

# When I Don't Desire God: Prayer as the Pathway to Delighting in God

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## 1. Introduction

- a. There are a few questions that humans have been asking for centuries, across time, space, culture, language, religion, and economic status. How did we get here? What happens after I die? Why is there suffering? Why am I here?
  - i. Throughout history this last question has been answered primarily through the lens of religion and spirituality. Historically people have linked their purpose to God.
- b. A Christian is, by very definition, someone whose sole aim in life and death is to glorify Christ. We exist to glorify God.

*“For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to **my earnest expectation and hope** that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so **now also Christ will be magnified in my body**, whether by life or by death. **For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.** But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit for my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard-pressed between the two, **having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better.**” - Philippians 1:19-23*

- c. If this is true we must ask, how do I most glorify God? If my aim and purpose in life is to glorify Christ how should I go about doing that? In what manner must I live to bring Him the maximum amount of praise and honor?
  - i. Fundamentally, do I bring Christ most glory through my faith? Through my obedience? Through my service, sacrifice, or selfless giving?
  - ii. The answer to each of these is yes, they all bring glory to God. However there is something deeper, something more fundamental that actually propels all of the things listed above.

*“Christ is most glorified when I am most satisfied in Him. Therefore the the way to bring Christ the most glory is to pursue my joy and fulfillment in Him alone.” - John Piper*

- d. At the deepest level, in the most fundamental sense, Christ is most glorified when He is my greatest treasure, the satisfaction of my soul, the deepest longing and desire of my heart and emotions; when He is the beauty the captivates my imagination and the goodness that fills my life.
- e. I want to argue this in two ways:
  - i. Humans are lovers before they are thinkers or workers
  - ii. Salvation is primarily about a change in desire

## 2. Humans are Lovers

- a. Genesis 1 tells us that humans were made in the image and in the likeness of God; we are God’s image-bearers. After God created man He observes that it is not good for

man to be alone. Why? One of the reasons is that in order to image God properly man must be able to express love which you cannot do alone.

- b. C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* recognized that in order for God, or anyone else, to love their must be a lover, a beloved, and a love flowing between them. That is to say that love requires more than one person.
- c. By saying it was not good for Adam to be alone God was pointing towards the reality that humans are not complete, are really fully alive, unless they are involved in the dance of love as Lewis described it.
  - i. And don't forget that Adam was still fully connected to God at this point so the issue was not his ability to give or receive love to God. In order for humans to fully be alive we must love one another.
- d. What God was pointing to in Adam and what Lewis realized is that humans are first and foremost lovers, not thinkers, decision makers, or workers. God is love and we are made in His image.

*"What makes a man is not what he does or even believes but what he loves most."* - Saint Augustine

*"...I also think that what constitutes our ultimate identities - what makes us who we are, the kind of people we are - is what we love. More specifically, **our identity is shaped by what we ultimately love or what we love as ultimate** - what, at the end of the day, gives us a sense of meaning, purpose, understanding, and orientation to our being-in-the-world. What we desire or love ultimately is a vision of what we hope for, what we think the good life looks like. **This vision of the good life shapes all kinds of actions and decisions and habits** that we undertake, often without our thinking about it." - James K.A. Scott*

### 3. Salvation is Primarily a Change in Desire

- a. One of the results of the fall was that our love nature, our desires and passions, became twists and corrupted. We can all easily examine our own lives to know that this is true. We all do things we know are wrong.
- b. We all say things we know we shouldn't, partake in things that go against our morals, ethics, and spiritual beliefs. Why? The answer is simply because we want to.

*"But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own **desires and enticed**. Then, **when desire has conceived**, it give birth to sin..." - James 1:14-15*

*"...among whom also we all once **conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind**, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others." - Ephesians 2:3*

- c. Thus we should see our strongest desires, or what we call the "good life", is the driving force of every human whether Christian or not.
  - i. This is what advertising is all about, trying to give you a particular vision of "the good life" in order to stir up a desire to purchase their product.

- d. The word that the Bible uses most often speak about our twisted love nature, its passions and desires, is the word ‘flesh’.
- e. What is the flesh? Galatians 5 is one of the premier places in Scripture that describes the flesh in detail.

*“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the **desires of the flesh**. For 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. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law...And those who belong to Christ Jesus have **crucified the flesh with its passions and desires**.” - Galatians 5:16-18; 24*

- f. If this is true, that our deepest desire drives our life, than that means that we ultimately serve the object of that affection. Put another way, your affections point to what you worship.
- g. Everyone worships something, even those who don’t claim to worship anything at all. Some worship material things, sex, attention, another person, a sport, a hobby, or a career. But deep down everyone worships whatever it is that pulls on the desires of their heart.
  - i. But each of these are rooted in something deeper. The person that loves material good is really deeply in love with what those goods do or gain for them. And those who crave some type of romantic or sexual relationship in reality crave the pleasure or validation it will give them among their peers.
- h. The Bible talks about wrongly aimed desires (visions of the good life) in terms of worship.

*“Professing to be wise, they became fools, and **changed the glory of the incorruptible God into the an image made like corruptible man** - and birds and four footed animals. **Therefore** God also gave them up to uncleanness, **in the lust of their hearts**, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and **worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator**, who is blessed forever. Amen.” - Romans 1:22-25*

*“Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, **passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry**.” - Colossians 3:5*

- i. The core sin every person commits is idolatry, the worship of something, namely ourselves, other than God. Meaning our core issue in life is an over desire for our own glory, our own comfort, and own joy in things outside of God.
  - i. It is important to realize that most idols are innocent. By innocent I mean they are good things like family and friends and the various blessings of God upon the earth not murder and adultery and witchcraft. But any time we turn a good thing into a god we are full blown into sin and darkness.

