

How does the New Testament use the concept of 'the lusts of the flesh' to understand human behaviour?

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'The lusts of the flesh' is not a phrase used often in contemporary parlance. In both Christian and secular spheres, it conjures up images of medieval Catholicism, of the 'seven deadly sins', of perjury and of an unhealthily abstemious attitude towards the body. It is a phrase linked commonly in the modern mind with physical sins such as sexual perversion or perhaps the kind of over-eating found in Roman orgies. Indeed, in the kind of world we live in today, in which both Christian and secular culture predominantly use the language of unfulfilled needs and rights to describe human behaviour, talk about 'lusts' and the 'flesh' might seem entirely out of place. As David Powlison writes, 'The term 'lusts' has become almost useless to modern readers of the Bible.'¹ In such a society, should this kind of talk perhaps be ditched altogether?

talk about 'lusts' and the 'flesh' might seem entirely out of place ... should this kind of talk perhaps be ditched altogether? ... the New Testament simply does not allow us to do so

We will see through this essay that the New Testament simply does not allow us to do so. It is striking to note that all of the major New Testament letter-writers refer to this concept. Paul, John, Peter and James all see the problem of the lusts of the flesh as central to understanding human behaviour (Galatians 5:16; 1 Peter 2:11; James 1:13-15; 1 John 2:16). Often translated in contemporary versions as 'the desires of the sinful nature', the phrase itself appears more than ten times through the New Testament, while the short-hand - 'lusts' or 'passions' or 'desires' - appears countless times through its pages.

The New Testament simply will not allow us to dispense with this concept, as it sees it as the very kernel of understanding why human beings do the things they do, and how change can take place within the regenerate heart. But what *are* the lusts of the flesh?

Epithumia in the New Testament

The Greek word translated 'lusts' is *epithumia*. It is translated variously as 'passions', 'cravings', 'desires', 'pleasures' or 'coveting'. It is not used primarily to refer to sexual or physical desires, but denotes coveting and desire in all its kinds. Thus in Ephesians 2:3, Paul writes of us when we were unbelievers living 'in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of our body and the mind.' As Powlison writes, 'The desires of the mind often present the most subtle and deceitful lusts because their outworkings

¹ David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes* (P&R, 2003), 148.

are not always obvious. They don't reside in the body, but the Bible still views them as "lusts".²

Furthermore, 'epithumia' can be used both positively and negatively. Desires or cravings can be good. In Luke 22:15 Jesus tells his disciples, 'I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer,' and in 1 Corinthians 12:31 Paul urges believers to 'earnestly desire the higher gifts.' Yet they can also be destructive – in 1 Timothy 6:10, Paul warns Timothy that 'the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.'

The New Testament shows us consistently, however, that, whether our desires/lusts/cravings/passions are good or destructive, it is they that shape our behaviour. Thus in Galatians 5:16-21, Paul warns his readers that:

...the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do... Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry... and things like these... But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, goodness...

His point is simple: the desires of the flesh lead to the works of the flesh, and the desires of Spirit lead to the fruit of the Spirit. Our desires, whether good or bad, are the well-springs of our actions. As James puts it, 'What causes fights among you? Is it not that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.' (James 4:1-2) *Epithumia* leads to *ergon*. Human desire leads to human action. The New Testament sees our desires as the epicentre of all our behaviour.

'Flesh' in the New Testament

The Greek word translated 'flesh' is *sarx*. It is a word that can be used to refer to the physical body (e.g. Matthew 16:17, 2 Corinthians 12:7), but more often than not, when the physical body is in mind, the Greek *soma* is employed in its place (e.g. Matthew 26:41, 2 Corinthians 4:16). Rather, in the majority of cases, *sarx* in the New Testament refers to the sinful nature, that tendency in each human being to reject God. Thus, in Romans 8:12-13, Paul urges his addressees not to live 'according to the flesh' but rather to be led by the Spirit. As Edward Welch writes:

Whereas there are times when flesh (*sarx*) is a synonym for the physical body (*soma*) or our members (*melesin*), it can also be categorically different than the body. In these cases it might refer to the heart when its wants are contrary to those of the Spirit (Gal. 5:17).³

Thus we see that, in the same way that the term 'desire' or 'lust' or 'craving' cannot be reduced to mere physical urges, neither can 'the lusts of the flesh' be limited to physical desires. Rather the New Testament uses 'the lusts of the flesh' to describe the desires/cravings/passions of the sinful nature.

