

Soul Surgery: Changing Your Desires

Loving God with all your Heart Part 4

1 John 2:16 6-26-11

Summary: How does one get the deep, profound joy that can carry you through horrible suffering? Desires come from whichever side persuades your soul that it is a joy source. Change your desires by changing which sermons you are exposing yourself to. Be persuaded by God (through argument and experience) and your desires will change, you will then seek and find God resulting in deep joy and emotional love. But experience is not just for persuasion – it is the ultimate goal of the Christian life (fellowship with God).

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1 John 2:15 Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For everything in the world--the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes and the pride of possessions--comes not from the Father but from the world. 17 The world and its desire pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

Introduction: Joy

"These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved. ... These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."

Every time the servant girl shouted that, it made Paul a little more upset. What she was saying was true, but this girl had a demon and was involved in fortune telling, and the last thing God needs or wants is publicity from the Devil. So finally Paul just turned around and let that demon have it.

Acts 16:18 "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

(So much for that whole "all truth is God's truth" idea. Not all truth is God's truth.) Paul is not interested in joining forces with a demon in any way no matter what that demon is saying, so he sends that evil spirit packing. The thing is, the owners of that girl had been using her as a fortune teller, and now that the demon was gone they were out of business. And when they realize that, things turn violent.

Acts 16:19 When the owners of the slave girl realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities.

It does not say they escorted them – it says they **dragged** them. It sounds to me like there was some resistance. Before you can drag someone somewhere you have to overpower him. I don't know what kind of scuffle took place, but it does not sound to me like Paul and Silas are going willingly at all. Most likely they are outnumbered, and so they get dragged away. Paul knows it will not go well for him before the authorities, so he struggled to get out of the headlock, trying to free himself and escape, but he cannot get loose.

20 They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar 21 by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."

Then it really gets ugly.

22 The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas

I cannot imagine the terror of being attacked by an angry mob. I know the terror of facing one single bully – I remember that from when I was a kid, and that scared me to death. But to be beaten by a savage, angry mob that wants to kill you – I cannot even imagine. You are on the ground getting punched and kicked and smashed in the head with clubs or rocks or whatever the people had. And you are just trying to cover your face the best you can, but you are getting blows to the side of the head and the ribs and all over, and the whole time you are praying, "God, please – let the magistrates step in!" Well, finally they do step in. But that did not go well either.

22 ... and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods.

You are crumpled up on the ground, bruised and bleeding from the beating, struggling to get your breath, and the next thing you know the officials are pulling you to your feet, and ripping off your clothes. Then they tie you to a post naked, and then the real beating starts. Being beaten with rods was an especially painful ordeal. They are already tender from the beating they just took and this is on top of that.

23 After they had been severely beaten, they were thrown into prison

Literally it says, "**After they had inflicted many blows.**" They just kept whacking away with those rods. Agonizing pain with every single one. And then they are thrown into prison.

23 ... and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. 24 Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

No medical attention. Just thrown into the maximum security inner cell and placed in stocks as well. The stocks were used both for restraint and for torture at times.

25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God

Now let me ask you something – can your joy source do that? Each one of us, when we get down or discouraged or bored or anxious or depressed – we all do the same thing. We try to find something that will give us our joy back. That thing you look to – can it give you this kind of joy?

I have been preaching the last couple weeks about how nothing in this world satisfies. And you might hear that and think, "I don't know, Darrell – some of the pleasures of this world are awfully ... pleasurable. A week on the beach in Hawaii can work wonders for my mood. A little marijuana can do amazing things for the nerves. Put me alone in my room for an hour with my favorite music cranked,

and I just feel so much better.” You hear me preach about how the presence of God is satisfying and the pleasures of this world are not, but the truth is the pleasures of this world can be pretty intense. You might think, “When I read my Bible, I don’t feel anything close to what I feel when I play my favorite game system.” Can the presence of God really compete with the intensity of the pleasures of this world – food, recreation, friends and family, popularity, fame, drugs, alcohol, sex,?

Well, let me ask you this: Which one of those earthly pleasures is so delightful, and so deeply fulfilling that you could go through what Paul and Silas went through and be so full of joy that you felt like singing? When you suffer horrible injustice, overwhelming physical pain, or brutal abuse with no end in sight, I don’t think daydreaming about your last trip to Hawaii will do much for you. The pleasures of this world are so fleeting – sometimes just moments after the pleasure is over there is zero lingering joy. And even when there is a little bit of lingering good mood, it is not deep enough to have you singing through the night when you really suffer.

