

## The Dangers and Transforming Power of Desires

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the second Sunday in Lent, February 28, 1988. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 17:1-10, 15-19; Psalm 105:1-11; Romans 4:16-25; Mark 8:31-38.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

There was a fascinating article in last weeks ~~Philadelphia Inquirer~~ ~~Magazine~~ entitled, "The Dangers of Desire". It asked the question, "Why are so many of us driven to engage in excessive, self-destructive acts?" It told the stories of several addicts. Lauren was addicted to food. She woke up and fell asleep every day thinking about food. A typical breakfast might be a dozen doughnuts, half a gallon of milk, three bowls of cereal overflowing with bananas and a scoop or two of chocolate chip ice cream.

John Doe was addicted to sex. He discovered pornography when he was a lonely 13 year old boy. It gave him an incredible ecstasy that temporarily replaced the sadness in his life. "It was all I could think about. I didn't care about school anymore. Nothing else mattered," he said. Even after he got married and became a father he sought out peep shows, massage parlors and hookers. It was costing him several thousand dollars a year, and he still couldn't satisfy his craving. He found all this disgusting and repulsive even while he was doing it.

Angela was addicted to vodka and valium. She had her first drink when she was 16. She still remembers the kick it gave her. "I felt smarter, more attractive, more self-confident. I knew I never wanted to lose that feeling." For 20 years she pursued that euphoria. First it was drinking on weekends, then a couple of Vodka's on the rocks in the evening- every evening. Then it was a martini at lunch, or two or three. She began drinking her Vodka in fine Waterford crystal. Later she slugged it down right from the bottle. All of these people had one thing in common. Their desires were destroying them.

We all have desires. It doesn't matter whether our desires are for t.v.,

video games, eating, work, gambling or drugs. But some of those desires lead us into destructive forms of compulsive behavior. We feel powerless to overcome them. We know <sup>we've got to</sup> ~~we must~~ stop but self-denial is one of the most difficult things to do. Tell alcoholics to stop drinking and they're powerless. Tell someone hooked on cocaine to just say, "No!". It's ridiculous! How many of us have said to ourselves, "I've got to stop eating so much!" "I've got to stop working so much!" "I've got to get more exercise!" "I've got to stop smoking!" We try self-denial. At first we're successful. For some <sup>few</sup> the success is lasting. But for many, we begin to fail. <sup>Life becomes a roller coaster of ups & downs, victories & failures.</sup> We get down to our desired weight and then we go on a binge. We become discouraged. We feel worthless. And in our despair we seek solace, once more, in fulfilling the very desires that we know are destroying us.

And Jesus said, "If any would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Could anything Jesus have said be more discouraging to someone whose desires are destroying them?

Let's take a look at the historical context in which Jesus said this. It was a turning point in his ministry. Up till now he'd enjoyed relative popularity. He'd healed the sick and raised the dead. At one point in his ministry he fed 5000 people with a few loaves and fish. People were so impressed <sup>that</sup> they wanted to make him king. They were beginning to believe that Jesus was the long hoped for Messiah. <sup>He met all their desires.</sup> Then Peter confessed his faith openly. "You are the Christ!" And immediately Jesus began to teach them that "the son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected and be killed." Jesus wanted to make sure Peter and everyone knew that <sup>He wasn't here to satisfy all their desires.</sup> the Messiah wasn't going to be the kind of King they expected." He said this plainly.

Peter couldn't believe what he was hearing. He rebuked Jesus. "You

don't know what you're talking about, Jesus. Look! If you keep on healing people and changing water to wine and raising the dead your popularity is going to grow. All you have to do is perform that miracle with the loaves and fish a few more times and the whole nation will proclaim you king. *Keep satisfying these desires for food + health + power. No Kingdom of God would ever come over to you.* They'll rise up against the Romans and defeat them. Legions of angels will come at your bidding and the Kingdom of God will be established!"