What are the lusts of the flesh?

The lusts of the flesh may be broken down into two main areas. First, they are used to describe the desire for evil things.

² *Op. Cit.*, 155

³ Edward Welch, 'How Theology Shapes Ministry: Jay Adams' View of the Flesh and an Alternative,' *Journal of Biblical Counselling* (Spring 2002), 19.

a) *The desire for evil things*

In 2 Timothy 2:22, Paul instructs Timothy to ‘flee youthful passions (*epithumia*) and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace.’ These are evidently passions for evil things, contrasted as they are with the pursuit of good things such as righteousness, faith, love and peace. Likewise, in Romans 1:24, Paul writes of God giving up those who deny him ‘in the lusts of their hearts to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves.’ We see, therefore, that the desires of the sinful nature are often for things contrary to the will of God, and lead directly into those works of the flesh of which Paul writes in Galatians 5:16-21.

The vast majority of the references to the lusts of the flesh, however, speak not of desires for things that are necessarily contrary to the will of God, but of an *inordinate* desire for good things.

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b) *Inordinate desires for good things*

In these cases, it is not the goodness of the object of desire that is in question, but the status of that desire in a person’s heart. Powlison writes:

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!’⁴

Desires or cravings for these things, however, are seen to be sinful when they take a ruling place in a person’s heart and become more important to a person than a desire to do God’s will. Thus in James 4:1-2, the writer shows his readers that the quarrels and fighting among them come from the ‘passions ... at war within you’. Their desires have reached a ruling status in their lives, so that they will do anything to get what they want, even to the point of fighting and quarrelling with their brothers and sisters. The object of their desire may be good – a wife, a child, respect, affection – but their desire has gained an inordinate control over their lives, so that they desire that thing more than they desire to follow God, resulting in all manner of sinful actions taken to pursue that desire.

For this reason, Powlison suggests that, in the New Testament, the concept of the lusts of the flesh is used to describe human idolatry in all its forms. As he writes:

If ‘idolatry’ is the characteristic and summary Old Testament word for our drift from God, then ‘desires’ (*epithumiai*) is the characteristic and summary New Testament word for the same drift. Both are shorthand for the problem of human beings. Interestingly (and unsurprisingly) the New Testament merges the concept of idolatry and the concept of inordinate, life-ruling desires. Idolatry becomes a problem of the heart, a metaphor for human lust, craving, yearning, and greedy demand.⁵

⁴ Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes*, 150.

⁵ Powlison, ‘Idols of the Heart and “Vanity Fair”’, *Journal of Biblical Counselling* (Winter 2005), 36.

Desires are seen to have become idols when they begin to exercise control over us. When our desires drive us to anger, to anxiety, to greed, to jealousy, to stealing, to violence and to any number of sinful actions and emotions, that desire may be seen to be exerting a controlling influence over our lives. It has, in a very real sense, become an idol: it has replaced God as the focus of our lives. Tim Stafford puts it this way:

The 'flesh' – that is, our lives without God – urgently desires many things. It wants power. It wants pleasure. It wants wealth. It wants status and admiration. None of these is wrong in itself. And nothing would be wrong with liking these things. But desire, or lust, is more than liking. It is the will to possess. Lust turns good things into objects of worship. And that is why lust, or covetousness, is so closely linked to another biblical word: idolatry. What we lust for we worship. We may joke about our lusts, but our behaviour shows a more fundamental allegiance. We look to our idols to give us what we need – to make our lives rich and purposeful.⁶

How does the New Testament employ the term?

