

Your Choices Shape Your Desires: A Theology of Desire and Its Implications for Personal Development

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PART 1: TOWARD A CHRISTIAN PARADIGM OF PEOPLE DEVELOPMENT

Our Choices Shape Our Desires: An Example

Early her senior year at Boston College, Grace Jhe, class of 2010, shared her testimony about how her choices shaped her desires. To be more specific, she was motivated in a small way by her love for God. This led to her desire to love others more, and even guided her directions about her major and career. [This is Grace's outline, from which she spoke; I modified it to the third person.]

During her freshman year, Grace was an overly ambitious premed, taking classes that were designed for upperclassmen. She ended up not liking most of her classes and struggled academically. Those academic struggles made her question why she was at BC, and what she was supposed to do. She thought she knew what she wanted to do in the future, but now wasn't sure anymore. Over winter break, Grace did a lot of self-reflection and, since she grew up in a very devoted Christian family, prayed about her life. She still didn't know what she wanted to do exactly, but started to take some small steps. Starting from 2nd semester, she learned to be more humble, enjoy her classes, and manage her time better.

During her sophomore year, Grace was very excited to meet all the new freshmen. Being an extrovert, she started to meet up with some freshmen and realized that I could actually use this for God's purpose. The more she met up with people, the more she wanted to be there for them and share God's love with them by listening to their struggles, encouraging them, etc. She wanted to serve God by helping my brothers and sisters in Christ grow. She also became friends with some non-Christians who she wanted to see come to Jesus. It was really a good year overall. Then during the summer, Grace worked as a counselor at a residential treatment program for adolescent girls with emotional, behavioral, and learning disabilities. Grace saw how much these girls lacked consistent care, love, and attention in their lives, so she wanted to give all she could. She thought she would be very good at working with them. But she clearly didn't know how to deal with them. The girls tested Grace's tolerance and she had to physically restrain a girl on one occasion. After a month, Grace broke out into hives from the stress, went to the emergency room twice, and had to take a break from work for a week. She thought to herself, 'God, is this really the right path that you have prepared for me?' Overall, she got used to the girls and didn't end up quitting. However, she told herself that she would never go back to that place *or* work with adolescents again, ever. 'Maybe I could if I were more intimidating,' she thought.

During her junior year, Grace continued to serve on campus by constantly meeting with people and keeping them accountable. She really prayed a lot for people around her. Realizing how much she valued serving people, Grace thought about how to serve people in the future. She prayed and asked God for clear guidance. Soon afterwards, Grace became interested in clinical psychology. Before she knew it, God put her in a research lab. She never thought she would get into research, but she did. And somehow, she decided to do a thesis. Things that she never thought she would get herself into happened. These things happened so naturally w/o me going out of my way to find things to do. That summer, Grace received a research fellowship from Boston College, with a strong

recommendation that she continue to work in the lab over the summer. It was only a part time position, which was financially difficult. She applied to other internships and jobs, but they only offered full time positions. So, the only option Grace had was the treatment program that she worked at during the previous summer. She really had no choice but to go back. The supervisor encouraged her to come back. The first day of work, Grace couldn't walk in the door. She had to pray before walking in. The girls that were still at the program from previous summer remembered her and were very welcoming. That summer, she actually enjoyed working with these adolescent girls. By going back to the same workplace, she could feel how much she had personally grown over a year. She believed that God made her go back to help her realize that she can work with adolescents.

This is how Grace entered her senior year. She says, 'Towards the end of the summer, I got accepted to a very competitive psychology internship at Children's Hospital. I wanted to work with children, but I'm with adolescents again. But now, I really appreciate it. Adolescence is a very crucial developmental stage and I am very thankful that God is training me in this field. During past three years, I made a choice to dedicate a significant amount of time to serve God on campus by meeting up with people and keep them accountable. I made this choice because I wanted to share God's love for me with others. As a result, I started to develop even more compassion for people and through this passion to serve God more, He has been blessing me and leading me more and more.'

Two Visions of People Development, Choices, and Desires

What I'd like to do is to reflect on Grace's experience and why that happened. What Grace's story illustrates is how our choices shape our desires. Many others have also had that experience. Why? I believe it's because God designed us that way. A lot of the time we think that *we have desires and therefore we make choices*. For example, isn't it true that when you feel hungry, you choose to eat; when you feel thirsty, you choose to drink; when you feel like you have to pee; you choose to pee. Well, of course that's true. Your desires lead you to make choices. But if you think our desires are constant, then you look at Jesus and think, 'There are things about him that I don't desire, today, like I'd have to be more truthful, or more sober, or more sexually pure, or more generous, so I really don't want to go further with Jesus. In fact, he scares me.' In other words, we assume that our desires stay constant. So you assume that Jesus calls you to choose against your desires all the time, and your life will be miserable, so why come to Jesus? But that's not true. What is less obvious – at least in our culture – is the flip side: *your choices shape your desires*. You have a say in what kind of person you become, how much of Jesus you experience, and how much of God you know. In fact, God has designed us to partner with Him in the shaping of our own human nature, and our human desires.

After I read the book by professor of anthropology Nancy Abelmann, *The Intimate University: Korean-American Students and the Problems of Segregation*,¹ I paused to consider what role various communities play in students' personal development. Taking a very sympathetic look at the intriguing phenomenon of Korean-American self-segregation at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, where she teaches, Abelmann describes how ethnic communities and church communities articulate more concrete visions of *who people are* and *what kind of people they should be* which are not articulated by the university itself. This vacuum can feel liberating for some, but perplexing for others. Sometimes the Residential Life program on campus has a particular view of student development, as do counselors and other administrators. But most often, ethnic and church communities create more intimate relational spaces to offset the campus setting which can be alienating precisely because it attempts to be multi-cultural in a disorienting way, on top of situating students in a fairly depersonalized process as they select majors and classes.

What I think is at stake here is (at least) two different models of people development. If I may generalize, the campus frequently assumes that students – people aged 17 to 22 years – develop as people and gain discernment about their future – how? By reading lots of books, engaging in some discussion about them, and listening to their professors' interpretations of this material. The average student repeats this dozens of times over the course of four years or so. They are supposed to emerge with clarity about what they are going to do for a good portion of the rest of their lives. This would of course imply clarity into one's own self. Given the staggering amount of money students and their parents are paying for college tuition, this is a significant expectation students have. Whether the university is a liberal one stressing a *universal humanity*, or a technical one stressing a *technological humanity*, the effect is usually the same. This model of people development leaves a lot to be desired.

¹ Nancy Abelmann, *The Intimate University: Korean American Students and the Problems of Segregation* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

I like to articulate Jesus' relationship with us as involving his model of people development. I contrast this with the university's implicit or explicit model of people development. Knowledge of certain subjects plays a part, but the greater framework is Jesus and his love for others. In Jesus' model, he calls us to himself. He often gives us the sense that he knows us better than we know ourselves, since he renamed Simon 'Peter' when he first met him (John 1:35 – 42) and knew what insights would raise Nathaniel's eyebrows (John 1:43 – 51). On numerous other occasions, Jesus seemed to know people and their needs in a striking way. In the larger biblical narrative running from creation to redemption, we find that Jesus is restoring in us the true 'image of God' (Genesis 1:27; Colossians 3:11) because he has restored it first in himself, in his own flesh, through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of the Father (Colossians 1:15 – 20). So it is in relationship with Jesus by his Spirit that we come to know ourselves, our truest selves, in addition to coming to know God. This doesn't happen all at once, and it is not always easy. It certainly involves trusting Jesus and loving people with him, which is always costly in some way. Jesus said it will feel like dying in some sense ('take up your cross and follow me'). Sometimes we only sense a next step for ourselves for the near term future. Yet, as we do this with him, Jesus continues to lead us, and shows us glimpses of what we are made to do, as Jesus did with Grace at Boston College. The road may be uncertain, but it is full of his love and joy. This leads us to the need to articulate what Jesus will do with our *desires* over time, and how our *choices* intersect with our *desires*.

PART II: THE NEED FOR ARTICULATION

Among all the attractive and competing options they have on campus, why would student engage in Christian mission, taking risks to love people more deeply and broadly than before? What would motivate them to serve in leadership? Hopefully, love for Jesus would. And of course, there are more base motivations: leadership in a student organization, volunteering for a spring break service trip, or helping to plan an event all look good on a resume. Idealistic ambition, of which some students are full, cause some to gravitate towards 'kingdom of God' language and seek to 'bring' (rightly or wrongly) this 'kingdom of God' on campus. I can think of numerous other possible motivations. But one of the motivations that I hope is present in students is Christ-centered self-discovery. I hope they desire to learn things about Jesus, themselves, and others. They will learn what spiritual gifts they might have, what motivated abilities they have, how they seem to work best on a team, what their love languages are, how to give good counsel, and so on. As they look at the world through Jesus' eyes of compassion, perhaps they'll actually discover new career paths to consider. Maybe they'll decide to not consider some career paths anymore. Hopefully they'll have more ability to discern whether to pursue singleness or marriage. If marriage, I hope they will know how to recognize important core 'kingdom values' in a prospective marriage partner. I hope they recognize in themselves how they have become a better 'catch' for another ministry-minded Christian by internalizing 'kingdom values' themselves. All this happens because *choices shape desires*. Their godly desires will mature and grow when they cultivate 'kingdom values' within themselves by taking concrete steps of faith-filled obedience.

Numerous other situations confront us as well, which have to do with *desire*. For example, what do we tell GLBT students wrestling with Jesus and his vision for human sexuality? What will happen to their *desires* if they continue to follow Jesus? That question is important because ultimately the argument against Jesus boils down to the argument from desire: Will the *desire* to pursue the active sexual lifestyle outweigh the *desire* to know and share in Jesus' life? While we don't know if they will or will not continue to wrestle with same-sex attraction throughout the course of their lives, we can state with conviction that they will grow in many other desires that find their source and goal in Jesus. Those desires, too, are significant and meaningful.