What kind of joy did they have? Look around this world – look inside the homes of the richest people in the world who can afford any earthly pleasure they want, look on the beach, check out a concert, go to the Superbowl – look anywhere you want in this world and you will not see this kind of joy anywhere. But look on the pages of the Bible and you see it everywhere. This was not an isolated incident for Paul.

2 Corinthians 11:23 I have ... been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. 24 Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, 26 I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. 27 I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. 28 Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

That was Paul’s life.

2 Corinthians 7:4 in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.

He did not paint on a smile. He did not force himself to sing. He literally felt so happy inside that it overflowed with unending delight. His life was constant pain and constant suffering and unbounded happiness. And Paul was not the only one who had this joy. Silas had it – that song in the dungeon that night was a duet.

Timothy had it (1 Thes.2:2, 19). The Twelve had it (Acts 5:41). The Disciples in Acts 13 had it (Acts 13:50-52). The Macedonians in 2 Corinthians 8 had it (2 Cor.8:1,2). The Thessalonians had it (1 Thes.1:6). David had it (Ps.63:1,5). Hannah had it (1 Sam.1:18). Jesus had it (Lk.10:21, Heb.12:2).

All of those people experienced great joy while enduring terrible suffering. What is the deal with these people? How can they have a joy so deep that it carries them through horrific torture and they still actually feel happy, and my joy is not even deep enough to carry me through the transmission going out on my new car? How do you get joy like that?

Review

We are currently in the midst of a study of the Greatest Commandment – **Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind.** In the first week of this study I left you with the burning question – “Since loving God with all your heart involves emotions, how do you generation that emotional love for God when it is not already there?” And if it is in your heart, how do you increase it? How do you increase your level of

emotional delight in God? And I didn't answer the question. I told you it is possible to change your emotions, but I did not tell you how.

Then last time I left you with the question "How do you change your desires?" If loving God with your soul involves desiring Him, but right now you desire things in this world more than the things of God – how do you change your desires? I did not answer that question either.

Change desire by persuading the soul

Now this week, instead of answering those questions I start the sermon with another huge question – how do you get that amazing, unassailable joy that can keep you happy even in the midst of horrible, prolonged suffering? My purpose is not to just keep teasing you with all impossible questions and then never answering them. I have piled up those three questions on purpose because the answer to all three of them is the same. And to show you that let me pick up right where we left off last Sunday – in 1 John 2:16.

The Source of Desire: the World or God

In verse 15 John gave us the negative side of the Great Commandment. The Great Commandment is to love God with all your being; the other side of that same coin is that we are not to love the world or anything in the world. And then in verse 16 John tells us why.

1 John 2:16 For everything in the world--the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes and the pride of possessions--comes not from the Father but from the world.

Notice, by the way, that John also defines love in terms of desires. And he points out that desires come from one of two sources – God or the world. Your desires are not inherent in you – they come from an outside source. When the world convinces your soul that its pleasures will satisfy the thirst of your soul, the result is powerful desires for the pleasures of this world. When God convinces you that His presence will satisfy the cravings of your soul, then your desires will be for Him. So the way to change your desires is to be convinced by God's argument rather than the world's. And that is not easy because there is more to belief than just being convinced in your head. If I am convinced in my head that God's Word is more profitable than watching TV, but I actually desire TV more than Scripture, that means my soul is not convinced. If I desire TV more that means my soul thinks TV will do a better job at quenching the thirst of the soul. You can always tell what your soul believes by what you desire. And you can tell what your heart believes by how you feel. If in your head you say, "God loves me" but you do not feel loved by Him that is because your heart does not believe it.

The Means of Persuasion: argument and experience

So how do you convince your soul and your heart to believe differently than the way they believe now? How do you convince that part of your inner man? Two ways – and both are absolutely essential. Persuasion comes through two means: Argument and Experience. The first one is obvious. We all know what it is like to be convinced of something by a good argument. All of us believe that drinking arsenic would kill us, not because of anything we have experienced, but because of persuasive arguments from reliable sources about the effect of poison in the body. And that is a deep enough belief to reverse strong desires. If you see a nice, tall glass of your favorite beverage in all the world, and you have overwhelming desire to drink it, but then you are told there are lethal amounts of arsenic mixed in, suddenly you have no desire at all to drink it.

