If I want money, I fear poverty. If I long to be accepted, I'm terrified of rejection. If I fear pain or hardship, I crave comfort or pleasure. If I crave preeminence, I fear being inferior to others. With some people the fear may be more gripping and pronounced than the corresponding desire. Wise counseling will work with what is pronounced. For example, a person who grew up during the Great Depression might manifest mammon worship through a fear of poverty that shows up in anxiety, hoarding, repeated calculations of financial worth, and so forth. A wealthy thirty-something entrepreneur might manifest mammon worship through unchecked consumer spending. With the former, address fear; with the latter, address greed. They are complementary expressions of craving treasure on earth.

**12. Do people ever have conflicting motives?**

Certainly. The conflict between sinful lusts and the Holy Spirit's desires is a given of the Christian life (Gal. 5:16-17). All of us often have mixed motives, some good, and some bad. Most preachers and counselors will acknowledge that genuine love for Christ and people battles with perverse love for personal success and human approval.

In other instances, two sinful cravings may conflict. For example, a businessman might want to steal something from a convenience store, but holds back in fear of what people would think if they found out. In this example, mammon worship and social approval present themselves as options for the flesh; the heart inclines to the latter. People often prioritize their cravings, and arrange the priorities differently in different situations. For example, the man who would never shoplift because of the social consequences might cheat on his taxes because he's not likely to get caught, and no one who "matters" would know if he did. In this case self-will and mammon worship seize the steering wheel, and social approval moves to the back seat. The "broad

way" has a thousand creative variants!

**13. How does thinking about lusts relate to other ways of talking about sin, such as "sin nature," "self," "pride," "autonomy," "unbelief," and "self-centeredness"?**

These words are general terms that summarize the problem of sin. One of the beauties of identifying ruling desires is that they are so specific. Insight can therefore enable more specific repentance and specific change. For example, a person who becomes angry in a traffic jam may later say, "I know my anger is sin, and it comes from self." That is true as far as it goes. But it helps to take self-knowledge a step further: "I cursed in anger because I craved to get to my appointment on time, I feared criticism from the person waiting for me, and I feared losing the profits from that sale." Repentance and change can become more specific when the person identifies these three lusts that expressed the lordship of "self" in this particular incident.

The Bible discusses sin in an astonishing variety of ways. Sometimes Scripture addresses sin at the general level: e.g., Luke 9:23-26 on "self," or Proverbs on the "fool." At other times, Scripture increases the microscope's power and treats a particular theme of sin: e.g., Philippians 3 on the pursuit of self-righteousness, or 1 Timothy 6:5-19 on love of money, or 2 Timothy 3:4 on love of pleasure. In still other places, the Bible speaks of "desires" that lead to sin without specifying. This invites us to make the specific application to ourselves.<sup>13</sup> We could diagram this roughly as follows: (1) general terms, (2) mid-level typical patterns, and (3) detail-level specifics. (See figure 1.)

**14. In counseling, do you just confront a person with his sinful cravings?**

Wise counselors don't "just confront" anything. They do many different things to make confrontation timely and effective. Counselors never see the heart, only the evidences, so a certain tentativeness is appropriate when discussing motives. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that counseling aims to illuminate the heart. We want to help people see themselves as they are in God's eyes, and in that to make the love of God a sweet

<sup>13</sup> See James 1:15-15 and 4:1-2; Gal. 5:16-21; Rom. 13:12-14.