- j. Do you see what this means? It means that our greatest sin is not an action, a moral failure, or an ethical shortcoming. Our greatest sin is a feeling. Or to be more accurate a lack of one.
- k. Humanities greatest sin that gives birth to all other sin is that we desire, we love, we covet, ourselves and other things more than we do God.
- l. But more precisely our gravest sin is not that we love other things it is that we do not desire God. It is not necessarily our over desire for others things that is the problem it is our lack of desire for God.

*“The New Testament has lots to say about self-denial, **but not about self-denial as an end in itself.** We are told to deny ourselves and to take up our crosses **in order that we may follow Christ; and nearly every description of what we shall ultimately find if we do so contains an appeal to desire...** Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, **it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.**” - C.S. Lewis*

- m. A Christian then is someone whose greatest treasure is Christ; someone whose vision of the good life is a vision of union with Christ, a person who values Christ above all else so that Christ is considered gain and everything else is loss.

*“Finally, my brethren, **rejoice in the Lord...**For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, **rejoice in Christ Jesus,** and have no confidence in the flesh...But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed **I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord,** for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, **that I may gain Christ** and be found in Him...” - Philippians 3:1, 3, 7-9*

- n. Listen to how Jesus describes salvation:

*“Again, the kingdom of heaven **is like treasure** hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and **for joy over it** he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”- Matthew 13:44*

- o. John makes it clear that the way in which we know someone is saved is that they are a new creation with new desires.

*“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 of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.” - 1 John 2:15-17*

#### 4. When I Don't Desire God

- a. So, a Christian is someone who loves, cherishes, desires, delights in, Christ above all others things; Christ is gain and everything else is considered a joyful lose in comparison.
- b. This then leads to the question, what happens when I don't desire God? What about the days when I don't feel anything for God? What about the months that I feel like I'm just going through the motions and there isn't an overwhelming sense of joy and delight in God above all other things? I can't just command myself to be happy in God, so what can I do?
- c. Is that just the way things are? Do I just obey even though I don't feel anything for God? Should I just push through? Do I wait for joy and delight in God to become real in my heart again?
- d. Thankfully this struggle is a universal one. From the patriarchs to the prophets; from the disciples to the great saints in church history, everyone has struggled with the affections of their heart waning and growing cold. How did they fight for joy in God so that we can fight for it?
  - i. And remember this is not simply an emotion issue. If God is most glorified when I am most satisfied in Him than my experience of joy and delighting in God has implications on my ability to glorify Jesus.
- e. The greatest weapon we have been given in our fight to treasure Christ above all else is prayer. Prayer is the God ordained pathway to finding soul-satisfying happiness in God for the glory of God.
- f. Consider the following scriptures:

*“Also the sons of the foreigner who join themselves to the Lord, to serve Him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be His servants...Even them I will bring to My holy mountain, and **make them joyful in My house of prayer.** Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on My altar; for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations.” - Isaiah 56:6-7*

*“Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you...Ask, and you will receive, **that your joy may be full.**” - John 16:22 & 24*

*“Rejoice always, prayer without ceasing...” - 1 Thessalonians 5:16-17*

- g. Briefly, why is this the case? Why is prayer the battleground for our delight in God and therefore the battleground for our ability to rightly and fully glorify God?
  - i. Because, as noted earlier, joy, happiness, and delight are all emotions and you cannot command or control your emotions like you can your finger.
    1. Did you chose to fall in love? Before you felt anger last did you make a conscious choice to produce that emotion on command? Of course not.
      - a. You commonly hear that love is a choice. But this is only partly true. It is a choice in that it is not only an emotion but the choices of love are mere demonstrations of a previously felt emotion.

- b. And when you don't feel the emotion of love you act out of a faith rooted in the emotion you know to be true and right.
- ii. Paul affirms this in Philippians 2:12-13.

*"...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for **it is God who works in you** both to will and to do for His good pleasure."*

- iii. Because we cannot produce soul-satisfying joy in God by ourselves (it is a gift of God) we must cry out to the Lord that He would give it to us supernaturally.
- h. So if prayer is the God-ordained pathway to delighting in God and therefore the God-ordained pathway to a life that fully glorifies God, how should we pray? There are many but here are the three that I most regularly pray for myself:
  - i. **Pray for your eyes** - The fight for joy is the fight to see. The joy and delight I have been speaking of is joy *in Him* therefore seeing Him for who He really is is my greatest need.

*"**Open my eyes**, that I may see wondrous things from Your law...**turn my eyes away** from looking at worthless things, and revive me in Your way" - Psalm 119:18 & 37*

- ii. **Pray for your heart** - All of our hearts are fragmented, being pulled in every different direction, therefore we should pray that God would give us a unified whole heart to love Him.

*"Blessed are those who keep His testimonies, who seek Him **with the whole heart!**" - Psalm 119:2*

*"Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it. **Incline my heart to your testimonies**, and not to selfish gain!" - Psalm 119:35-36*

- iii. **Pray for the Word to come alive** - Nothing exhilarates the human heart more than God speaking to us about Himself. Your heart, and life in God, will correspond to the joy you find and experience in the Scriptures. If the Bible is boring to you God will be boring and you never be able to sustain a thriving heart of love for God.

*"**The law of Your mouth is better** to me than thousands of coins of gold and silver." - Psalm 119:72*

*"**How sweet are Your words to my taste**, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" - Psalm 119:103*

- i. God is most glorified when I am most satisfied in Him, and the pathway to God-glorifying soul satisfaction is through a life given over to prayer.