So in some cases information alone, apart from experience, can persuade your heart and soul to believe something. So why is it that in some cases the heart and soul are stubborn and will not be persuaded by mere argument? Your mind is convinced by some powerful argument that something is bad, but your soul stubbornly keeps desiring that thing. You receive a compelling argument that

something is true, but it does not feel like it is true because your heart refuses to be convinced. Why is that? One word – experience. Tell your 5-year-old what will happen to him if he drinks arsenic and he will not desire it at all. But tell your 5-year-old that nothing but candy for every meal would not actually be satisfying, and even though he might be nodding his little head, his soul – the seat of his desires – is saying, “I don’t buy it.” Why? Why can’t his soul be convinced easily just through persuasive argument? Because of past experience. One hundred percent of the times he has had candy it has been satisfying. And the number times he found it satisfying when you made him eat all his broccoli is closer to zero. And so going up against that past experience creates an uphill battle trying to convince him that only candy all the time would not be satisfying.

So how can he be convinced? I can tell you what convinced me – and I bet it’s the same thing that convinced you – what is it? (Experience.) At some point we gained enough freedom to be unrestrained in our consumption of candy and junk food, and we felt miserable. And if you are like me, you did not even learn that after the first experience. The first few times I did that I figured it was a fluke. But if you do it enough times you eventually learn – even to the point where your desires change. And now as adults, even though we still love sweets and desserts, aren’t there those times when you are hungry and there are cookies available or ice cream or whatever and you are thinking, “No – I don’t want any of that right now. I want some real food. I want something substantial that will give me some energy,” and you actually opt for something somewhat healthy?

Stubborn feelings and stubborn desires usually indicate a heart and soul that has been persuaded of something by both argument and experience, and to reverse that is going to require both counter-argument and counter-experience.

Now – is this just a bunch of human wisdom, or does God’s Word itself teach us to use this method?

Psalms 34:8 Taste and see that the Lord is good

God calls us not just to listen to arguments about how good God is, but in addition to that we must actually taste and see. Taste His goodness for yourself. Don’t just read about it in the Bible; don’t just listen to me preach about it from this pulpit – taste it for yourself.

Error 1: Use experience to determine truth

Now at this point some of you might have some red flags. You might be saying, “Whoa, wait a minute. Are you telling us to use experience to determine truth?” Isn’t that dangerous? Isn’t that the error of the extreme wing of the Charismatic movement – having all kinds of bizarre experiences and deciding it is from God because of how it feels? Isn’t that also the error of people who rationalize sin based on how it feels? “This feels so right, it just can’t be wrong.” Yes – using experience to determine truth is a HUGE mistake and it will lead you into deadly error one hundred percent of the time. Do not ever use experience to determine what is true.

“But didn’t you just tell us to do that?”

No, what I told you to do is not to use experience to determine what is true; what I am saying is to use experience to *verify* what you already know is true from Scripture so that your heart and soul are convinced. If you have an experience that goes against the Bible then your interpretation of your experience is just wrong and should be ignored. Is it true that some of our Charismatic brothers have tended to get into doctrinal error because they make the mistake of using experience to determine what is true? Yes, tragically – that has been the Achilles heel of much of the Charismatic movement. They have a powerful, moving experience, and so they assume it must be from God. If you watch that movement you see all kinds of bizarre things, like the laughing “revival” - laughing in the Spirit, barking like a dog in the Spirit, shaking, fainting, frenzied activity – all kinds of crazy things, all attributed to the Holy Spirit. Is that in the Bible? No. So how is it accepted? It is accepted because people have such moving experiences that they assume it must be from God. They talk about the

feeling of the presence of God as being like the sensation of electricity shooting through your body, or a tingling, or whatever. And that is why the Charismatic movement has been notorious for being weak on doctrine.

Error 2: Downplay experience in favor of truth

However, in reacting against that error, the Evangelical movement has tended to fall into the ditch on the other side of the road. Many non-Charismatics have made the mistake of saying, “We don’t want to make the mistake of using experience to determine truth, so we are going to hold up the truth of God’s Word as supreme, and downplay experience as unimportant or even dangerous.” I know that error exists because I committed that error for most of my life. I threw the baby out with the bathwater.

When we downplay experience we end up turning the Christian life into a pursuit of truth as the final goal. If you get an emotion here or there – that is a bonus, but it does not really matter. If you have a religious experience on some rare occasion, fine, but do not make that your goal. The Charismatics are out there seeking all kinds of wild experiences, but a good Christian focuses on truth and is indifferent to experiences. That is dead wrong. We determine what is true by means of Scripture, and then we persuade our heart and soul to believe it by means of both Scripture and experience – tasting and seeing for ourselves that God is good.

Conclusion: expose yourself to argument and experience

So how do you change your desires? By exposing your mind and heart and soul to the two methods of persuasion: argument and experience.