We will highlight three ways that the New Testament uses the concept to describe human behaviour. First, the writers employ it to describe the behaviour of unbelievers.

a) The behaviour of unbelievers

Thus in Ephesians 2:3, as we have already seen, Paul writes the following:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience – among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Unbelievers are entirely enslaved to 'the lusts of the flesh', living only 'to gratify the desires of the sinful nature' (Galatians 5:16). As Elyse Fitzpatrick writes:

Before Christ brought us to himself and changed us, we freely chose to follow our strongest desires and inclinations. Our heart was against or contrary to God. Unbelievers can't understand truth and never desire to obey it. Make no mistake: they freely choose to live that way. It is their choice to follow the fallen nature – and they love it.⁷

This does not mean that an unbeliever will simply do all the things he or she desires to do. Competing desires often conflict. 'For example,' writes Powlison, '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.'⁸

In this way, human beings are enslaved, following only their desires and cravings, unable to resist them except by replacing one with another. However, the New Testament also uses the 'lusts of the flesh' to describe the negative side of the struggle in believers between the Spirit and the sinful nature.

⁶ Tim Stafford, 'Serious about Lust,' *Journal of Biblical Counselling* (Spring 1995), 5.

⁷ Elyse Fitzpatrick, *Idols of the Heart* (P&R, 2001), 147.

⁸ Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes*, 156.

b) The struggle between the Spirit and the sinful nature

Thus, as we have seen, in Galatians 5:16-23, Paul describes the conflict between the ‘desires of the flesh’ and the ‘desires of the Spirit.’ This is an on-going battle in the heart of a believer, and is used by the New Testament to describe the day-to-day struggle with sin that each Christian must face. Fitzpatrick goes on to describe this:

Once a person becomes a Christian, he has liberty. Unlike his old self, whose choice was always towards sin, he is now able to choose to sin or not sin. Both of these choices are a possibility. When his heart is so inclined, when he’s convinced of the goodness of it, and when he longs for the Lord and the joy of bringing him pleasure, he chooses to obey him ... Before he was saved there was only one possible outcome in every choice: he was going to sin. But now that he has a new heart, there are two possibilities. He can sin or he can not sin, freely choosing according to his desires.⁹

Thus the battle going on in the heart of a Christian may be described as a battle of the desires. Will the desires of the flesh win; will our idols rule in God’s place in our hearts and control our behaviour, or will the desires of God’s Spirit rule, as we submit to him and our hearts are captivated by a love for him, rather than for other things? John puts the contrasts starkly in his first letter:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh, and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions – is not from the father, but is from the world. (1 John 2:15-16)

The love of the Father and the love of things in the world are in opposition: they are mutually exclusive. In any given situation, a believer will either be motivated by a desire for Father, or by a desire for other things. Likewise, Peter calls out to the churches he is writing to,

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. (1 Peter 2:11)

Peter pleads with his readers not to allow the ‘passions of the flesh’ to control their hearts, because he knows that it is desire which will control the behaviour of the believer, whether good or bad. Powlison sums up the battle neatly:

New Testament authors repeatedly allude to life-controlling cravings when they summarize the innermost dynamics of the human soul. Which will triumph, the natural deviancy of the lusts of the flesh or the restored sanity of the desires of the Spirit?

This being the case, how is the battle to be fought? Two considerations will help us here: first, how the New Testament teaches us to diagnose the ‘lusts of the flesh’; and, second, how it teaches us to supplant godly desires for fleshly ones.

⁹ Fitzpatrick, *Idols of the Heart*, 147.

How does the New Testament teach us to distinguish the lusts of the flesh from godly desires?

In Luke 6:45, Jesus says:

For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

Jesus wants us to see that there is an inherent link between the things we do and what is going on in our hearts. Bad roots produce bad fruits. Good roots give good fruits. Therefore, if we wish to see where we are desiring other things than God, then we are to look at our behaviour. As Powlison writes, 'It is a serious mistake to engage in introspective "idol hunts", attempting to dig out and weigh every kink in the human soul.'¹⁰ Rather the New Testament invites us to examine our actions and emotions and trace back the works of the flesh to the desires of the flesh that are controlling us. This is Paul's point in Galatians 5:16-21: you can see whether you are being controlled by the desires of the sinful nature by the works of the sinful nature which appear in your life. James suggests the same thing in the passage quote above: our quarrelling and fighting come from our desires at war within us.

