

## Desire (*epithumia*)

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The Greek word *epithumia* meant a strong desire. Often it indicated a desire for evil things; often it did not. The Stoics, including such Jewish Stoics as Josephus, considered desire bad in itself. For the Stoic sage, any strong desire is hard to control and is, therefore, bad.

Epictetus lists desire along with grief, fear, envy, malice, and greed as things to be avoided. He singled out desire for money as a typical defect of character. The Wisdom of Solomon expresses the Stoic position, "the insatiability of desire perverts the innocent mind" (4:12).

Perhaps the reason that desire in the good sense is rarer than desire in the evil sense lies in the fact that desire is not love. Desire is closer to *eros* than to *agape*. Desire is acquisitive. It seeks what is not. Love seeks not its own but desire seeks to own—to own a thing, moment, experience, or accomplishment. If the desire is good, it can be satisfied. Evil desires, though, are never really satisfied. Therefore, they last longer than good desires. The glutton, the drunkard, the lecher, and the miser find their desires increasing as their attempts to fulfill them increase.

### In the Gospels

There is no doubt that Stoicism influenced Christianity. Stoicism's strong moral tone fitted well with Judaism's ethical monotheism. Like Stoic writers, the New Testament has lists of virtues and vices. Yet the New Testament does not reflect the basic Stoic attitude of rational acceptance of fate. What Jesus accepted in the Garden of Gethsemane was the will of God; he did not take whatever-may-come. His acceptance resulted from a personal encounter, not from a calm analysis of the situation. So it is not surprising that Jesus uses the word desire in the good sense.

In Luke 22:15 Jesus says, "I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer" (in the *Revised Standard Version*, the Greek uses both the verb and the noun for desire as in the *King James Version*). Jesus' passion was displayed not only on the tree but at the table. He approved the intense desiring of the right thing (as in Matthew 5:6), but he denounced the intense desiring of wrong things (as in Mark 4:19).

There is nothing in the teaching of Jesus reflecting the Greek ideal of moderation in all things. Unlike the character in *Lost Horizon* who explained that in Shangri-la they avoided excesses of all kinds—including the excess of virtue itself—Jesus could speak of joy among the angels of heaven. He could weep for a city or a friend.

### In the Epistles

New Testament correspondence is filled with denunciations of evil desire. References to "lusts of the flesh" occur repeatedly (Romans 13:14; Galatians 5:16, 24; Ephesians 2:3; 1 Peter 2:11; 2 Peter 2:18; 1 John 2:16), and we tend to assume that this means sexual desire. It need not. Even a passage such as Romans 1:24 probably refers to pagan worship rather than to social immorality. The *epithumian* of Romans 7:7-8 is exemplified by covetousness. Only in 1 Thessalonians 4:5 is desire clearly sexual. In 1 Timothy 6:9 desire is for money (perhaps James 1:14-15 as well). In 2 Timothy (2:22, 3:12-13, 4:3) desire is for religious novelty. What is evil in these desires (and in various unspecified desires of 1 Peter 1:14, 2:11, 4:2-3; 2 Peter 1:4, 2:10, 3:3, 1 John 2:16-17) is their power over the person.

A controlled desire may be intense. It may be more intense than most uncontrolled desires. Many persons light a cigarette not because they have an

intense desire to smoke but because a very weak habit is uncontrolled. But many writers with a burning desire to be published refuse to lower their standards to pander to the public taste.

Like Jesus, Paul could speak of having intense desire. "My desire is to depart and be with Christ" (Philippians 1:23). With "great desire," Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians, he wanted to see the Christians "face to face" (2:17). Paul was a man of interesting excesses.

### Later Christianity

Browning's Bishop Blougram said:

*Why, to be Luther—that's a life to lead,  
Incomparably better than my own,  
He comes, reclaims God's earth for  
God, he says.  
Sets up God's rule again by simple  
means,  
Re-opens a shut book, and all is done,  
He flared out in the flaring of man-  
kind:  
Such Luther's luck was: how shall such  
be mine?*

Christians are not enjoined to live passionless lives. A colorless Christ is beyond imagination. Where intensity of feeling is what is called for by the situation, a temperate response is despicable. The church at Laodicea got no praise in Revelation.

On the other hand, Thomas Aquinas said that three things were necessary for man's salvation: to know what he ought to believe; to know what he ought to desire; and to know what he ought to do. It was a good aphorism but bad theology. Our salvation does not depend on our knowledge. If he had said "are necessary for wisdom," he would have come closer to the mark.

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