



# Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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## CONCUPISCENCE

Christians have strong desires as do nonchristians -- for friendship and acceptance, for an easy life without trial or pain, for material security, for the abilities which others have (efficiency, attractiveness, articulateness, intelligence, etc.), as well as for the gratification of fleshly desires. Concupiscence (intense desire) includes all of these. Sometimes the object of our desire is sinful, as with the desire to satisfy our lust. Other times what we desire may not itself be sinful, as when we want a friend to ease our loneliness. Even these desires can be a problem for Christian life, however, when they become so strong that they overwhelm everything else in our lives. These passionate desires then interfere with our prayer and with our love for God generally. They keep us from loving God with our whole heart, for our desire is divided.

If we indulge concupiscence at all, the desire can become overwhelming. Eve allowed the desire for the forbidden fruit to grow within her: she pondered the fruit and gazed upon it. She saw that it was pleasing to the eye and desirable as food. Gradually, she became so filled with her desire that she could not continue to live without gratifying it -- and so she gave in. She gave herself to the desire, and she was consumed by it. This is the way concupiscence works.

Concupiscence includes fleshly desires, but is actually far broader than that. Whenever we desire something so much that it seems we cannot live full lives without it, then concupiscence rules within us. Some people cannot accept life without a certain level of income and material comforts. They pursue money passionately until they get what they think they need. In the meantime, they are not at ease with themselves or

with God: implicitly they are saying that they will not accept life with Him until the necessary income level has been attained.

Others desire companionship, a friend or a spouse. Such loneliness can overwhelm us, so that it dominates all our prayer. "Why, God," one would say, "don't you give me a friend? I MUST have one. I cannot go on like this! Life is intolerable: I must have someone to share my life with." Grievous as the desire may feel at the time (and it can be very painful), we ought not give in to it this way. For then we claim that God is not sufficient for us: we need a friend as well. Or, put another way, we will not be saved on God's terms, but only if He will give us a friend.

Others are constantly dissatisfied with themselves. They envy others who have other talents and gifts. Thus they may crave efficiency, the ability to accomplish things. Or they may desire attractiveness so much that they cannot regard themselves as acceptable people the way they are. Whatever the particular desire, the result is the same: they cannot accept God's love unconditionally. They say, "God cannot love me the way I am, I am so inefficient (unattractive, stupid, unpopular)." Thus the desire to be different becomes an obstacle to accepting the love of God. We think we must change ourselves before we can be loved (and thus saved) by God.

There are many such desires: emotional, material, and even spiritual. All are concupiscent, and all are potentially very troublesome for prayer. When we, like Eve, give ourselves to the desire, God is forced out, or at least into a corner. The object of our desire fills our vision. We may try to see God around it, but in the center is always the desire. Eve fell because she lost sight of God. The same will happen to us. We must watch our desires. We must be on the lookout for anything which presents a precondition for our relationship with God. "I cannot really serve You unless You give me X." Whenever we do that, even subtly and without quite realizing it, we have been overcome by concupiscence.

God offers us a life freed from the tyranny of concupiscence. But to receive that life and live it out requires that we deal directly and forthrightly with concupiscence as we find it within ourselves. The first step is to admit that we have such desires, be they fleshly or emotional or material or spiritual (or all of these!). We are tempted to deny our desires, since they are apt to interfere with our image of ourselves as "good Christians": "Good Christians don't have such desires." In fact, good Christians are tempted in all sorts of ways -- even as our Lord was tempted.

So the first step is to admit that we want what we want. The second step is to remind ourselves that God saves us in whatever situation we may find ourselves. Nothing can separate us from the love

of God. No unfulfilled desire can by itself keep us from heaven. Nor can it keep us from a full human life here on earth. It may be part of the cross which we must bear after Jesus -- but it cannot separate us from God.

Thus we face the desire squarely within the context of our faith. We see that faith does not necessarily include the gratification of the desire, even if the desire (such as the desire for a spouse) is not sinful. Rather we begin to see that the one thing essential is the love of God. If His love wills to fulfill our desire, so be it. If not, then we can be sure that living with the desire unsatisfied is for us the most direct route to heaven.

This realization leads us to the third step: the renunciation of the desire. Renunciation is giving up our claims upon the object, letting go of it, and getting on with life apart from it. Renunciation does not mean rejecting the fulfillment should God give it to us, but rather placing ourselves entirely in His hands in the matter, to dispose as He will. We resolve to get on with life and prayer however things come out.

It is not enough to renounce the object alone. That is a start, but only a start. If we only commit ourselves to abstaining from fornication without also committing ourselves to giving up the desire for fornication, we will not get very far. Eve started with the commitment not to eat the fruit. Yet she indulged the desire, and eventually she could not stop herself. Giving up the object without giving up the desire is doomed from the start.

Moreover, if we indulge the desire while letting go of the object, we create problems for ourselves even if we do not eventually give in. The desire will become a preoccupation. It will be constantly in mind, especially in time of prayer. We will think how much we want it, what it would be like to have it. Or perhaps, hating the desire even as we indulge it, we will think about how much we would like to be rid of the desire, for it is ever with us.

Thus we must be prepared to renounce the desire as well as the object. This means reminding ourselves that full life is possible without the desire or its gratification. This is sometimes hard for us to admit, so close to our hearts is the desire. We may not be able to envision life without the desire, but that is a limitation on our imagination rather than on reality. We must give ourselves to God, ready to accept life at His hands, trusting that the particulars of that life will be exactly what is best for us.

This is the final step in dealing with our concupiscence. We must strive to replace concupiscence with the love of God. Simply driving out concupiscence is not enough. That would leave a vacuum

within us, soon to be filled with some other (probably worse) desire. Concupiscence must be replaced with the willing love for God. We must desire Him, with all our heart. We must shape our lives to live for Him -- this is the opposite of living for our desires. We live not to self but to God. This is not learned all at once. It takes practice. But it is the essence of Christian life: pleasing Him and not self.

Nothing essential to our lives will be lost by willing the love of God before all else. For He wills what is best for us. He designs a plan of salvation for us, using the "accidental" circumstances of our lives. His way is the only sure way to heaven. So we can safely trust ourselves to Him. We can then trust that if our desire is essential to us, it will be satisfied. If not, then we are better off without it.

By renouncing the desire and willing the love of God, we gain a little distance from our desires. They no longer seem quite so irresistible, so ultimate. Something greater comes into our lives, and God begins to have His proper place. We can accept that we have desires, some of them terribly strong. But we need not fear them: they lose their power to control us. We experience instead the power of God to redeem us: manifesting His power over the desires before which we are ourselves powerless. In place of the desires dominating our lives, we begin to feel God's love and peace: a security not of our own making.

In all of this, we learn something of the reality of the Cross, most especially that we do not gain what we really want by indulging our desires. The more we give into them the more insatiable they become. It is a hard lesson but true: the only deliverance from our concupiscence is by self-denial, by discipline and not gratification. From this discipline, which depends upon the grace of God, comes purity. And it is in purity that the love of God grows within us, bringing us at the end freedom from concupiscence. For our deepest longing cannot be satisfied by the earthly things which we desire. Giving in to our concupiscence is a vain attempt to satisfy our desires by gratification, when in fact the only real satisfaction is to be found in God. This satisfaction is ours when we renounce our concupiscence and give ourselves instead to the love of God.