The Persuasion of Argument

Let’s take those one at a time – first argument. When you desire the things in this world, and you find that your desires for the things of God are weak or non-existent, change those desires by decreasing your exposure to the world’s preaching and increasing your exposure to God’s. I read that the average American is exposed to three thousand advertising messages per day, and most of those are designed to convince your soul that happiness comes from something in this world. That is 21,000 sermons per week. And have you noticed how the world’s little thirty-second sermons on TV, more and more do not even bother with the intellect – they just go right for the heart and soul? Watch a car commercial and you will not hear any reasoning for why this car is the best choice. They just show you all kinds of images that appeal to the appetites of the soul. The message is not, “Buy this car because of the reliability or longevity or how well it holds its value” but rather “Buy this car because this car will make you happy. It will be water to your thirsty soul. You will be grinning from ear to ear the whole time you drive it, you will feel powerful and smart and successful and attractive and members of the opposite sex will fall all over themselves just to get a glimpse of you driving by.”

If you listen to 21,000 of those sermons from the world each week and then come here and sit through one sermon arguing the other side, it is going to be no contest. So the first way to change your desires is to reduce the number of the world’s sermons you are exposed to and increase the number of God’s you are exposed to. Turn off that TV and listen to a good sermon online. Turn off the secular radio station and turn on some worship music. Put down the magazine or novel and pick up the Word of God or some book that will do a persuasive job convincing your soul that God’s presence really is more satisfying than the pleasures of this world.

The Persuasion of Experience

And we all understand that part. But what about the other part – experience? If every time you have eaten a grape it has been sour, you could listen to sermon after sermon telling you that grapes are sweet and it would be hard for you to believe until you actually ate a sweet one. If every time you decide to pick up your Bible and spend some time alone with God you find it really boring and

unsatisfying, and every time you indulge in some earthly pleasure you find it really delightful, all the sermons in the world are not going to convince your soul to prefer God.

And that tells us two things: We need to strive to have as many delightful, enjoyable, soul-satisfying experiences with the presence of God as we possibly can. We should realize how much damage we do every time we experience pleasure from sin. Have you ever thought of how much damage it does to your soul and your desires when you enjoy a sin? Every time I commit a sin and it feels good – I just preached a powerful, persuasive sermon to my soul about how desirable sin is, and that shapes future desires, and it is incredibly difficult to undo that damage. This should serve as a motivation for us to avoid sin because of the harm it does to our desires. It makes it so hard to convince your soul of the truth.

So that is a great reason to avoid sin, but just avoiding the pleasures of sin will not be enough. You also need to experience the positive side. You need to have such amazing experiences with the presence of God that your soul is convinced that however pleasurable sin is, the presence of God is better. So in the weeks to come – all the rest of this series is going to be devoted to the question of how to have delightful experiences with the presence of God.

Result: Desire, Delight, and Joy

Because the more you have those experiences, the more your soul and heart will be persuaded of the goodness of God. And guess what the result of that will be. When your soul is persuaded that the experience of the presence of God really is more pleasurable and satisfying than anything in this world – guess what will happen to your desires. Those compelling, powerful desires for the things in this world will evaporate, and your desires for God will take over your life. So instead of forcing yourself to read your Bible or pray or come to church you will want those things more than anything else in the world.

And guess what else happens. Once your desires for God become that powerful and dominating, it will drive you to seek Him with such relentless fervency that you will actually succeed in finding Him and experiencing His presence in awesome ways. And when that happens you will experience the food-likeness of God and be satisfied and delighted and attracted to God. Your emotions will change, and you will love the Lord your God not only with your mind and strength and soul but also with your heart. You will have emotional love for God.

And that delight you feel in His presence – there is another word for that – *joy!* That deep, profound, unassailable, unstoppable happiness that can carry you through the most severe suffering imaginable without being dowsed – how do you get that joy? It comes as a result of experiencing the presence of God. So you see how this one principle answers all three of those questions? How do you generate emotion where it does not exist so you love God emotionally? How do you change your wrong desires? How do you get that supernatural, overpowering joy that is greater than any sorrow or loss? It all happens as a result of persuading the heart and soul of the truth about God by shutting down the world's pulpits in your life that are influencing you and exposing yourself to the preaching and teaching of God's Word.

Experience (fellowship with God) is the final goal of the Christian life

Up to this point this sermon is a little bit misleading. Up to this point I have been pointing to experience as something that is useful for persuading our souls of the truth about God. But that is not the only reason for seeking experience. In fact, it is not even the most important reason.

Having these kinds of experiences with God is not merely a means to an end (to help us believe). They are the end. They are the ultimate, final goal of the Christian life. The error of some Charismatics was to use experience to arrive at truth. The error of some non-Charismatics was to use the Bible to

arrive at truth. But the goal of the Christian life is to use the truth of the Bible to arrive at experience. Truth is crucial but it is not the ultimate goal. It is the means of getting us to the ultimate goal. The ultimate goal is an experience. The ultimate, final goal of the Christian life is to love God, and loving a person is an experiential thing.

