

Desire and Lust

A Series on the Practice of Sin: Part 1

There are several Hebrew and Greek terms used to express a person's excitement, desire and impulse for something; but, the most common Greek term used in the LXX (Greek Old Testament) and the New Testament is the verb "epithymeō."

Of the Old Testament, a good example is the tenth commandment found in the book of Exodus:

"You shall (**epithymeō**) not covet (**epithymeō**) your neighbor's house; you shall (**epithymeō**) not covet (**epithymeō**) your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor." (Ex 20:17)

With this commandment, God implies that desire can lead to behavior. God does not simply command what not to do, but His negative imperative also commands one what not to wish, desire, nor long for. Thus, when God says, "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut 6:5), He is also informing what one should desire as, in this case, it reflects one's true love of God or not.

In the New Testament, in context of God's word and the Law, Jesus reinforces this view, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust (**epithymeō**) for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt 5:28).

To desire in itself is ethically neutral. Because of God's holy character, His word defines what is good, and this context determines whether a desire may be rendered in the good or evil sinful sense (see the article: God is Good at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/1God/CharacterGood.aspx).

Jesus used "epithymeō" in all three senses: neutral (Luke 15:16; 16:21), good (Matt 13:17; Luke 17:22; 22:15), and evil (Matt 5:28).

When speaking of the purpose of the Law, the apostle Paul indicates that God's word is the basis of learning what desires are evil (Rom 7:7), which is in sharp contrast to Satan's declaration that your word is the standard for what is good and evil (Gen 3:4-5).

What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "You shall not covet." (Rom 7:7)

The serpent said to the woman, "You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Gen 3:4-5)

It becomes apparent that one can choose to desire something good or evil.

At times it may be difficult to discern what desires the Bible is advocating. For example, following His beatitudes, as Jesus issues His command and prohibitions to teach what one should desire (Luke 6:27-38), it appears that loving your enemy is the primary motive for behavior. But is Jesus encouraging one to power through this unnatural desire? In Matthew's account, as he writes to the Jews, it becomes clearer that one's behavior is motivated primarily by the love of God that glorifies Him (Matt 5:13-19). This agapē love forms the basis of loving your enemy which provides the strength to overcome this natural aversion and enables one to be the "salt of the earth" and "light of the world."

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When the noun form of the epithymeō word group is used, “epithymia,” the Bible provides a greater understanding of the nature of desire.

Paul and Peter are explicit that desire “gives birth” to a behavior that has consequences.

But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust (**epithymia**). Then when lust (**epithymia**) has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. (Jam 1:14-15)

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts (**epithymia**) which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” (1 Pet 1:14)

Jesus makes clear that there is a competition for one’s desires and associates the desires of the world with those of Satan.

And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires (**epithymia**) for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. (Mark 4:19)

You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires (**epithymia**) of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (John 8:44)

The apostle Paul repeatedly makes the point that this competition to influence one’s desires is in fact a war that determines whether one obeys God’s word or not. English translators, in conveying the morally evil sense of the epithymia word group, use the translation “lust.”

Paul portrays the conflict of desires as a comparison between those who know the word of God to those who don’t.

For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful (**epithymia**) passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; (1 Thes 4:3-5)

Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts (**epithymia**) of men, but for the will of God. For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts (**epithymia**), drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries. (1 Pet 4:1-3)

Paul portrays the conflict of desires as a comparison between the old nature without Jesus Christ to the new nature with Him.

But you did not learn Christ in this way, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts (**epithymia**) of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. (Eph 4:20-24)

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For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust (**epithymia**). (2 Pet 1:4)

Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts (**epithymia**). (Rom 13:13-4)

Paul portrays the conflict of desires as a comparison between the perishable flesh with the imperishable Spirit.

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire (**epithymia**) of the flesh. For the flesh sets (**epithymeō**) its desire (**epithymeō**) against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (**epithymia**). (Gal 5:16-24)

Paul portrays the conflict of desires as a comparison between the prince of this world Satan with Jesus Christ.

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts (**epithymia**) of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. (Eph 2:1-3)

As a matter of choice, what one desires is a game of zero sums. Desiring what God values reflects your love for Him and leads to eternal life; disobedience reflects a lack of love and leads to death.

Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust (**epithymia**) of the flesh and the lust (**epithymia**) of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts (**epithymia**); but the one who does the will of God lives forever. (1 John 2:15-17)

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly lives thereafter; and if He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day by their lawless deeds), then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires (**epithymia**) and despise authority. (2 Pet 2:4-10)

Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts (**epithymia**), and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation." (2 Pet 3:3-4)

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Drawing on a comparison to the Greco-Roman slave of the first century, the dominance of one's desire effectively makes one a slave. The implied question is, "who is the lord of your life?"

In the absence of any knowledge of God and deceived of the existence / purpose of Jesus Christ, one is enslaved to Satan.

For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts (**epithymia**) and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. (Tit 3:3)

These are springs without water and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved. For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires (**epithymia**), by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved. For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, "A dog returns to its own vomit," and, "A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire." (2 Pet 2:17-22)

With a genuine recognition of the values of God, one becomes devoted to Jesus Christ and ceases to lust after the things outside of God's word.

Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts (**epithymia**), and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. (Rom 6:11-13)

When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory. Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire (**epithymia**), and greed, which amounts to idolatry. (Col 3:4-5)

the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires (**epithymia**) and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, (Tit 2:12-13)

References:

1. Brand C, Draper C, England A, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, (2003).
2. Brown C, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, (1979).