

Desire Runs Deep

INTRODUCTION:

One of our central duties—as Christians seeking to live obediently in this fallen world—is to learn the true nature of the temptations before us. The oldest trap in the world for us is to “objectify” sin in a simplistic way, placing certain items on a list of prohibitions, as though it would be so simple.

THE TEXT:

“And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house, saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou has made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day. But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen” (Matt. 20:1-16).

OVERVIEW:

What we have here in this text is an economic illustration of a spiritual and covenantal truth. The point of the parable is the relationship of Jews to Gentiles, the Jews having labored in the vineyard of the Lord for centuries, with the Gentiles breezing in at the last minute for some really good wages.

At the same time, this kind of human reaction is a very common one, and it represents the kind of desire we need to be considering. We respond this way with covenantal privileges, wages for work, bowls of ice cream and more. The kingdom is like a householder who went out to hire workers for his vineyard (v. 1). He hires some to work all day for an agreed upon price (v. 2). At the third hour, he hired some more *without* an agreed upon price (vv. 3-4). At the sixth and ninth hours, he did the same thing again (v. 5). At the eleventh hour, near the end of the day, he did the same thing *again* (vv. 6-7). When the day was over, the householder told his steward to pay everyone, starting with the last ones hired (v. 8). When this group was paid, they got what had been promised to the first group hired (v. 9). So when the first group got up to the pay table, they were naturally expecting more, but they got the exact terms of their contract instead (v. 10). Being sinners, they thought this was an injustice and grumbled about it (v. 11), saying that the householder had made the unequal equal (v. 12). The householder defended himself; justice was done (v. 13), and grace was extended (v. 14). What is it to you that I am being gracious to another (v. 15)? The last will be first, and the first last (v. 16).

INSTITUTIONALIZED SIN:

We have not only rejected this biblical way of thinking, we have also as a culture reversed all the values (Is. 5:20). We have institutionalized our sin—if a farmer today tried this stunt, he would immediately be slapped with a class-action lawsuit. Not only so, but he would be accused of *injustice* when his actions had been preeminently *just*. And if he took the stand in his own defense, and repeated the Lord’s argument to the plaintiffs—“Take what is yours and go your way”—he would quickly discover that we don’t like how Jesus thought and taught. We don’t like it at the macro level (covenant history) and we don’t like it at the micro level (different rates paid to kids for mowing your lawn).

But *why* don’t we like it? In order to answer the question, we have to distinguish between two different kinds of desire.

TWO KINDS OF DESIRE:

A certain kind of desire is a creational, biological given. It is not social or corporate. You desire to breathe, for example. In the middle of a desert, you would want a drink of water, even if, especially if, the nearest town was a hundred miles away. An itch exactly halfway between your shoulder blades creates a desire that has nothing to do with anybody else. Let us call this simple desire, and let us thank God for it. “And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food” (Gen. 2:9). No sin anywhere, and a world full of things to desire. God is good, and the created world is good to want, provided we know how to want it.

But we don't. We don't know how to want it. Sin entered the world at the Fall, and right along with it, a completely different kind of desire. This kind of desire shapes far more of your life than you probably recognize. This kind of desire is the driving engine of our text. We can see it appear just a few pages into our Bibles: “And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell” (Gen. 4:5). This is the seed bed of envy, but we are not to envy yet. “Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy? But he giveth more grace” (Jas. 4:5-6).

INTERWOVEN DESIRE:

This kind of desire runs far deeper than you probably recognize. Trying to see it is like trying to see the air we breathe. Trying to see it is like trying to see your own eyeball. This kind of desire is the kind of thing we use to look *with*, instead of learning how (by the grace of God) to look *at* it. This kind of desire—interwoven desire, metaphysical desire—is not something we tend to bring to the bar of God's justice; rather, we use it idolatrously *as* the bar of justice. We want, and therefore we know what all others should want on our behalf (if only they had a sense of “justice”).

Step out of your desires for a moment. Learn to look at your life as though you were watching a movie, and “you” were a character up on the screen there. View your wants dispassionately, with a sense of justice that is not fed by the simple fact of your desiring. This is the heart of what Jesus provided for us in the *profound* ethic of the Golden Rule. “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt. 7:12). Note what obedience to this requires—it *requires* you to step out of yourself. The Golden Rule is *not* a fancy way of telling you to “be nice.” Nice people are often vicious when their niceness is not appropriately recognized. The Lord's words require you to treat your desires as authoritative, but not authoritative in the treatment others give to *you*.

If you are “caught up” in this kind of desire, this means that you are wanting things because others want them, or because others have them, or because you believe that others want them, or you believe that others have them. Moreover, when you are caught up this way, there is no *reasoning* with you. And when God gives “more grace,” it is this problem that He is giving the grace to address. What are the sorts of things that we desire when we are desiring wrongly this way? Our desires include, but are not limited to: the favor and blessing of God, the birth status of your older brother, her looks, his wife's looks, her education, his height, her body, his paycheck, his self-confidence . . . him being hired for easy money at the eleventh hour. If desire is authoritative in the mere fact of wanting, such irrational desires don't seem irrational to the person in the grip of them.

And this is why desire of this kind must be addressed by *grace*, and not by a logical argument.