Powlison gives a helpful illustration: '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 a manipulative, fearful, angry, suspicious father. 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.'¹¹ We can distinguish a godly desire from a sinful desire by the fruit that it produces in our lives.

Thus, an appropriate response when we find ourselves struggling with sin, is to ask oneself, 'What thing am I desiring which is contrary to the will of God? Or what thing am I desiring or craving inordinately, so that it rules my heart?' Fitzpatrick suggests a list of questions we might ask ourselves, in order to trace back our sin to the distorted desire or lust that produced it:

What did you want, desire or wish for?
What did you fear? What were you worrying about?
What did you think you needed?
What were your strategies and intentions designed to accomplish?
What or whom were you trusting?
Whom were you trying to please?
What were you loving? Hating?
What would have brought you the greatest happiness, pleasure or delight?
What would have brought you the greatest pain and misery?¹²

The New Testament nowhere suggests, however, that a certain action always has the same root desire, or that one root desire always produces that same sin. In the James passage cited above, the writer refuses to specify the nature of the desire that has caused the fighting and quarrelling among God's people. Indeed, he suggests that it may be more than one desire that causes quarrelling and fighting: 'is it not your desires that are at war within you?' he asks. As Chester puts it, 'One sinful behaviour could be caused by a number of different heart issues. One heart issue can lead to a number of different sinful behaviours ... and in most cases people have

¹⁰ Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes*, 153.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Fitzpatrick, *Idols of the Heart*, 163.

multiple heart issues at work and heart issues that produce multiple behaviours.¹³

So where anxiety about public speaking is the presenting sin, the believer may be able to trace that sin back to an idolatrous desire for a good reputation among the people he is speaking to. This desire may also express itself in other ways – for example, failing to confront his brothers and sisters on heart issues for fear of what they might think of him. Moreover, this anxiety about public speaking may also spring from other idolatrous desires, too – a craving for fulfilment through doing ministry, for example.

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Thus the New Testament teaches a believer to distinguish between godly and sinful desires by examining the fruit in one's life to see if it is a good or bad. Uncovering the lusts of the flesh in our lives, therefore, is not done by going on introspective 'idol hunts', like a person going for a full-scale medical investigation every week. Rather it is done by examining the symptoms to diagnose the lusts of the flesh that are controlling his or her heart, like a person going to see the doctor when they find something wrong with them, in an attempt to discover the root cause. Thus the believer will be able to see who or what is ruling their hearts instead of God, and begin the process of repentance.

Before we go on to examine the New Testament's teaching on how we are to repent of our inordinate desires, however, it may be useful to note that sin and the desires of the flesh are often referred to as 'deceitful' by the NT writers. In Romans, Paul writes that sinful man's thinking is futile and his heart darkened by his rejection of the truth about God. Our love for sin blinds us to the reality of our sin. Thus Paul writes of the old self being corrupted through 'deceitful desires' (Ephesians 4:22), and the writer to the Hebrews of the 'deceitfulness of sin' (Hebrews 3:13). Believers are often duped by sin into believing that their desires are good and are blinded to the reality of their idolatrous cravings. Both Ephesians and Hebrews give us the remedy for this, suggesting that the diagnosis of sinful desires happens best in the Christian community. Paul urges his readers to 'speak the truth in love' to one another, and the writer to the Hebrews puts the responsibility firmly in the place of the Christian community to be helping one another to see the sin in each one's life:

See to it, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called Today, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (Hebrews 3:12-13)

The diagnosis of the lusts of the flesh happens best in the Christian community, as we help each other to see both the works of the flesh in our lives and the desires of the flesh and idolatry that lie behind them. Diagnosis, however, is only the first part of the solution. The second is repentance.

¹³ Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, 'Unit 4: A Biblical Understanding of the Problem,' *Pastoral Care Module* (Open Bible Institute, 2006).

How does the New Testament teach us to conduct the struggle between the desires of the flesh and the desires of the Spirit?

As stated above, the difference between a believer and an unbeliever is that a believer is able to change. Contrary to much modern secular psychology, the New Testament teaches the liberating truth that our desires can be changed: we can change what we want. Whereas secular psychologists take desires and felt needs as givens, objective needs that must be fulfilled, the glorious news of the New Testament is that the deepest longings of the human heart can and must be changed if we are to become the lovers of God and of others that God has created and redeemed us to be. We can be changed to 'hunger and thirst for righteousness' (Matthew 5:6). But how?