Anytime you ever learn some truth about God it should have the goal of experiencing that thing firsthand. Why do we study what the Bible says about peace? So we can experience peace. I study all the truth I can about faith – not so I can ace an exam on the subject, but so I can learn to actually believe. What good is it if I can recite from memory every single fact in the whole Bible about faith if I do not experience faith in my heart? The reason I need to learn what the Bible says about joy is so I can experience joy. If God is merciful I am not content to just know about His mercy – I want to experience His mercy firsthand. I want to experience His grace and His power and His awesomeness and His tenderness and His wisdom and every single one of His attributes. When you work to get to know more about a person you do not do that for the sake of education as an end goal. You do it for the sake of improving the quality of your interactions with that person. That is what love does.

Discovering facts about God is not the final goal of Bible study. God is not a set of propositions. He is a person. There is a set of propositions that are true about God, and we must know those before we can ever know God, so truth is crucial. But just knowing true things about God and agreeing with those things is not the same thing as experiencing the presence of God.

And if you doubt this, just think about the metaphor of God being like food and drink. What should our interaction with God be like? Eating and drinking. And if the metaphor of eating and drinking means *anything* it points to an experience. What is more experiential than eating and drinking? People read their Bible and walk away feeling unsatisfied and bored and they wonder why. If you have not eaten in three days are you content to go to the library and study a book about prime rib? And wash it down with a nice scholarly journal article about the benefits of water to the body? And for dessert maybe look at some photos of a fresh baked cherry pie? No – the only thing you want to read at that point is a cookbook – or a map to a good restaurant. When God described Himself as food and drink He showed us that fellowship with Him is not just an abstraction to be learned about, but an event to be experienced.

Forgetting about God

A tragically large number of people in the Church have been faithful in every area except one - they have all the service projects down, ministry to the poor, women's ministry, men's ministry, children's ministry, youth ministry, music ministry, classes, programs, committees, leadership, outreach, evangelism – we have all of it except for one little thing. We forgot about God. God Himself somehow got lost in the shuffle. In the typical church, what percentage of sermons would you say you hear about God? Not mainly about what we should do, or how we should live, but a sermon that is mostly about what God is like. What percentage of sermons are about God Himself? What percentage of Bible studies? What percentage of Sunday school lessons? What percentage of Christian books? And compare that with this – how often do you read something in the Bible about God? If you randomly flop open your Bible there is a very good chance you will open to a chapter that is designed to teach us what God is like or show us something God is doing or has done. But if you randomly turn on the radio and listen to a sermon, or randomly pick up a book at the Christian bookstore, what are the odds it is mainly about God? Are there thousands of verses in the Bible about behavior and how we should live? Absolutely, but every one of them tells us to live a certain way as an act of fellowship with God.

Fellowship with God is the only thing that matters in life. I love my wife for one reason – so that I can draw nearer to God. That is the reason why I preach sermons, that is the reason I mow my yard, it is the reason I read my Bible, it is the reason I eat lunch, it is the reason I sing worship songs, it is the reason I pay my taxes. Fellowship with God (interacting with Him in a back-and-forth love relationship) is the only thing that matters.

Only one thing

Do you believe that? Do you believe that there is actually only one thing that matters in life and nothing else matters *at all*? Or do you think worshipping God is the most important thing in life, but not the only thing? I realize it sounds really spiritual to say, but do we really believe that nothing matters if it is not an act of fellowship with God? Nothing should ever be done that is not an act of loving God? How about putting on my socks in the morning? I mean, let's get real – how could every single thing you do be for the purpose of drawing near to God? Aren't we going a little overboard when we say only one thing matters in life? Is that overboard? Do you remember what Jesus told Martha in Luke 10:42?

Luke 10:42 only one thing is needed.

Anybody here planning on standing before the Almighty on Judgment Day and saying, "Excuse me – I don't mean to interrupt, but I just wanted to let You know that You got a little carried away when You were talking to Martha that day"? Are you going to say that? Or will you agree with me that Jesus did not go overboard when He said:

Luke 10:41 Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, 42 but only one thing is needed.

A little math quiz for you - If it is true that only one thing matters, then how many other things matter? Zero other things matter. Nothing in all the world matters – nothing in your whole life matters except that one thing that Jesus had in mind in Luke 10:42.

Benediction: Psalms 34:3 Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together. ...Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame. ... 7 The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them. 8 Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.