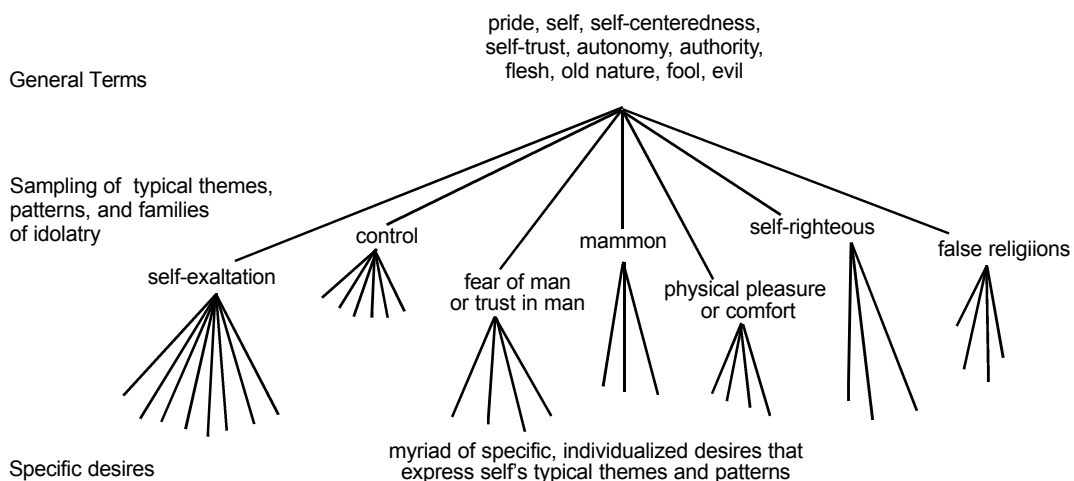


FIGURE 1. DESIRES OF THE FLESH

necessity. Since counselors have the same package of typical lusts, we meet on common ground in our need for grace because of pride, fear of man, unbelief, and love of comfort and control.

We can and must tackle such issues. As we saw earlier, Second Timothy 3:16 begins with “teaching.” Good teaching (for example, on how Galatians 5 and James 1 connect outward sins to inward cravings) helps people examine and see themselves. Good teaching invites self-knowledge and self-confrontation. Experience with people will make you “case wise” to typical connections (e.g., the varied motives for immorality mentioned above in Question 6). Probing questions—“What did you want or expect or fear when you blew up at your wife?”—help a person reveal his ruling lusts to himself and to the counselor.

In the light of self-knowledge before God’s face (Heb. 4:12-13), the Gospel offers many promises: mercy, help, the Shepherd’s care in progressive sanctification (Heb. 4:14-16). “The unfolding of Your words brings light” (Ps. 119:130). Repentance, faith, and obedience become vigorous and intelligent when we see both our inner cravings and our outward sins in light of God’s mercies. Work hard and carefully both on motivation issues (Romans 13:14: the lusts of the flesh *versus* putting on Jesus Christ) and on behavioral issues (Romans 13:12-13: the varied deeds of darkness *versus* proper “daylight” behavior).

The patterns, themes, or tendencies of the heart do not typically yield to a once-for-all repentance. Try dealing one mortal blow to your pride, fear of man, love of pleasure, or desire to control your world, and you will realize why Jesus spoke Luke 9:23! But genuine progress will occur where the Holy Spirit is at work. Understanding your motivational sins gives you a sense for the “themes” of your story, how your Father is at work in you over the long haul.

#### 15. Can you change what you want?

Yes and Amen! This is central to the work of the Holy Spirit. You will always desire, love, trust, believe, fear, obey, long for, value, pursue, hope, and serve *something*. You are motivated when you feel desire. God does not anesthetize us; He redirects our desires. The Holy Spirit works to change the configuration and status of our desires, as He leads us with an intimate hand.<sup>14</sup> The desires of the heart are not unchangeable. God never promises to give you what you want, to meet your felt needs and longings. He tells you to be ruled by other, different desires. This is radical. God promises to change what you really want! God insists that He be first, and all lesser loves be radically subordinate.

The best way to understand this is to think about prayer. Prayer means asking. You ask because you *want* something. You ask God because you believe He has power to accomplish

<sup>14</sup> Gal. 5:16-25; Rom. 6:16-18; 8:12-16; Ps. 23:3.

some desired good. For example, when Solomon prayed for a wise and discerning heart, God freely gave Solomon what he wanted (1 Kings 3). God was delighted that Solomon did not ask for a long life, riches, and success. These are the felt needs of most people in power. Solomon had not treated God as a genie in a lamp who exists to grant him three wishes. What we want by nature—the cravings of the flesh—expresses our sin nature. But Solomon had learned to know what he really needed. He had learned to pray according to the will of God, and it pleased God to answer him. The Lord changes what we want, and we learn to pray for what delights God, to want what He wants.

God challenges the things that everybody, everywhere eagerly pursues (Matt. 6:32). What desires of body and mind (Eph. 2:3) *do* people naturally follow? Consider our characteristic passions: desires of the body include life itself, air, health, water, food, clothing, shelter, sexual pleasure, rest, and exercise. Desires of the mind include happiness, being loved, meaning, money and possessions, respect, status, accomplishment, self-esteem, success, control, power, self-righteousness, aesthetic pleasure, knowledge, marriage and family. Must these rule our lives? They did not rule Jesus' life. Can these cravings really be changed? The Bible says Yes, and points us to the promises of God: to indwell us with power, to write truth on our hearts, to pour out His love in our hearts, to enable us to say "Abba, Father."