First, by recognising that change is God's work. Romans 8 describes a battle between the Spirit and the flesh. It is only through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit that the desires can be changed. Without his work, no-one can change and remains captive to the lusts of the flesh, unable to please God. This realisation should induce in the Christian a complete dependence upon God in the work of change.

Second, change requires our active co-operation. Paul tells his addressees in Ephesians 4:22-24 'to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.'

This is a three-fold activity, though as Fitzpatrick suggests, these steps are not to be seen as sequential but simultaneous.¹⁴ First, we put off our old self and our deceitful desires. They are to be rooted out, shown for what they are and repented of. We are to see the ugliness and offensiveness of our idolatry and, as John Owen suggests, to bring ourselves to the point of hating it as a trampling over the cross of Christ. Second, we are to be renewed in our mind, to have our desires and our thinking changed so that we desire only God himself and his glory. And third, we are to put on our new self, to live out of those new desires for righteousness and holiness.

It is a lack of love for the Father and a love for the things of the world that leads to lives controlled by sinful desires.

1 John 2:15 puts it clearly: 'If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.' How, therefore, are the lusts of the flesh to be resisted? Only by supplanting them with a love for the Father. It is a lack of love for the Father and instead a love for the things of the world that leads to lives controlled by sinful desires. Thus our desires can only be changed as the desires of the sinful nature are displaced with a love for God.

In his excellent sermon on this verse, *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*, Thomas Chalmers notes that desire is indeed the motivating force behind all our actions and that desires can only be changed as one is replaced with another:

Such is the grasping tendency of the human heart, that it must have a something to lay hold of – and which, if wrested away without the substitution of another something in its place, would leave a void and a vacancy as painful to the mind as hunger is to the natural system.

The only way, therefore, that we can resist the desires of the sinful nature is to love God more. As he concludes:

¹⁴ Fitzpatrick, *Idols of the Heart*, 156.

We know of no other way by which to keep the love of the world out of our heart than to keep in our hearts the love of God – and no other way by which to keep our hearts in the love of God, than by building ourselves on our most holy faith.

It is therefore only by coming to hate those desires that function as idols and by cultivating a greater love, passion, desire and craving for God himself that we can walk in step with the Spirit and his desires. As Fitzpatrick puts it:

As you seek to put off idolatrous worship, replacing it with obedience, you'll need to put on a heart that appreciates, loves, rejoices in, and celebrates the beauty kindness, holiness and majesty of your King. All other gods and their faint promises will pale when compared with the greatness and glory of the Lord. A heart that is crammed with thoughts of God's beauty, kindness, holiness, majesty, greatness and glory has no room for feeble counterfeits and will inevitably burst forth with fervent praises.¹⁵

The New Testament teaches us that the battle between the lusts of the flesh and the desires of the Spirit is ultimately all about worship. It is not a question so much of what you will desire, but of who you will bow down before and worship.

The concept of 'the lusts of the flesh' must therefore be rehabilitated in our churches to replace competing pseudo-Christian psychologies based on needs, empty love tanks and instinctive urges.

Conclusion

The concept of 'the lusts of the flesh' must therefore be rehabilitated in our churches to replace competing pseudo-Christian psychologies based on needs, empty love tanks and instinctive urges. The New Testament sees the lusts of the flesh as central to our understanding of human behaviour, describing as they do the idolatrous worship of created things rather than the Creator. Not only does the New Testament teaching on the lusts of the flesh lead us to recognise our own responsibility in rejecting our Creator and longing for other things than him, it also gloriously proclaims that change is possible. Where our needs are non-negotiable givens, we are never able to change, always captive to our urges and instincts. If the good news about Jesus has no power to change, then it is not good news at all. Gloriously, however, the New Testament shows us that our desires can be changed from idolatry to the worship of the one true God in Jesus Christ, as we put off our old desires, and come to delight in, long for and live for him. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:15: '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.'

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¹⁵ *Op. Cit.*, 202.

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