Yet the implicit or explicit pressure that students generally feel on campus is to maximize knowledge and accomplishments. Knowledge by itself will help them discern who they are and what they should pursue in life. Accomplishments will open the door to opportunity. The pressure students feel to accumulate knowledge and accomplishments comes from decisions made by universities dating back to the late 1800's. In the 1870's and beyond, the humanities replaced theology and moral philosophy as the discipline for integrating other branches of knowledge into a meaningful whole. But the humanities could not be prescriptive for what we *should believe*, but only descriptive of what people *have believed*.

‘Over the course of several decades academic knowledge in the United States crept away from a resilient traditional ideal of knowledge cohering under a Christian worldview toward an attractive new ideal of specialized disciplinary learning. This transition profoundly shaped the humanities, and the humanities in turn offered a resolution to its dilemmas, but a resolution that in the end must be judged deceptive. Placing the humanities at the heart of liberal education when moral philosophy fizzled helped colleges and universities to ease concerns about specialization and the spread of electives... But if no overarching law of progress or evolution existed but only history as an undirected collection of events, then no larger pattern could link all cultural histories into a whole... Whatever else the humanities may have done for academic knowledge, they certainly did not save the unity of knowledge when moral philosophy decayed but, by disguising the collapse, only made it easier to accept.’²

While lacking an overarching vision of how to integrate knowledge, vocation, and personhood, no wonder students feel like they must gain as much knowledge and accomplishments as possible. However, Jesus’ message is that knowledge is only a part of the overall picture. But for us to develop as people, Jesus must be the utter and absolute foundation for what it means to be truly human; love for others in concrete relationship is a necessary part of self-discovery because Christ is personal and relational; the embrace of uncertainty and sacrifice are essential; and that the gradual, unfolding discernment of one’s ‘calling’ (if we may call it that, or ‘ongoing discernment’ if not) involves a spiritual relationship with the One who calls them, the one true God.

PART III: A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF DESIRE

The Starting Point: Receiving God’s Wisdom and Growing in Godly Desires

In the Psalms and Proverbs, we are invited by the Scriptures, for more or less the first explicit time in the biblical canon, to explore our own *desires*. Psalm 37 famously says:

Ps.37:4 Delight yourself in the LORD;
And He will give you the *desires* of your heart.

This is always quite startling for me to read. But what does our heart desire? Depending on what those desires are, and how we feel them, what does that mean as we stand before God? What does God want for us to desire? And perhaps most importantly, what does it mean to the Psalmist to ‘delight yourself in the LORD’?

Here are some Proverbs below which deepen those questions for us. In some sense, the difference between the wicked and the righteous lies in what we *desire*.

Pr.10:24 What the wicked fears will come upon him,
But the *desire* of the righteous will be granted.

11:23 The *desire* of the righteous is only good,
But the *expectation* of the wicked is wrath.

13:1 A wise son accepts his father’s discipline,
But a scoffer does not listen to rebuke.
² From the fruit of a man’s mouth he *enjoys* good,
But the *desire* of the treacherous is violence.

13:12 Hope deferred makes the heart sick,
But *desire* fulfilled is a tree of life.

Though an in-depth analysis of these particular verses might be valuable, I wish to ask larger questions: What is the pastoral relevance of desire? What role does it play in our lives? For ministers, what role does it play in counseling, encouraging, and correcting others?

² Jon Roberts and James Turner, *The Sacred and Secular University* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.117 – 118.

I will look at this theme first in Proverbs. The Book of Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings attributed mainly to King Solomon, David's son and heir. The Book of Proverbs is written like a letter of wisdom from father to son. Just as wisdom is something God gives to humanity, so we must pass on wisdom to our children. Adam was given a word from God, and he was given the task of meditating on it and living it out, in particular with his wife Eve and then, implicitly, their children. So the picture of humanity in paradise is to be given a word from God to meditate on, to obey, and to pass on. That word then becomes something called 'wisdom.' God's people need God's wisdom to live in His blessing. Not surprisingly, then, 'wisdom' in Proverbs is portrayed as being present from the beginning of the world, from creation itself. The literary pattern found between the three major sections of the Old Testament occurs within this one section itself. David was given a covenant-forming word from God. Solomon's job was to meditate on it and live it out.

In the opening frame of Proverbs, chapters 1 – 9, there are a series of ten admonitions³:

1. Proverbs 1:8 – 19
2. Proverbs 2:1 – 22
3. Proverbs 3:1 – 12
4. Proverbs 3:21 – 35
5. Proverbs 4:1 – 9
6. Proverbs 4:10 – 19
7. Proverbs 4:20 – 27
8. Proverbs 5:1 – 23
9. Proverbs 6:20 – 35
10. Proverbs 7:1 – 27

This structure is probably meant to recall the Ten Commandments in the mind of the Jewish audience. Once again, the symmetry is suggestive. Within the covenant God gives commandments. Within the covenant with David (emphasized by Psalms and Chronicles, the beginning and ending books of the Ketuvim), God gives commandments (Proverbs). The proverbs reflect on the 613 commandments of the Torah. They are clever and witty sayings about the same subjects: marriage vs. adultery, family responsibilities vs. irresponsibility, parenting, passing down God's commands, honoring vs. dishonoring God, working the land vs. idleness, justice vs. injustice, contentment vs. greed, caring for the poor vs. treating them unjustly, etc. Reflecting on God's commands constitutes 'wisdom.' There is, however, a deeper point being made by Proverbs. Since God created the world and humanity with His 'wisdom' (Pr.8:22 – 36), God's commands are not arbitrary but are rather directing us to the fulfillment of our nature and purpose as God's creatures. 'Wisdom' in this sense seeks to bridge God's commands with His creation; it asserts that God's commands are not fundamentally foreign to God's creatures, but organically and intrinsically linked. There is a hidden unity in which God's commands are seen as the means by which God shepherds humanity and creation into more life. This will become part of Paul's argument in Romans 2:12 – 16 where the internal witness of the conscience within all human beings functions for each in a similar way that the Mosaic commandments functioned for Israel. Yes, sin has tarnished human nature, but human nature in its origins and in its continued existence, in a limited but persistent way, recognizes the wisdom of God in what God commands.

Proverbs 2:1 – 10 reflects a dynamic of receiving God's commands (mediated by one's elders), internalizing those words, and growing spiritually and *emotionally*.

¹ Proverbs 2:1 My son, if you will receive my words and treasure my commandments within you,

² Then you will discern the fear of the LORD and discover the knowledge of God...

⁹ Then you will discern righteousness and justice and equity and every good course.

¹⁰ For wisdom will enter your heart and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul... (emphasis mine)

When you choose to exercise, you grow your capacity and usually desire for more exercise. It feels better. When you choose to eat healthy, you develop a taste for healthy food. It tastes better. When you love Jesus and others by the love of Jesus in you, you desire more of him.

³ "Frame Narrative," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry, and Writings* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), p.243.

Wisdom is brought to its fullest revealing and fulfillment in Jesus, in how Jesus gives radical commands, which, though they went far above and beyond anything ever taught in the Old Testament, must still nevertheless be understood as fitted to and appropriate for all humanity; and also in how Jesus restores and fulfills the Imago Dei – and hence the wisdom of God – in his own humanity to fully reconcile God and humanity in his own physical, resurrected body (Col.1:22), so that he could share the Spirit of his new humanity with others. It is no coincidence that Paul describes Jesus in Colossians with Adamic and wisdom language: as the ‘image of the invisible God’ (Col.1:15, 3:10), which is parallel to Adam in Genesis 1; as the one through whom and for whom all things were created (Col.1:16 – 17), which is parallel to ‘wisdom’ in Proverbs 8; and as the source of a new humanity where human boundaries are transcended (Col.3:8 – 15).⁴ With this language, Colossians portrays Jesus as not just a new Adam and a new wisdom, but the true Adam and the true wisdom of God. As always, what God creates and what God commands are joined by God’s ‘wisdom.’

Once again, the cultivation of ‘wisdom’ as a special responsibility of the Kings of Israel from the House of David fits a pattern Israel discerned. They saw symmetry between the Davidic King and Adam. David built the Temple sanctuary, a new Eden from which the presence of God was made known to all Israel, and indeed the world. In that sense, David and each of his heirs are seen as a recurrence of Adam, the original man who was specially charged with being in the original Eden, from which the presence of God would have been made known to the world. To reflect on God’s wisdom was a uniquely Davidic task because it was an Adamic task, as is the task of explaining and expositing it. True ‘wisdom’ is the gift of God through the Davidic kings to the rest of the world. It is no surprise that the New Testament writers saw Jesus as the fulfillment of David, of God’s Temple presence now dwelling in the human person of Jesus, and of course God’s wisdom personified (1 Cor.1:24).

I now live in the 2nd highest crime area in Boston with my wife Ming and our two kids, along with other dear friends who live in our three story house. But if you had told me that I’d be doing this 20 years ago, I would have said, ‘No way!’ How did this happen? Here were the major steps: I went to Mexico my junior year of high school. That’s where I came to Jesus. I started to care about poverty. My sophomore year of college, the Rodney King incident happened in Los Angeles. I was really affected emotionally by that, because I grew up in the LA area. Also that year, the U.S. decided to give reparations checks to Japanese American survivors of the internment, so because of those two things, I chose to care more about race relations in the U.S. I soaked myself in Scripture, to know the teaching of Jesus and the heart of God, especially for the poor. I was also very interested in how Jesus engages issues of ethnicity, race, culture, power, forgiveness, and dealing with a complex history. Then when I graduated, I chose to be mentored by a wonderful couple named Jose and Jennifer Espinosa, in a city called East Palo Alto, and they taught me a lot about the Mexican immigrant community there. I came to feel so strongly about this type of life and ministry that I broke up with a girl I dated who had a hard time with it. It was a criterion for marriage, for me. Then I met Ming, and she felt the same, so we got married! Now, we live where we do. *My choices shaped my desires.*

The Desires God Intended Us to Experience: Genesis

Having started in Psalms and primarily Proverbs, we can now look backward at creation in Genesis to get a sense for what desires God wants us to cultivate in ourselves, in partnership with Him. When God created Adam and Eve, they were supposed to choose to love one another within the love of God, which would have led to more love and more *desire* for God and for each other. More *desire* for God and each other? Yes! Just as God made human life, Adam and Eve were supposed to make more human life. They weren’t going to do it in exactly the same way as God did, of course; Adam and Eve were supposed to do it by having sex. They were supposed to make love. What would have happened then? They would have loved each other even more. They were not fallen, flawed human beings; this was in the paradise, in the garden, in Eden! There was no self-centeredness, no personal insecurities, no hidden feelings, no distrust, no jealousy – all the things that we struggle with, they didn’t have. So their marriage would have just gotten deeper and deeper with every choice they made to love each other within the love of God. And every time they physically made love to one another, it would have just gotten better! They would desire each other more! They would desire God more!