As we have seen, many of these things are not bad in themselves. The evil in our desires does not lie in what we want, but in the fact that we want it too much. Our desires for good things seize the throne, becoming idols that replace the King. God refuses to serve our instinctive longings, but commands us to be ruled by other longings. What God commands, He provides the power to accomplish: He works in us both the willing and the doing of His good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13).

Can you change what you most deeply want? Yes. Does that answer to this question surprise you? It counters influential contemporary views of human motivation. Most Christian counseling books follow on the heels of secular psychologists and take your desires, your "felt needs," as givens. Many leading

Christian psychologists make the unchangeability of what we long for the foundation of their systems. For example, many teach that we have an "empty love tank" inside. Our craving for love must be met, or we are doomed to a life of misery and sin. Desires to feel good about ourselves ("self-esteem") or to accomplish something meaningful are similarly baptized. This creates the psychological equivalent of the "Health and Wealth" theology, which similarly selects certain common desires and accepts them as givens that God is obligated to fulfill. The psychological versions of health and wealth miss that God is about the business of changing what people really long for. If felt needs are unchangeable, then it is impossible for us to learn to pray the way Solomon did. This reinforces our tendency to pray for our cravings. It reinforces a sense of victimization in those who were mistreated. It reinforces the tendency to press God into the service of our lusts. Nowhere in the Bible does anyone pray, "Lord, meet my need to feel significant and my need to feel loved." Knowledge of the significance of your life and of the security of God's love for you comes through a different channel than "I long for significance and security."

The deepest longings of the human heart can and must be changed as we are remade into all that God designed us to be. Our deviant longings are illegitimate masters. even where the object of desire is a good thing, the status of the desire usurps God. Our cravings should be recognized in order that we may more richly know God as the Savior, Lover, and Converter of the human soul. God would have us long for Him more than we long for His gifts. To make us truly human, God must change what we want; we must learn to want the things Jesus wanted. It is no surprise that the psychologists can't find any biblical proof texts for their view of human motivation. The Bible teaches a different view.

The Christian life is a great paradox. Those who die to self, find self. Those who die to their cravings will receive many times as much in this age, and, in the age to come, eternal life (Luke 18:29). They will find new passions worth living for and dying for. If I crave happiness, I will receive misery. If I crave to be loved, I will receive rejection. If I crave significance, I will receive futility. If I crave

control, I will receive chaos. If I crave reputation, I will receive humiliation. But if I long for God and His wisdom and mercy, I will receive God and wisdom and mercy. Along the way, sooner or later, I will also receive happiness, love, meaning, order, and glory.

Every vital Christian testifies that the instinctive passions and desires of the flesh can be replaced with the new priorities of the Spirit. This reorientation is not instant and complete, but it is genuine and progressive. Two of the greatest books of practical Christian theology—Augustine’s *Confessions* and Jonathan Edwards’s *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*—meditate exactly on this transformation. And one assumes that Francis of Assisi meant his prayer: “O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love.” The craving to learn *how* to love and understand replaces the craving *for* love and understanding.

Those who hunger and thirst for such righteousness will be satisfied. We have Jesus’ word. We have no promise, however, that God will satisfy the instinctive cravings of the soul. The Bible teaches us to pray, to learn to ask for what we really need. Can we pray the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer and really mean it? Yes. Can we long for God’s glory, for His will to be obeyed, for daily material provision for all God’s people, for sins to be forgiven, for aid in warfare with evil? Yes.

A wise Puritan pastor, Stephen Charnock, once wrote of “the expulsive power of a new affection.” New ruling desires expel lesser masters from the throne. What are the new and different motives that rule in renewed hearts? What changed objects of desire characterize the master motives of the new, listening heart? How does God change what people want? The Bible treats these matters everywhere.<sup>15</sup>

Idoltrous cravings hijack the human

---

<sup>15</sup> The following passages get a start on this question. For each passage ask, “What does this person *really* want, long for, pursue, delight in?” Ps. 42:1-2; Ps. 63:1-8; Ps. 73:25-28; Ps. 80; Ps. 90:8-17; Prov. 2:1-6; Prov. 3:13-18; Prov. 8:11; Isa. 26:8-9; Matt. 5:6; Matt. 6:9-13; Matt. 6:19-33; Matt. 13:45-46; Luke 11:9-13; Rom. 5:1-11; Rom. 8:18-25; Rom. 9:1-3; 2 Cor. 5:8-9; Phil. 1:18-25; Phil. 3:8-11; Phil. 3:20-21; 2 Tim. 2:22; 2 Tim. 3:12; 1 Peter 1:13; 1 Peter 2:2; Rev. 22:20.