But Jesus recognised the voice of Satan in the words of Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not siding with God, but with humans." Jesus thought of how Satan had tempted him in the desert. "Turn stones to bread. Jump off the pinnacle of the temple and let the angels rescue you. I'll give you all the kingdoms of the world if you just worship me." It was all very tempting to Jesus. But the apostles tell us that Jesus was born for one reason, and one reason only. Not to make bread of stones and solve the problems of the economy. Not to put on a spectacular that would tickle our fancies and attract attention. Not to rule over us and to suppress us as the rulers of kingdoms do. His one purpose was to die for my sins and for yours... and for no other reason. He must let nothing divert him from that purpose.

"And Jesus summoned the multitude with the disciples, and said to them, 'If any would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'"

First, Jesus says, "Let them deny themselves!" What did he mean? Did he mean, "Now try real hard not to give into those destructive desires. Just say, 'No!' to drugs and sex and alcohol"? No, that's not what he meant. To deny ourselves is to behave toward ourselves as Peter once did toward Jesus. Remember how after Jesus was arrested Peter denied him three times. He disowned him, repudiated him, turned his back on <sup>Jesus,</sup> him. ~~Peter~~ *Jesus calls us to do no same thing to ourselves,* denied Jesus. Jesus calls us to deny ourselves, to disown, repudiate, and



turn our back on ourselves. Self-denial isn't denying ourselves luxuries like candies, cakes, cigarettes, and cocktails (though it may include this); it's actually denying or disowning ourselves, renouncing our supposed right to go our own way. Denying oneself ~~isn't a matter of giving up something, whether for Lent or for the whole of life.~~ it is a decisive saying 'No' to oneself, to one's hopes and plans and ambitions, to one's likes and dislikes, to one's nearest and dearest, for the sake of Christ. It's a hard saying. ... *very hard ... impossible.*

Secondly, Jesus said, "If any would come after me, let them... take up their cross and follow me." The Romans had made crucifixion a common sight throughout their empire and Palestine was no exception. Every rebel and criminal who was condemned to death by crucifixion was compelled to carry the cross beam on his shoulders to the scene of his execution. To take up our cross, therefore, and follow Jesus is to "put ourselves into the position of a condemned criminal on his way to execution" (H.B. Swete). Our cross, then, isn't an irritable husband or a cantankerous wife or a *... affliction, burden ... not cross* debilitating handicap. The cross is our conscious, deliberate decision to follow Jesus even to death. To take up our cross, then, is to say, "I'm going to follow Jesus no matter what. I'm going to trust him. I'm going to obey him. I don't care if it means rejection or ridicule. I'm no longer going to insist on my rights, but on the crown rights of Jesus."

Self denial and cross bearing! That's what it means to follow Jesus. Only a person who really loves God can do this! It's not a matter of an extraordinary effort of our will to do what what we don't want to do. *to give up all the vain things and chains we want.* It's a matter of loving God so much that those desires that lead us to self-destruct are cast out. *we see that they are vain ...* Only a powerful love for Christ can expel desires that destroy us.

But how do we get that love? That's the big question. Can you will to fall in love with someone? Threats of hell can't make a person love God.

Legislation can't make a person love God. Only one thing can create that love. Only when we rediscover the good news of the Gospel. Only when we come to the place in our lives when we confess to the Lord, "I know that my desires are destroying me but I'm powerless over my addiction." Only when we believe the wonderfully good news that while we were helpless Christ died for us. Then we discover the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who loves us and forgives us and accepts us and gives us his Spirit. Forgiven much, we love much.

*That does not mean the end of failure or the end of struggling & pain... rather we continue on the firm assurance that God accepts us for the sake of Christ.*

Jesus, Thou Joy of loving hearts,  
Thou fount of life, Thou light of men,  
From the best bliss that earth imparts  
We turn unfilled to Thee again.

Thy truth unchanged hath ever stood.  
Thou savest those that on Thee call;  
To them that seek Thee Thou art good,  
To them that find Thee all in all.