Not only that, but out of that love would come children. When you have a good marriage relationship, kids increase the love. When each of my two kids were born, I loved my wife Ming even more. Like many husbands, I watched my wife endure labor and childbirth and doubled the respect I already had for her. This continued while nursing and

⁴ See also N.T. Wright, *Climax of the Covenant* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fortress Press, 1993), p.99 – 119.

childraising. When Ming cradled them, smiled at them, lost sleep and looked tired because of them, my love for her deepened. Even when she was spending less time with just me alone, since we spent time together as a family and she spent time with the kids on her own, it didn't make me insecure. We had, I think, a healthy balance of how we spent time together. That's the nature of healthy and appropriate love, and especially being in the love of God. Love grows. It doesn't diminish or lose something. A choice to love deepens our desire, matures it, and helps it grow in the right direction. This is how God created us. As a side note, when my second child, my daughter Zoe, was born, my love for my son increased, too: I watched him become a big brother and friend to Zoe, so I became more proud of him than I had been before. So I think this dynamic is true in general, or at least it can be when our Lord is in the center of our lives, ordering and granting healthy love to us all.

Why did God create us this way? I dare say it's because God cares about *our experiential knowledge*. God cares that we grow in our experience of love and goodness, because as a Trinity, God is always experiencing the love and goodness between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Between each of the three divine Persons of the Trinity, love is being given and received in complete freedom and utter joy. I don't know if we can say that God, within Himself, 'grows' in His experience of that love. But it is certainly the case that human beings were meant to *grow* into the experience of His love. We were meant to bring forth more human life, and experience a sliver of the joy God has in bringing forth human life. In fact, our joy at becoming parents is a concrete personal knowledge of God's joy over us in being our heavenly Father when we were conceived and born. Also, we were meant to love the creation in similar way that God loves it: Therefore, we were meant to spread the garden of Eden across the wild creation and bring forth more order and beauty. God brings forth life, order, and beauty. He called us to bring forth life, order, and beauty. If human beings had simply done that, we would have fallen more and more in love with this God, living within His love. God cares about our experiential knowledge. He wanted, and wants, us to know what it's like to be Him. Because we were meant to be like Him: experiencing more and more love. So we deepen in His love with every choice.

The implication here is simple: Spiritual growth is not something you can put into a microwave. You don't get it fully cooked. It's slow. It takes time. It is a series of small and sometimes challenging decisions to live life with Jesus. Yet I think at no other time has the world out there needed the love of Jesus. And at no other time, perhaps, have we been so impatient with ourselves and others.

The Warping of Human Desires: Paul's Teaching on the Heart, Mind, and Perception

But what happens to our desires in this fallen world? How do our poor choices impact our own desires? No other passage of Scripture illuminates this than Romans 1:18 – 32. I have boldfaced the sections that deal with desire, implicitly or explicitly.

^{1:18} For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, ¹⁹ because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. ²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. ²¹ For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and **their foolish heart was darkened.** ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them over **in the lusts of their hearts** to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. ²⁵ For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and **worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator**, who is blessed forever. Amen. ²⁶ For this reason God gave them over to **degrading passions**; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, ²⁷ and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. ²⁸ And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to **a depraved mind**, to do those things which are not proper, ²⁹ **being filled** with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; ³² and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also **give hearty approval** to those who practice them.

Through the three major ‘exchanges’ human beings make (1:23, 25, 26) and the three times that God, responding to human choices, ‘gave them over’ (1:24, 26, 28), we see the warping of human desire through sin: (1) Sin affects our hearts and minds, meaning our emotions, passions, and desires: ‘Their foolish heart was darkened...the lusts of their heart...to degrading passions...to a depraved mind...being filled with all unrighteousness...’ Our desires and emotional passions are affected by the deeper, spiritual choices we make. (2) This means our own personal desires, as we experience them, are not sufficient as a guide to truth, morality, and proper feeling. They might be quite wrong, in fact. (3) We need revelation from outside ourselves, from God, in fact, around which we can then interpret and organize our desires.

Let me offer an illustration from my own life of how that can happen. My parents’ marriage was never really good. During my sophomore year in high school, they started arguing about divorce. I would sometimes go to school and start crying. Early on, during a lunch period, I went to go talk to my old biology teacher who was really good at listening and really encouraging. I knew she would say things that would make me feel better. I told her what was happening at home. Sure enough, she said some really encouraging things. Then I went a bit further. I told her how I was trying to focus on school and swimming. I knew I was fishing. Being the nice person she was, she said, ‘Mako, I really respect how you’re trying to hold things together.’ Then the bell rang. As I left the room, I heard a voice in my mind say, ‘Mako, you can turn any situation to your advantage, can’t you?’ I thought, ‘Who said that?’ Looking back, I think that was Jesus. But I ignored him. Even though three friends of mine were loving on me and praying for me to get to know Jesus, and even though I had started reading the New Testament, in the deepest place of who I was, I decided that was I was going to be the solution to my own problems. Somehow. Then, the following year, I started dating this girl. She also had family problems, so I thought we could relate. She cut her arms, which surprised me but I could kind of understand it. Since I had tried to be the solution to my own problems, I thought I could be the solution to her problems too. *But I just made it worse.* At other times, I thought *she* could be the solution to her own problems, and *then I scorned her for being so weak.* I had chosen not the love of Jesus. I had chosen to love myself. As a result, I wanted her to validate me. But I did not understand at the time that I was only making things worse for her and for me. It was only after we broke up and Jesus helped me to see the truth. Even when we feel unloved by everyone else, Jesus’ call is to love him and be loved by him. Otherwise, we choose ourselves in a deeper way and we make bigger mistakes. *Our choices shape our desires.*

In Ephesians 4:17 – 24, Paul makes a compressed statement that includes both the corruption of human desires and also their restoration in Jesus, using almost the same language about our hearts and minds, emotions and desires:

^{4:17} So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, **in the futility of their mind,** ¹⁸ **being darkened in their understanding,** excluded from the life of God because of **the ignorance that is in them,** because of **the hardness of their heart;** ¹⁹ and they, **having become callous,** have given themselves over to **sensuality** for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. ²⁰ But you did not learn Christ in this way, ²¹ if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, ²² that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, ²³ and that you **be renewed in the spirit of your mind,** ²⁴ and put on the new self, which in God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

In his writings, Paul says that if you choose to be in the love of Jesus, then Jesus will reshape your desires. You may still have negative or rebellious desires to contend with, but the fact is that on the spiritual level, God is shaping your desires through the Spirit of Jesus. If you choose to be in your own selfishness, then your selfishness will shape your desires. Your desires are always being shaped. There is no such thing as neutrality. You are either traveling on an upward spiral towards God, or a downward spiral away from God.

Here’s an example of that. In book 7 of the Harry Potter series, Dumbledore explains to Harry why the Dark Lord Voldemort is actually quite dumb. Despite being the most powerful dark wizard ever, Voldemort is dumb. Why? Dumbledore explains, ‘And his knowledge remained woefully incomplete, Harry! That which Voldemort does not value, he takes no trouble to comprehend. Of house-elves and children’s tales, of love, loyalty, and innocence, Voldemort knows and understands nothing. Nothing. That they all have a power beyond his own, a power beyond the reach of any magic, is a truth he has never grasped.’⁵

⁵ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, 2009) p.709 – 710.

This insight, which reflects the same insight Paul has, has immense importance for all of us, but let me spell it out especially for college students. If you are a careerist, and your ethic is ‘work hard, play hard,’ if you are here fundamentally to get all you can out of college, then you will really only get to know people to the extent that they help you study and party. But then: Do you ever have the realization that you don’t know something about a friend? Why does he call his sister every weekend? *You don’t know*. Or why does she care about the black community? *You don’t know*. These are the most important and precious things about people, and you did not know them because *you didn’t care to know*. You’re like Voldemort. Voldemort didn’t care to learn about other things and other people – and know them truly – because he chose to be self-centered. When you’re self-centered, you miss really important things about people and life. And, you’ll miss things about Jesus, because you’ll *only* be ‘interested’ in Jesus to the extent that *he helps you advance and have fun*. But your advancement is not a valid criterion of truth.

Here’s another example of this dynamic between your desires and the knowledge you pursue: In *The Lord of the Rings*, Sauron never considered the possibility that someone would destroy the Ring. Why? Because he himself would not. He wanted power. And he assumed that everyone is as self-centered as he is. So that is why he could not conceive of anyone trying to destroy the Ring. But Gandalf and others could understand how this would be Sauron’s weakness. Good can understand evil, but evil cannot understand good. The more you resist alcoholism and peer pressure, the more you can understand why escapism or people-pleasing is tempting. Good can understand evil. But the more you give into alcoholism and peer pressure, the less you can understand the person who does not. Evil does not understand good. If you’re a philosophy major, you can put it this way: ***Your ethics determines your epistemology***. *Your spiritual posture determines what you will choose to know and can know*. We are not neutral. We don’t just take in information as it comes to us. We are biased one way or the other. If you choose the love of Jesus, you will *know* certain things. If you choose the love of self, you will ‘know’ certain other things. You make choices, and those choices affect your desire to know things. The only way to truly know people and things is to love them appropriately, with Jesus. Even when you feel unloved.

Look at how this is true in friendship in general. Let’s say that you are Person #1. And you are friends with Person #2. But you can’t stand Person #3. Person #3 gets on your nerves. You don’t like being around him. Or maybe it’s the other way around. Person #3 doesn’t like you. But either way, Person #2 is friends with Person #3. For some reason you can’t understand, they are friends. Now apart from the love of God, your response to Person #2 is probably falls into these categories:

- ‘I don’t really understand how you can be friends with Person #3, or why.’ That’s the befuddled but apathetic response.
- ‘I don’t think you should be friends with Person #3, for your own good.’ That’s the semi-parental response.
- ‘I’m mad that you actually spend time with Person #3.’ That’s the insecure, jealous response.
- ‘I’m not going to be your friend if you’re friends with Person #3.’ That’s the *Mean Girls* response, right?