heart. Both the Christian life and Christian ministry are by definition about the business of accomplishing a transformation in what people want. Such transformations lie at the center of the Holy Spirit’s purposes in working His Word into our lives. The lusts of the flesh lead somewhere bad: dead works. The lusts of the flesh have a specific solution: the gospel of Jesus Christ, which replaces them. “He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf” (2 Cor. 5:15). The desires of the Lord lead to somewhere good: good works. One key ingredient in reclaiming the cure of souls is to make this transformation central.

### Conclusion

We have probed only one of the many terms by which the Bible explains the workings of the human heart in specific detail. This is a theme whose riches are inexhaustible. The human heart is an active verb. We do not “have needs”; we “do desires,” just as we do love, fear, hope, trust, and all the rest. In this article we have examined the verbs of desire. We could have examined any of scores of complementary verbs that capture the fundamental activism of the heart of man. But we would do so confident of this: The gospel of Jesus Christ is as wide as human diversity and as deep as human complexity. The Scriptures that bear witness to this Christ in the power of His Spirit are sufficient to cure souls.

\* \* \*

As our staff and authors work on each issue of the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, one of the real pleasures is to see how an issue “comes together.” Unexpected thematic unities become clear. Articles complement each other. The personality and perspective of one author differs from another author in such a way that, when we put the two side by side, a wisdom emerges that no single author could ever capture. This Spring 2005 issue is a prime example. You will read, from many angles, how personal honesty becomes accurate. This issue of *JBC* is full of stories in which honesty changes as people come to see themselves differently. And you will read,

again from many angles, how an honest person grapples with himself or herself by the grace of our most kind Savior. This issue of *JBC* is full of stories getting caught up in The Story.

“How Christ Changes Us By His Grace” sets forth a model for understanding how people change. At first glance, it’s a simple model: situation, instinctive reaction, merciful Savior, renewed response. But Paul Tripp and Tim Lane have put on paper a template for practical sanctification. It is able to embrace the complexities and details of life lived—and life lived well.

The next two articles bear witness to how that template works out in practice. Susan Roberts (“A Heart Full of Worry”) and Max Benfer (“A Heart Full of Pride”) trace their own stories. Pay particular attention to how honest changes take place in tiny moments of daily life. This is of critical importance, if we are to understand how counseling ministry (and life!) really work. The big ideas, profound personal insights, and life-rearranging truths actually work out in the tiniest moments.

William Farley explores how humility develops in “Finding Intimacy with God.” The Humility section in Barnes & Noble, Borders, or amazon.com is not large! But humility happens to be the surprise door that leads to life.

“The Sins We are Unaware Of” by James Eberhart tackles an issue that needs tackling. Most people view “sin” as consciously, willfully chosen wrong-doing. But God (against whom sin registers, by definition!) takes a *very* different view of sin. How do we become aware of things

in ourselves of which we are currently unaware?

Gossip happens to be one of those sins of which many people are unaware. After all, gossip is both an industry and a lifestyle: the stuff of *Entertainment Tonight*, the “gossip column” in the newspaper, and animated conversations in 10,000 lunchrooms. But Brenda Payne shows up gossip for what it is in “The Heart that Wags the Tongue.”

Psalm 77: “I Was in Distress... Then I Thought....” carefully works its way through one of those characteristic psalms in which an honest man talks it out with the Lord in whom he hopes. Sue Nicewander applies the psalm into the life experience of a woman beaten down by life’s disappointments.

Just as Barnes & Noble doesn’t offer much in the humility line, so it doesn’t offer much about forgiveness that shows it as the deepest human need before God. Only if you are rooted in the mercies of God in Christ can you truly forgive other people. Tim Lane revisits this essential aspect of love in “Pursuing and Granting Forgiveness,” and unfolds the practicalities of forgiveness.

Over the past five years “Theophostic” ministry/counseling has become very popular in certain Christian circles. It is appropriate that Tim Ackley reviews this counseling model in this particular issue of *JBC*. Theophostic ministry claims to be Bible-based. But its approach to counseling takes a view of human beings and a view of how God works that stands in marked contrast to the nine articles you will have just read.