But in the love of Jesus, you would look at that friendship more positively. You would say:

- ‘I’m really glad that you’re friends with Person #3, because I can’t be that friend, at least right now.’
- Or, you would say, ‘I admire you for being friends with Person #3. I want to get there, too.’
- Or you would say, ‘I admire you, and I’d like to learn from you how are you able to be friends with Person #3 while I am not?’

Again, the implication of this is simple: Our spiritual posture determines how we interpret situations and even how we feel about certain people. Jesus calls us into a pattern of personal development with him.

PART IV: JESUS’ REALIGNMENT OF HUMAN DESIRE AND HUMAN NATURE

Why does the redemption and realignment of human desires always involve the person of Jesus of Nazareth? Our desires must pass through him to be either purged or reshaped. Why? Because Jesus redeemed and realigned human nature in his own person, to offer a new humanity to us through union with himself by the Spirit. This means

he is the ground and foundation for human desires. Here are the doctrines of the incarnation and atonement as they address the redemption of human desire.

Like us, Jesus had a mouth prone to boast about himself and sneer at others, eyes prone to greed, fists prone to strike his enemies, and feet prone to walk by the principle of self-preservation. Like us, he inhabited a body craving physical comfort and sexual satisfaction. Like us, he had a human instinct that was prone to avoid people who were awkward, unpleasant, and threatening. John tells us, ‘the Word became flesh and dwelled among us’ (John 1:14). Jesus became *flesh* (Greek *sarx*). That is not a neutral term. John the writer could have said that the Word became *anthropos* (a *man*) or took to himself a *soma* (a *body*); that would be a neutral way of saying it. But to say that the Word became *sarx – flesh* – is the most negative way of saying that Jesus became human. *Flesh* in the ancient world was understood to be the corrupt aspect of us – our depravity. In another part of the New Testament, Paul says, ‘Nothing good dwells in my *flesh*.’ The Jewish commentator Philo of Alexandria said, ‘The Lord said, ‘My Spirit shall not remain among men forever, because they are *flesh*.’⁶

The term ‘flesh’ is the New Testament, apostolic designation for the corruption that has set in to human nature and human desire after the fall of humanity into sin. They are building on the diagnosis that the Hebrew Scriptures offer, when those authors use the term ‘heart’. Moses records God’s insight into the wound in the human ‘heart’ early on in the primeval narrative, ‘The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his *heart* was only evil continually’ (Gen.6:5), ‘the Lord said to Himself...the intent of man’s *heart* is evil from his youth’ (Gen.8:21). Moses therefore concludes that Israel, despite being God’s chosen people, has the same corrupted human nature that everyone else does. Israel will therefore go into exile because of their own heart-level corruption. On the other side of that exile, God will circumcise the ‘hearts’ of the Israelites (Dt.30:6), which is the only resolution to the problem of this internal problem. From that point on, various Old Testament authors diagnose the ‘heart’. King David, after his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, asked God to cleanse and purify his ‘innermost being’, his ‘hidden part’, his ‘heart’. He recognized that God would have to create for him a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within him (Ps.51:5 – 10). Jeremiah and Ezekiel, looking out at Israel’s urban poverty, oppression, social problems, and spiritual idolatry, also diagnosed the human heart. Jeremiah saw that God will write His law upon people’s hearts (Jer.31:31 – 34). Ezekiel saw that God would give them responsive hearts of flesh in place of hardened hearts of stone (Ezk.36:26 – 27). Paul later offered a very precise diagnosis of human desire and the corruption in human nature, in terms of his experience as a Jew under the Sinaitic Law (Rom.7:14 – 25). The Law was given to help the Jews have an accurate diagnosis of human nature – we are all dealing with a fundamental internal problem, not an external one. This is the substance of human nature that Jesus took to himself, in order to reorient it. The flesh was hostile to God (Rom.8:7; Col.1:21), so Jesus had to take human flesh to himself to bring an end to that hostility (Eph.2:16).

But Jesus lived perfectly, right? Yes. Doesn’t that mean we understand moral weakness and sin far better than Jesus? No. The only way to know how selfish you are is to resist your own self-centeredness. If you gossip all the time, you don’t ever know how to discipline your tongue. If you just surround yourself with comfortable people, you don’t know how to care about difficult people. If you just watch porn or read romance novels whenever you feel like it, you don’t know how to resist the selfish lure of the fantasy world. The reason why Jesus understands sin, selfishness, and the corruption in human nature so well is because he struggled with it so deeply. By comparison with Jesus, we have no idea how weak and sinful we are!

In fact, many of us wrestle with sin only in its *downstream, final, outward* form. You wrestle with the temptation to punch or curse someone out when they piss you off. But most of us do not wrestle with sin in its *upstream, earlier, internal* form, when they are emotions of bitterness and control raging in our minds. We have an easier time restraining ourselves from the outward expressions of our sin. After all, if we physically hurt someone, we could get in big trouble. If our mouths let loose with some nasty words, there might be consequences for us. If you send a flaming email to someone, it could backfire on you and be copied all around the Internet. So, it’s relatively easy to restrain ourselves from outward sin. But it’s a lot harder to restrain ourselves from internal sin. The further upstream we wrestle with our own selfishness, the harder it gets.

Now think about this: Jesus wrestled with sin *at its source*. He wrestled with the temptation to think his own thoughts and live his own life apart from his Heavenly Father. Jesus had to think using a mind that constantly tried

⁶ Philo, ‘On the Giants’, *Commentary on Genesis*, V.19 – 21

to privately think its own self-centered thoughts by shutting God out. But he forced his mind to be aware of his Father's presence, love, and purpose *at all times*... even under hard conditions.⁷ For example, Jesus lived as part of an oppressed people dominated by an occupying enemy; the emotional landscape of his life was one of painful trauma and simmering anger. Yet Jesus said to the devil in the wilderness that he would not use his power or life for any purpose of his own, *ever*. Instead, he gave his life to the Father *at every moment*. Few people understand what it's like to struggle against our own sinfulness *at its very source*. No one knows what it's like to consistently be victorious there, at the very root of our being – no one, that is, but Jesus. It's just a lot harder to struggle against sin that far upstream. Jesus did for us what none of us could do for ourselves. He was victorious against all temptations at the source, where we often don't even know we're failing. Jesus resisted it at the source. When his flesh wanted to just have an easy life, Jesus said, 'No, my life belongs to God.' When his flesh wanted to lash out at his enemies, Jesus said, 'No, my life belongs to God.' When his flesh wanted to sin, Jesus said, 'No. I belong to God.' He constantly took his own humanity and redirected it to God, to receive the love of God to the fullest, and to love God absolutely. As Jesus grew up, he 'increased' in stature, says Luke in Luke 2:52. But the word for 'increased' is *proekopten*, which is the Greek word that means 'to hammer out with blows.'⁸ He was reshaping his flesh like a blacksmith reshapes a piece of metal that has its own way of resisting him. Jesus' life was a life of struggle to manifest the pure love of the Father. The letter to the Hebrews refers to the 'loud cryings and tears' of Jesus (Hebrews 5:7).

When we read about Jesus being tempted, as we see him in the wilderness and at the Garden of Gethsemane, which are meant to bracket his ministry at the front and at the end, and thus characterize what happened throughout, the struggle is not just a show. Jesus didn't pretend to be tempted. The temptations were real and awful for him. For here we see that Jesus did not take on a 'perfect human nature,' a human nature that is *different* from ours. He took on a *sinful* human nature, the *same* human nature we have. Jesus began to redeem humanity by 'inhabiting' and 'wearing' the human nature that is common to us all. He took it all onto himself. Every time his own humanity tried to resist, rebel, and squirm away from God to be an independent thing, like at the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus redirected it – his own writhing humanity – into obedience to the love of God. He did this as one of us, by the power of the Spirit.

This is why he retold the story of his people, and why he will retell our life stories. For example, after his baptism and in his wilderness temptation, Jesus retold Israel's story. Jesus' baptism in the water echoed Israel's 'baptism' in the Red Sea. Jesus' forty days in the wilderness echoed Israel's forty years. Jesus even quoted three times from Deuteronomy, the word from God to Israel during their wilderness sojourn, showing us that he was in fact reflecting on Israel's wilderness wandering. Hence, Jesus was undoing the sin of Israel. He was the embodiment of a new Israel, reliving Israel's wandering, without giving in to sin. If Jesus boarded a ship called the Mayflower, and sailed from England to Plymouth, Massachusetts and there started to deal kindly and justly with the Native Americans, what would Jesus be communicating? That he is the embodiment of a new American, reliving its history, without giving in to sin. He would be undoing the primal sin of America. That is what he was doing in the wilderness temptation, but also throughout his whole life.

In fact, Jesus' three temptations in the wilderness also resembled Adam and Eve's triple temptation in the garden. In Genesis 3:6, Eve took the fruit because she thought it was 'good for food' (turn these stones to bread), it was 'a delight to the eyes' (see the nations of the world), and because it was 'desirable to make one wise' (be admired by others). Hence, Jesus was undoing the sin of humanity, reliving the temptation by Satan, without giving in. Israel was called to play the role of a new Adam, but failed to do so.

The best way I have of understanding this struggle is to look at Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*.⁹ Frodo carried the Ring of Power. The moment Jesus entered into the womb of Mary is like the moment Frodo took hold of the Ring of Power. It wasn't just this neutral thing. The same thing is true with Jesus. It began affecting him. It fought with him. It tried to take him over. It tried to make him as self-centered as we are. But he never let it. And Jesus couldn't just put down some object like the Ring. It was part of him. He couldn't say, 'Hey, where's my Sam??? Can't I give this to someone else?' But he resisted the flesh, every moment, at the source, all the way to the end.

⁷ See T.F. Torrance, *Atonement* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p.437 – 447. I have been influenced a great deal by Torrance.

⁸ T.F. Torrance, *Incarnation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p.64

⁹ My favorite illustrations of the atonement are located at <http://www.anastasiscenter.org/preachers-corner-illustrations>.

Whereas Frodo could take off the Ring because it was separate from him, Jesus could not take off his humanity because it was permanently a part of him. Whereas Frodo failed, since he at the end gave in to the temptation of the Ring and called it ‘my own,’ Jesus succeeded: Jesus judged the flesh – the corruption in human nature – and cast it into the judgment of God to be destroyed. Then in his resurrection, Jesus raised up a new, fresh, glorified, God-soaked, God-drenched human nature in his own body. By his Spirit, Jesus allows us to share in himself and his new humanity. And in his ascension, Jesus brought the humanity in himself to the right hand of the Father, there to intercede for all his people.

In Romans, Paul describes the struggle that he as a Jewish person under the Law experienced: a myriad of unruly lusts and covetous *desires*, which he attributed to his *flesh* (Romans 7:14 – 25). However, what the Law was powerless to do because of the weakness of human flesh, God did; God condemned sin in the flesh of Christ (Romans 8:3). That is, not just through his death but through his moment by moment choices to never sin but instead live in the love of the Father, Jesus condemned sin in his own flesh. He cleansed sin out of his human nature. In this sense, Jesus was the true Israelite, who lived under the Law. Jesus, through his life and death, accomplished the death of our ‘old self,’ i.e. the sinful nature (Romans 6:6). Thus we, by sharing in Jesus’ death and resurrection, also acquire a new identity ‘in Jesus.’ That which Jesus physically redeemed in his own body, this we now share in.

Here is what John Calvin said about that: ‘When it is asked how, after abolishing sins, Christ removed the discord between us and God and acquired a righteousness, it may be replied generally that he provided us with this by *the whole course of his obedience*...From the moment he put on the person of a servant, he began to pay the price of liberation for our redemption...In order, however, to define the manner of salvation more surely, scripture ascribes it to Christ’s death as its property and attribute. Yet there is no exclusion of *the rest of the obedience which he performed in his life*; as Paul comprehends the whole of it, from the beginning to the end, when he says, ‘he made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross’...*Nor was this without inward conflict, because he had taken our infirmities*, and it was necessary to give this proof of his obedience to his Father. And it was no mean specimen of his incomparable love to us, *to contend with horrible fear, and amid those dreadful torments to neglect all care of himself*, that he might promote our benefit.’¹⁰ Calvin himself says that it’s not just Jesus’ death that was atoning, but his whole life. His whole life was the undoing of human sin and the forging of a new humanity.

The great 4th century theologian Athanasius said: ‘Had it been a case of a trespass only, and not of a subsequent corruption, repentance would have been well enough; but when once transgression had begun men came under *the power of the corruption proper to their nature* and were bereft of the grace which belonged to them as creatures in the Image of God. No, repentance could not meet the case. What – or rather Who – was it that was needed for such grace and such recall as we required? Who, save the Word of God Himself, Who also in the beginning had made all things out of nothing?... Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were *liable to the corruption of death*, He surrendered His body to death instead of all, and offered it to the Father...This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection. Thus He would make death to disappear from them as utterly as straw from fire.’¹¹ The ‘corruption’ Athanasius spoke of refers to the corruption of our human nature, originally designed by God as good. While this certainly refers to our *physical* nature, as thus became dying beings, it also refers to our *spiritual and emotional experience of life*. Our fear of death triggered self-centeredness and sin in all its forms, and thus the New Testament writers think of our fear of death as a vulnerability to the Enemy himself (Hebrews 2:14 – 15). Augustine continues this line of thought: ‘Take away death, the last enemy, and my own flesh shall be my dear friend throughout eternity.’¹² Though I would add, ‘Take away the corruption of sin, the deeper enemy, first.’

Thus, Jesus did two things in one and the same movement. On the one hand, he cleansed and eliminated sinful human desires out of his humanity. On the other hand, he infused the Father’s desires into his humanity by the Spirit. By redeeming human *nature* in himself, Jesus also began the transformation of human *desire*. We are not

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes* 2.16.5, emphasis mine

¹¹ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 2:8 – 9, emphasis mine.

¹² Augustine, *Sermon 155*, 15, quoted in Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1967, 2000), p.369

Buddhists aiming for the elimination of our desires. We are Christ-centered, aiming for the cultivation of Jesus' own desires in us through his Spirit. What are the implications of this for evangelism and discipleship?

PART V: EVANGELISM AS THE INTERPRETATION AND REALIGNMENT OF DESIRE

In a very punchy passage, Jesus indicates that *good desires still exist in us*, despite the fact that *we are now evil*: 'Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? *If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children*, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?' (Luke 11:11 – 13, italics mine) Anyone reflecting on sin's effect on us, or the 'doctrine of total depravity', or some such thing must consult many different passages, but we must not neglect this one. It is as clear a statement as we get. In our being, we have become evil, but we still know how to do some good.¹³ The image of God still resides in us, although it has been tarnished and corrupted.

For me, this gives rise to a certain style of evangelism (not the only one) which I have found to be very effective. Rather than insist that everything we do and think is motivated only by selfish motives through and through, I honor the biblical relational virtues I see in people: desire to forgive; compassion for the weak, alien, stranger, and elderly; care for children; attempt to articulate human dignity and human rights; and simple love for another person. I connect their desires to do good and be good to being made in God's image. At the same time, I connect our own easily-recognized personal obstacles to doing good and being good to a corruption in our human nature *and* a relational alienation from the Triune God. I connect the transformation of our human nature to Jesus, who cleansed and reconciled our human nature, which is hostile to God, to the love of the Father. And I invite people to think *realistically*: Is evil simply external to us? Can human evil be blamed on external circumstances or is there something internal in us that has become deeply corrupted? And so on.

The results have been wonderful. The first occasion was a retreat called *The Dreams That Refuse to Die*. I gave the content to this on two occasions: at Boston College's Asian Christian Fellowship Winter Retreat in January of 2009 and at the Fenway Area Fall Retreat in October 2009.¹⁴ In the first message, I talked about three dreams that refuse to die: the dream of love, the dream of meaning, and the dream of a more just world. I suggested that our desire for things that go beyond what we've experienced points to a deeper reality woven into our very being; being made in the 'image of God' is a good explanation of why we have these desires. In the second message, I spoke from Romans 5:12 – 21 about why our dreams often turn to nightmares. We sabotage our own dreams and hopes. I explore the contrast between Adam and Jesus as two different types of humanity – the corrupted humanity of Adam and the new humanity of Jesus. Then in the third message, I spoke from Romans 6:1 – 11 on identifying with Jesus in his death and resurrection so that his solution to the corruption in human nature – his crucifixion of it – can be our solution as well. At BC, three students gave their lives to Jesus. At the Fenway, three more did. There was a Hindu student who responded to my invitation to come to Jesus, which was the first time that I've seen a Hindu switch from the circular story where there is no victory of good over evil, to Jesus' linear story with a happy ending. Two other students came from an atheist/agnostic background.

A second example of evangelism as the interpretation and realignment of desire is our hope for a 'happy ending.' The discussions were started by presentations I made on stories that have no happy ending because there is no good triumphing over evil – namely, Hinduism, Buddhism, and atheism – being fatalistic. The stories with a happy ending involve some kind of hope for good defeating evil, and Christianity is among them as the only story where the problem is within humanity and resolved by God's cleansing human nature in Jesus. This has been the central insight in messages, evangelistic conversation stations, and various discussions. Students who attended our spring break Katrina Relief Urban Plunge have been exposed to it, and several have come to faith in Jesus because of it.¹⁵

A third example of this style of evangelism concerns the topic of human dignity and the corresponding sense of social justice it serves to undergird. I find that people in Western culture generally want to have universal human

¹³ Paul says something similar in Romans 7:14 – 25, when he, as a Jew, reflected on wanting to do the will of God as revealed in the Law of Moses, and yet did not want to do it as well.

¹⁴ My three messages are located here: <http://www.anastasiscenter.org/bible-messiah-paul-romans>

¹⁵ My material on the 'happy ending' can be found here: <http://www.anastasiscenter.org/other-beliefs>

dignity, because it is the historical and cultural legacy of Christian faith, but they don't know how to support it in a secular framework. So I wrote a paper exploring the foundations of human dignity. I examine science, philosophy, and existential self-regard and conclude, along with other scholars, that none of those subjects give us a concrete foundation for universal human dignity. I also examine Deism, Hinduism, and Islam, and find that the way the deity treats human beings also means that the 'god' in question does not provide a concrete foundation for universal human dignity. However, orthodox Trinitarian theology presents us with a deity who does serve as the foundation and guardian of the dignity of every human being. Recently, an adult friend of mine who is a bisexual male, who had lots of skepticism about the church and the historical Jesus, read this paper and, as a result, decided that atheism is too bleak and has revived his interest in Christianity.¹⁶

A fourth type of evangelism holds up the selfishness in human nature against the radically loving other-centeredness in the Triune God. This paradigm emphasizes the doctrine of reconciliation. Human nature is corrupted ontologically because it is relationally alienated from God, its source and goal, and hostile to Him. I've given messages and trainings on understanding heaven and hell this way, especially. The understanding of hell as the love of God is very helpful – it is God's wrath against the corruption in human nature in that Jesus keeps asking us to surrender ourselves to his cleansing love, but it is God's love for us as persons because of the very same thing: Jesus keeps asking us to surrender ourselves to his cleansing love. So hell is torment for people who insist on rejecting Jesus, not because Jesus throws them into a prison system from which they want to escape, but because Jesus keeps pressing upon them and calling out to them to be transformed in his love, which is what people refuse to choose. They do not desire him, yet Jesus is all that is being offered to them. With every passing moment, Jesus seems more and more like a stalker to them, thwarting them from what they really desire and interposing himself. While I don't know of anyone who has come to Christ because of this paradigm explicitly, I do know that many people find this understanding of hell much more rational and consistent with the nature of a loving God who calls us to be transformed. Hell is a state of eternally frustrated desire, desire that has gone awry and needs to be transformed now by Jesus. This paradigm honors the insight of the Proverbs, which draws a distinction between the righteous and the wicked based on what we *desire*. C.S. Lewis may be the most eloquent person who describes human desires as so essential to our salvation, as shown in his depiction of hell in *The Great Divorce*.¹⁷

The fifth type of evangelism basically says that Jesus quenches our deepest desires. The story of Jesus offering living water to the Samaritan woman in John 4:1 – 30 is the easiest passage to study or discuss in this venue. This type of invitation tends to be heard best by people who are a bit disillusioned with their human friendships, or by people who recognize that there is a vacuum inside them that causes them to 'use' other people. Like the Samaritan woman who cycles through husbands looking for love, as she cycles through her days meeting her thirst for water at the well and her thirst for conversation there, since it was by a well-traveled caravan route, Jesus speaks to those people in their vulnerability and defensiveness, and invites them to himself. She recognizes that she needs to find God and asks if He is found on Jerusalem or Gerizim. Jesus clarifies that he is the location of God's presence and his Spirit, which he will pour out into us, will draw us into himself to find the Father there so we can worship in spirit and in truth.

PART VI: DISCIPLESHIP AS CULTIVATING GOD'S DESIRES

Meditating on Scripture: Internalizing God's Story and Desires

One of the first ways to cultivate godly desires, the desires that exist in God's own heart, is to meditate on Scripture. I'd like to point out how Scripture itself invites us to do this. I believe that one key category is *story*. What is the *story* that Scripture is telling? There are many other stories that vie for our allegiance: the individualized hero story

¹⁶ My paper, *Human Dignity: Does Each Individual Matter?* is located here: <http://www.anastasiscenter.org/other-beliefs-atheism>

¹⁷ This understanding of hell, and the systematic theology from which it derives, is less common among Catholics and Protestants, but is nevertheless biblically and historically grounded and attested by great Christian theologians. It comes from the patristic Trinitarian foundations of writers like Athanasius, and is found explicitly in Gregory of Nyssa and Isaac the Syrian, continues through the entire Eastern Orthodox communion through today, and has been recovered by Protestants like Karl Barth, C.S. Lewis, T.F. Torrance, and Donald Bloesch, along with Catholics like Hans Urs Von Balthazar. Eastern Orthodox American theologian David Bentley Hart is an eloquent exponent of this tradition. Hence, this is a systematic Trinitarian theology that is Patristic, Orthodox, and Reformational. See my message *Hell as the Love of God* and many other resources located here: <http://www.anastasiscenter.org/gods-goodness-fire>

in which we defeat the opponent on our own, the victim story which is not a happy ending because other people are to blame, the princess story in which we seek to be seen, the struggling immigrant story in which we maintain the family and yet pursue our own dreams, etc. But Scripture tells the story of a romance between God and humanity, as G.K. Chesterton put it: a romance in the sense of a love story, in the sense of reconciliation with someone who has pursued us, and in the widest sense of a return to something familiar.¹⁸ Reflecting on this story with the goal of internalizing it offsets the influence upon us of other stories on offer.

Hence, after Moses gives the *Torah*, or ‘*the Teaching*’ (also unfortunately called ‘the Law’ through the Latin translation ‘lex,’ although this title tends to emphasize the ‘commands’ and not the narrative and poetic portions), Joshua read it and meditated on it constantly (Josh.1:8). As a result of this deep study of the *Torah*, Joshua is portrayed as the great wise man reflecting on the *Torah*. He reflected on what was given before – not simply on the commandments, although the commands are certainly included, but the whole story envisioned by the *Torah*. And Joshua begins the second section of the Old Testament called *The Prophets*, or the *Nevi'im*.

Interestingly enough, at least in this ordering, when the third section of the Old Testament, the *Ketuvim*, starts, we find Psalm 1, which praises the person who meditates on God’s *Torah* constantly. That person is wise. We always reflect on what was given before. John Sailhamer calls these ‘compositional seams’ linking and holding together books of the Bible.¹⁹

Torah		Nevi'im		Ketuvim	
Moses		Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Treisar (the Twelve Prophets)		Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Megillot (Ruth, Songs, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther), Chronicles ²⁰	
‘The LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat, but from the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat...’ (Gen.2:16 – 17)		‘Be strong and courageous, for you shall give this people possession of the land which I swore to their fathers to give them... This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night... ’ (Josh.1:8)		‘But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water , which yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither...’ (Ps.1:2 – 3)	

Furthermore, the *Torah* (‘Moses’) begins with the garden land (Gen.1 – 2) and ends with the prediction of exile and the hope of restoration (Dt.27 – 33). The *Nevi'im* (‘the Prophets’) begins with the garden land in Joshua but ends with the reality of exile and the hope for restoration in Ezekiel and the Book of the Twelve Prophets. And the *Ketuvim* (‘the Writings’) begins with a motif of the garden land (the ‘well watered tree’ of Psalm 1) but ends with the reality of exile and the hope for restoration at the end of Chronicles. This is one way the entire Old Testament arrangement demonstrates having been intentionally ordered. The message is clear: The wise man will meditate upon what God has revealed before. This is ‘wisdom.’ Wisdom shapes desire.

After the *Torah* comes Joshua, and after the *Psalms* comes *Proverbs*. Just as Joshua was a wise man by reflecting on Moses’ teachings in the *Torah*, so Solomon was the quintessential wise man by reflecting on David’s teachings in

¹⁸ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image Books, 1959; previously printed in 1909, 1936 by Dodd, Mead, and Company), p.10 – 11

¹⁹ John Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Zondervan, 1995).

²⁰ If one follows the Tiberian Masoretic codices and the old Spanish manuscripts, and arranges the *Ketuvim* with Chronicles first, the pattern still holds and is striking. Chronicles begins with the name ‘Adam,’ certainly connoting the garden and probably ‘wisdom’ in the sense that he was the first recipient of God’s wise commands. If one follows the Babylonian Talmud, and arranges the *Ketuvim* with Ruth first, Ruth would seem to serve as an introduction to King David, as well as the theme of exile and restoration to the garden land.

the Psalms and God's covenant with David concerning Zion. The pattern is: A prophet is followed by a wise man; the covenant teachings are written, and then studied. It happened after Moses, after David, and after Jesus.

After Jesus came and returned to the Father, the apostles recorded and applied his teaching in various situations. Jesus clarified the meaning of God's story, bringing it to a climax in his own person. I think that the apostolic writings have been bequeathed to us by the apostles and the earliest Christians for us to reflect upon. But here, as with other points in the story of God's people, active obedience to God by faith is important, not just active reading or memorizing or what have you. Jesus calls us to participate in *his* mission as a framework for our spiritual formation. This involves many things, but most importantly love for others and a passing down of Jesus' teaching. This is clear in each Gospel, for instance, as each ends with Jesus declaring his authority in some form, and commissioning the disciples with sharing in his mission to the world:

- Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:19 – 20)
- But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' (Mark 16:7)
- Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. (Luke 24:46 – 47)
- As the Father has sent me, I also send you. (John 20:21)

In Matthew in particular there exists a responsibility for each follower of Jesus to reflect upon the teachings of Jesus. This is present in the other Gospels in different ways, but it is most explicit in Matthew. For the sake of simplicity and brevity, I'll comment only on Matthew.

Each year, when my kids start a new grade in September at their elementary school, their teachers meet with us as parents. They tell us what they will cover during the school year. They have a goal of covering a certain amount of topics. They already know to what they will give our children exposure. And by the end of the year, our children should have become competent in those things. This is how all good teachers plan the curriculum they expect to cover. Similarly, Matthew is a good teacher who has planned his curriculum around Jesus' identity and mission. He designed it for us as students, and eventually for us as teachers, too.

Matthew finishes his Gospel with Jesus' command to his disciples that they teach others: 'teaching them to observe all that I commanded you' (Mt.28:20). They are not to produce merely *converts*, in a simplistic sense of that word. They are to produce *disciples*, full fledged followers of Jesus who abide by ALL Jesus' teaching. But what is ALL of that teaching? Matthew is surely not excluding what is included in Mark, Luke, and John, but at a minimum, we should look at how Matthew structures his Gospel around Jesus' teaching. Matthew groups Jesus' teaching in five major blocks. Each section ends with a similar phrase:

Mt.7:28 When Jesus had finished **these words**.

Mt.11:1 When Jesus had finished giving **instructions**.

Mt.13:53 When Jesus had finished **these parables**.

Mt.19:1 When Jesus had finished **these words**.

Mt.26:1 When Jesus had finished **all these words**.

Matthew structures Jesus' actions and teaching in a pattern of five, in a structural allusion to the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), the original constitution-like document of Mosaic Israel. 'Torah' means 'teaching.' It's not that each 'section' of Matthew matches each 'book' of Moses; the structural allusion doesn't work quite that way.

The first section (1:1 – 7:28) deals with Jesus' identity and his teaching which transforms the human heart. The second section (8:1 – 11:1) is about Jesus healing us by his word, which builds the disciples' confidence that his word is powerful, a useful thing since Jesus sends them to do a short-term missions trip to Israel. The third section (11:2 – 13:53) deals with the mixed response to Jesus and how Jesus trains his disciples to interpret rejection; the Old Testament anticipated this, so it's not a failure of prophecy but a fulfillment. The fourth section (14:1 – 19:1) deals mainly with Jesus doing ministry with the disciples among the Gentiles, i.e. cross-cultural, multi-ethnic

ministry. This is vital hands-on training for the Great Commission. The fifth section (19:2 – 26:1) deals with Jesus' final confrontation with the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, his parting of ways with them (ethically and socially), and his preparing the disciples for the fall of Jerusalem, the sign that he was indeed the Messiah.

One thing that we can do with Matthew's Gospel is use it as a kind of diagnostic tool. Some of us need Jesus to work on our hearts. Others of us need to experience the power of his healing word and develop our understanding of it. Others of us need to think more about kingdom expansion, to face our fears of rejection, to sharpen our minds, and get over our discomfort with making spiritual distinctions between true Christians and everyone else. Others might need to expand the range of people to whom we witness. Others may need to understand the key distinctions between Jesus and other figures – religious, literary, philosophical, or political – even if it reproduces the same conflicts Jesus experienced in his final days in Jerusalem. Spend some time thinking and praying about where you have been more or less developed. You might sense the Lord leading you to develop some area of your life.

Then comes a climactic summary epilogue where Jesus dies and rises again, and tells his disciples to 'go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.' That statement summarizes what came before. Look at the structure:

Mt.7:28 When Jesus had finished **these words**.

Mt.11:1 When Jesus had finished giving **instructions**.

Mt.13:53 When Jesus had finished **these parables**.

Mt.19:1 When Jesus had finished **these words**.

Mt.26:1 When Jesus had finished **all these words**.

Mt.28:16 – 20 Make disciples of all the nations...**teaching them to observe all that I commanded you**.

What does this mean about the *function* of Matthew's Gospel? Just as the Torah is Moses' *teaching*, so Matthew's Gospel is Jesus' *teaching*. And just as Moses' teaching was the founding charter, the constitution, of *Mosaic* Israel, so Jesus' teaching is the founding charter, the constitution, of *Messianic* Israel. That is, the church.

Our founding charter document commissions us to make *disciples*. But, just for the sake of clarity, it would be fair to say that it commissions us to make *disciplers*. That is, a disciple is someone who can do evangelism, help bring someone into Jesus' kingdom, and nurture and mentor that person. We are supposed to be able to develop a person from the threshold of faith in Jesus into maturity and then into someone who can disciple others in the same way. And those disciples of theirs are supposed to make disciples, and so on and so on. It's as if Matthew is saying to us, 'Go therefore and make *disciplers*. Carry this book with you wherever you go, and put it to good use.'²¹

Various methods of study exist of engaging with the Lord in Scripture, and reminding one's self of what story we live in, and also what point in that story we live in. It is not my intention to suggest here which methods are more important than others. I do believe, however, that certain parts of Scripture are more important than others. For instance, I believe that Matthew is very important, and that Jesus in Matthew summons us to a coherent way of actively disciple others. And participating in Jesus' mission as we trace through Jesus' own mentoring of his disciples will make this Gospel come alive to us. A regular 'diet' of Scripture in various forms is essential for shaping our desires.

Developing Emotionally Mature Disciples

If God is an emotional being, and if our human emotions are somehow an imperfect reflection of his own emotions, then surely there are ways to connect with God emotionally. Various teachers of the church have recognized that the spiritual shaping of our emotions is essential to our life in Christ. Augustine was the first theologian we know of who explored our will, memory, and desires. He regarded our memory to be cavernous, mysterious even to ourselves, a deep darkness where fears and desires lurked that we could not know by ourselves but which only God's Spirit can penetrate for us. For the human mind, with all the desires (primarily sinful ones) therein, was a 'spreading, limitless room' that was terrifyingly complex.²² This insight, rooted in Scripture,²³ preceded Freud's

²¹ My material on Matthew's Gospel can be found here: <http://www.anastasiscenter.org/bible-messiah-matthew>

²² Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1967, 2000), p.173

theory of the subconscious by more than a millennia. At the same time, Augustine desired to widen the *affections* of his audience to include the things of God. A biographer, Peter Brown, says that Augustine designed his pastoral and preaching ministry to do this. ‘No one will love what he has no prospect of making his own by understanding: faith without the hope of understanding would be no more than compliance to authority. Yet he will not understand what he is not prepared to love. To separate ‘faith’ and ‘reason’, therefore, goes against the grain of Augustine’s thought. For what concerned him was to set a process in motion: it was to ‘purify’, to ‘heal’ a damaged mind.’²⁴ He loved the Psalms especially, primarily because he thought of them as both anticipation and record of Jesus’ own human emotions.²⁵

I do agree with Augustine that Jesus invites us to share in his own human emotions, although I do not agree with him that there was a one to one correspondence between the Psalmist’s emotions and Jesus’ emotions, despite Jesus’ frequent quotations of the Psalms. I designed a series of studies called *The Emotions of God*, through which I led a small group of men.²⁶ The series was made up of:

- The Joy of God, Part 1 (Luke 15:1 – 32)
- The Joy of God, Part 2 (Luke 15:11 – 32)
- The Tears of God (John 11:1 – 44 and Luke 19:41 – 44)
- The Eager Generosity of God (Luke 11:1 – 13)
- The Romantic Passion of God (Song of Songs 8:5 – 7)

I also led a significant portion of Boston College’s Asian Christian Fellowship through two messages in the series. The basic idea behind this is that God does not have self-protective emotions. In relation to lost human beings, for instance, He does not distance Himself emotionally from us, or devalue what He lost as a way to cope with the feelings of loss. Instead, he continues to long for us, search for us, yearn for us. When we compare our own emotions with God’s emotions, we connect with something that *feels* very real, which *is* very real. One of the students said, ‘I felt it!’ God’s desires then start to shape our desires. I did this because I suspected that spiritual growth is driven by a not so remarked upon personal quality: empathy, and in this case, *empathy with God*, the ability to *feel God’s desires*. I believe that we must cultivate people’s sense of empathy with God.

Discerning Through Godly Desires

Since the early days of the church, a portion of the church has focused on the subtle movements of God as reflected in fragile human desires, to study them and coax them further towards the light of Christ. The ‘Desert Fathers and Mothers’ were men and women who pursued a certain kind of holiness in the deserts of Egypt; Anthony was one of the most notable ones due to a biography written about him by Athanasius; Abba Abraham, St. Mary ‘the Harlot’, and others were known to have unusually clear counsel for those who ventured out to the desert monasteries to talk with them. Augustine in the Latin West was profound in his insights into human desire. The Irish monks set up monasteries throughout Ireland and Western Europe as they re-evangelized Western Europe, and Nestorian monks did the same throughout Asia as they made their way from Syria to Japan; it may have been their theological emphasis on the humanity of Jesus that led them more deeply into Christian mission, prayer, and guidance. The Eastern Orthodox Church developed ‘holy man’ and ‘holy fool’ archetypes; like Dostoyevski’s Prince Mishkin in *The Idiot* or Father Zosima in *The Brothers Karamozov*, these men were known to have penetrating insights into human desire. The Jesuits began a powerful renewal movement within the Catholic Church focused on spiritual direction, reading the soul, times of retreat for self-reflection and prayer, etc. Today, spiritual directors from all three major traditions offer ‘care for the soul.’ I have benefited personally from reading Margaret Guenther’s *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction*, David G. Benner’s *The Gift of Being Yourself*, and others.

Robert Ellsberg tells the story of John Vianney, a man who, it was said, could read the soul. This story inspires me. John Vianney was born to a peasant family in a village near Lyons, in France. He wanted to become a priest, but his lack of education posed a challenge. With the help of some private tutoring, he got to seminary. His studies were interrupted when he was drafted into the army. On his way to a post in Spain, he deserted and went into hiding for

²³ For example, I am reminded of Jeremiah’s remark, ‘The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it? I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind...’ (Jeremiah 17:9 – 10)

²⁴ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1967, 2000), p.276.

²⁵ *ibid*, p.254

²⁶ My notes are available at: <http://www.anastasiscenter.org/desire-emotions-of-god>

several years in a neighboring village. Only with an amnesty was he able to resume his studies. Unfortunately, John was quite a poor student. Though his professors did recommend him for ordination, it was only with serious reservations. But one of his sponsors and advocates wrote, 'The Church wants not only learned priests but even more holy ones.' His prayerfulness and goodness won the day. He was finally ordained at age 29. He served for a brief time at his home parish, but in 1817 he was named the parish priest (the curé) of Ars-en-Dombes, a village of 250 people, as remote and insignificant a place as his bishop could find. Strangely enough, John thought the size of the village was not important. To him, this was an awesome responsibility, which he accepted with all the zeal of a soldier determined to hold his post. John's sermons were simple and unsophisticated. His theology was rudimentary. His efforts to elevate the spiritual life of his community by combating the evils of profanity, public dances, and work on Sunday seemed, even at the time, to verge on the naïve. But what gradually dawned on his community was the awareness that their lives and souls mattered to this priest. He seemed to live on a simple diet of potatoes, which I certainly would not advise. He never seemed to sleep. When he wasn't visiting people or offering the sacraments, he was found in the small church, praying. And for all his simplicity, there was one area where John Vianney excelled: it was said that he could read the soul. The simple curé of Ars somehow knew the secrets of his people which he used not to manipulate them but to lovingly unlock the barriers that prevented them from knowing and loving God. This gift attracted a stream of people wanting to confess their sins and get his counsel, almost all his waking hours. In his cramped confession booth, John would sit ten, twelve, as many as eighteen hours a day, shivering during the winter, stifling hot in the summer. Eventually, railroads even provided special trains to accommodate the heavy traffic of people making a pilgrimage to this tiny village! Various honors were bestowed on him. Napoleon III sent him the medal of the Legion of Honor. John didn't even take it out of the box, remarking, 'I don't know what I have done to deserve this except to be a deserter.' So in 1859, John Vianney died at the age of 73 as one of the most beloved figures in all of France. In 1925, Pope Pius XI called him the patron saint of all parish priests.²⁷ Admittedly, holding up John Vianney as an example makes for an ambitious goal, but he is nevertheless one of many Christians who seemed to have an unusual gift of listening, and his humble approach to this ministry elicits from my heart praise for God and a desire to love for others in the same vein.

While spiritual direction is a field that now has its own licensing and traditions, and while we dare not presume to speak from within a field from which we are not trained, it is important to be aware that this field exists. We might refer people on. In addition, in tentative, preliminary ways, I think it is possible to offer guidance to college students as they make sometimes hard choices to follow Jesus, whether they do battle with forces within themselves or pressures from without. There will be a type of satisfaction and peace that they experience, even though their decisions might bring them heartache and struggle in other ways. We need to articulate for them what we see developing in them. This is a spiritual gift we can offer them which, hopefully, will be useful to them as they continue to discern the voice of God in their desires. By doing this, they make room in themselves for Jesus and cultivate in their own hearts more of his desires.

As a note of caution: Sometimes when we quote thoughts or passages from spiritual directors, it seems like they are telling us that we can shape our desires independently of bowing before Jesus as Lord. But I think this involves quoting them out of context. That is why I wrote a section of this outline on Jesus' transformation of human nature and human desire.

On the popular level, John Eldredge seeks to bring this rich world of Christian insight to a wider audience through his books, especially *Desire: The Journey We Must Take to Find the Life God Offers*. N.T. Wright in *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* speaks to our desires for beauty, justice, relationship, and spirituality and offers Jesus as the best ground, source, and shepherd of those desires. And of course, C.S. Lewis is a sensitive interpreter of desire:

'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 (*The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*)

²⁷ Distilled from Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses For Our Time* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2000), p. 334 – 5.

King David wrote in Psalm 32 how he experienced emotional hardship and even physical difficulty when he did not yet confess his sin to the Lord:

When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away
Through my groaning all day long.
For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me;
My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. (Psalm 32:3 – 4)

But when he did confess, the Lord forgave him (v.5). David then encouraged ‘everyone who is godly’ to ‘pray to You’ in this way. Then, God broke into the Psalm and personally responded to David:

I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go;
I will counsel you with My eye upon you.
Do not be as the horse or as the mule which have no understanding,
Whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check,
Otherwise they will not come near to you. (Psalm 32:8 – 9)

I think this is a remarkable word from God. Of course, it means that God renewed His relationship with David in its fullness. I suspect, moreover, that the way the Lord continued to guide David was emotional and physical. A bit and bridle have an effect on the horse’s body, from outside it. So God was stating His preference of not using factors external to David, although He will certainly use the prophet Nathan and others if He would like! God prefers, as this passage suggests, not to use physiological factors internal to David either, although He certainly can and will. He prefers to engage us directly with His word, to shape our own desires and motivations. By asking the Lord to cleanse us from sin, and then following His counsel out of trust in His character, we make space within ourselves to hear His voice through the desires He shapes in us. The more we yield ourselves up to Jesus, and receive his ongoing leading, the more we will be able to help others do the same.

PART VII: HUMAN DESIRE AND THE HUMAN BODY

Can we explore further the relationship between our desires and our bodies? In this section, I explore a train of thought that involves a little bit of speculation. I would say in my own defense that it is not too much, and the careful student of Scripture will notice that no doctrine in particular seems to be at stake. In fact, if anything, this exploration will serve to strengthen the Christian view of the resurrection of the body.

Plato, in his *Republic*, tells the story of the Ring of Gyges, a magical ring that will turn its wearer invisible. This was perhaps one of the inspirations for Tolkien’s Ring of Power. In Plato’s story, a poor shepherd finds the Ring of Gyges and discovers its magical powers. He uses the Ring to seduce the Queen of that land, and murder her husband the King. He then becomes the King. Professor of philosophy Patrick Downey explores that story to discuss the relationship between our evil desires and our physical bodies.²⁸ Our evil desires usually remain hidden within our bodies because our bodies are physical and not transparent. If we act on our evil desires, however, our character and intentions become clear because our bodies make them so, of course. But otherwise, our physical bodies veil our sin and selfishness. But what happens if we discover a Ring that can make our bodies invisible? We are much more tempted to act out the selfish desire that lingers in our hearts. That is part of the allure of possessing such a magical Ring.

When accountability and visibility are removed from us, who do we become? Similarly, when we are part of a huge crowd, we are much more likely to commit acts of evil that the crowd is committing, like lynching, vandalism, or some horrible thing. Why? In a large crowd, we as individuals are invisible, in a sense. The police and other onlookers will only see a nameless, faceless mob. So accountability is impossible. Normally, we learn to allow our bodies to hide and veil our deepest emotions and thoughts. But when our bodies become invisible and yet still effective, our evil desires come forward. That should be a sobering thought for anyone.

²⁸ Patrick Downey, *Desperately Wicked: Philosophy, Christianity, and the Human Heart* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p.15 – 29

But will it always be that way? In his rather beautiful parable of a book *The Shack*, William Paul Young describes a scene where human bodies are transparent to emotions and desires. There is nothing to hide. Mack, the main character in the story, is able to see his earthly father, who has been dead and with the Lord, in glory. The scene is poignant and provocative. Mack can see his father coming from a great distance, and *see* what his father is feeling towards him. That is because magnificent colors erupt from his father's body communicating the emotions his father feels towards him.²⁹

In his longest discussion of the future resurrection body – a conviction rooted in both the Jewish view of creation as fundamentally good, and Jesus' resurrection as God's personal affirmation of that original creation order – Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 speaks of the implications of the continuity and discontinuity between our present bodies and future bodies.

³⁷ ...That which you sow, you do not sow the body which is to be, but a bare grain, perhaps of wheat or of something else... ⁴¹ There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. ⁴² So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; ⁴³ it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; ⁴⁴ it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body... ⁴⁹ Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly... ⁵¹ Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. (1 Corinthians 15:37 – 53)

So there is a deep discontinuity between my present, earthy, perishable body and my future, heavenly, imperishable body, as a seed of wheat is unlike a full grown stalk of wheat. But there will be a kind of continuity as well, for the former turns into the latter. We can see this because Jesus' wounds, which he suffered while in his earthy, perishable body, are still present in his resurrected, imperishable body. Do some things we do with our present bodies – and in them – carry over into our resurrection bodies? I suspect there are. In a very intriguing earlier passage, Paul speaks of our sexual conduct:

¹³ ...The body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body. ¹⁴ Now God has not only raised the Lord, but will also raise us up through His power. ¹⁵ Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be! ¹⁶ Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body with her? For He says, 'The two shall become one flesh.' ¹⁷ But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him. ¹⁸ Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. ¹⁹ Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? ²⁰ For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:13 – 20)

Paul makes clear that our bodies are for the Lord to indwell by his Spirit. Ultimately, we are not the primary owners of our bodies; Jesus is! Within that conviction, Paul suggests that how we conduct ourselves sexually in the present has some bearing on what our bodies will be like in the future. It is possible to become 'one body' with a prostitute, even though we are, on a deeper level, 'one spirit with him'. Who we join ourselves to, and what manner of relationship, seem to matter in this context – a context involving time and our future bodies. Could the phrase, 'the immoral man sins against his own body' carry this meaning? It is very possible. If Jesus' scars are remembered physically in his resurrection body, to his glory, then is it possible that our faithfulness to him be represented in and on our bodies? Will people who had been martyred for their faith still bear those scars in a glorified way? Will women who acquired stretch marks by giving birth to their beloved children still have those stretch marks in a glorified way? And conversely, is it possible that our lack of faithfulness to him will also be represented in and on our bodies?

²⁹ William Paul Young, *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity* (Newbury Park, CA: Windblown Media, 2007), p.211 – 219

Jesus said on numerous occasions, 'Everything hidden will be revealed.' While he was speaking of the state of people's hearts, or the quality of their witness, and not what the resurrection body will look like or what the relationship is between the present body and the future one, I find this idea to be an intriguing one.

This touches on the question of our motivation for obeying Jesus and cultivating his desires in ourselves. Our resurrection bodies may reveal what we did and did not do in our present bodies. Yet this is hard for us to envision, partly because it is hard for us to imagine having an experience we've never had, and partly because secular liberal individualism tends to reduce us down to bodies and say that that is all there is to us, especially elevating our sexual desires. But let me give two illustrations of how I've communicated to others about how our choices now may affect our resurrection bodies.

One day, I was wrestling and tickling my children John and Zoe. After a really good match where I pinned them on the bed and really got them good, I told them that when they grew up and got bigger, they'll be stronger than me, and they'll be able to beat me up. They sat there looking like they didn't believe me. They had confused and puzzled expressions on their faces. It was hard for them to imagine what they would be able to do as their bodies matured. That is similar to us: We find it hard to imagine what we will be able to do as our bodies 'mature' by God's power into the same substance as Jesus' resurrection body.

Let me give you another example of that. My daughter Zoe used to love McDonald's McChicken sandwiches. We learned, though, that they aren't good for her. But being a young girl, about six years old, she had a hard imagining how her body would be affected by a bad diet, including McDonald's burgers and sandwiches and other things beyond McDonalds. Then we watched Jamie Oliver's show *Food Revolution*. He talks about what could be in processed chicken sandwiches. It's not healthy for sure! After that, Zoe didn't want to eat those sandwiches any more. But it was not a clear understanding. She still had a hard time understanding what could happen to her body, and what her body would be like in the future if she didn't eat healthy food. That is similar to us: We find it hard to imagine what we will be able to do as our bodies 'mature' by God's power into the same substance as Jesus' resurrection body.³⁰

What will our bodies be like? How exactly do our choices and desires relate to the bodies we will have? That is shrouded in the future and we have no clue in Scripture except the nail marks in Jesus' hands and feet. But perhaps that is sufficient. I am not saying that this motivation will appeal to everyone! And I certainly cannot say any more than I wrote here. But I think the idea is suggestive. It builds in us a sense of hope that the sufferings we have endured here will indeed melt away when Jesus returns, and our inward choices to be faithful to him will be revealed (Rom.8:18 – 25; 2 Cor.5:1 – 15).

³⁰ My attempts at teaching and preaching through Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, and his teaching on the topic of the human body, are here: <http://www.anastasiscenter.org/bible-messiah-paul-corinthians>.

PART VIII: RESOURCES

In addition to the resources referenced in the footnotes, the following resources are helpful.

Character and Decision Making

N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*

N.T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*

Margaret Kim Peterson & Dwight Peterson, *Are You Waiting for “The One”?*

John Eldredge, *Desire: The Journey We Must Take to Find the Life God Offers*

Spiritual Disciplines

Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*

- Disengagement
 - Secrecy
 - Silence
 - Solitude
 - Fasting from food
 - Fasting from media
 - Sabbath Rest
 - Simplicity
- Engagement
 - Encouragement
 - Worship
 - Confession
 - Grieving
 - Hospitality
 - Celebration, Gratitude
 - Study of Scripture: exegetical
 - Study of Scripture: lectio divina
 - Prayer: intercessory, etc.
 - Service
 - Generosity

Ruth Haley Barton, *Invitation to Silence and Solitude*

Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*

Lauren Winner, *Mudhouse Sabbath*

Robert Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word*

Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

Brother Lawrence, *Practicing the Presence of God*

Spiritual Direction

David G. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself*

David G. Benner, *Desiring God's Will*

Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening*