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# Directions Against Sinful Desires and Discontent

by Richard Baxter

Contributed by Steve Doan

I shall say but little here of this subject, because I have already treated so largely of it, in my book of "Self-denial," and in that of "Crucifying the World;" and here before in chap. 4 part. 6 against worldliness and flesh-pleasing, and here against sinful love, which is the cause.

How sinful desires may be known, you may gather from the discoveries of sinful love: as, 1. When you desire that which is forbidden you. 2. Or that which will do you no good, upon a misconceit that it is better or more needful than it is. 3. Or when you desire it too eagerly, and must needs have it, or else you will be impatient or discontented, and cannot quietly be ruled and disposed of by God, but are murmuring at his providence and your lot. 4. Or when you desire it too hastily, and cannot stay God's time. 5. Or else too greedily as to the measure, being not content with God's allowance, but must needs have more than he thinks fit for you. 6. Or specially when your desires are perverse, preferring lesser things before greater; desiring bodily and transitory things more than the mercies for your souls which will be everlasting. 7. When you desire any thing ultimately and merely for the flesh, without referring it to God, it is a sin. Even your daily bread, and all your comforts, must be desired but as provender for your horse, that he may the better go his journey, even as provision for your bodies, to fit them to the better and more cheerful service of your souls and God. 8. Much more when your desires are for wicked ends, (as to serve your lust, or pride, or covetousness, or revenge,) they are wicked desires. 9. And when they are injurious to others.

Direct. I Be well acquainted with your own condition, and consider what it is that you have most need of; and then you will find that you have so much grace and mercy to desire for your souls, without which you

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are lost for ever, and that you have a Christ to desire, and an endless life with God to desire, that it will quench all your thirst after the things below. This, if any thing, will make you wiser, when you see you have greater things to mind. A man that is in present danger of his life, will not be solicitous for pins or trinkets: and the hopes of a lordship or a kingdom will cure the desire of little things: a man that needeth a physician for the dropsy or consumption, will scarce long for children's balls or tops. And methinks a man that is going to heaven or hell, should have somewhat greater than worldly things to long for. Oh what a vain and doting thing is a carnal mind; that hath pardon, and grace, and Christ and heaven, and God, to think of, and that with speed before it be too late; and can forget them all, or not regard them, and eagerly long for some little inconsiderable trifle; as if they said, I must needs taste of such a dish before I die; I must needs have such a house, or a child, or friend, before I go to another world O study what need thy distressed soul hath of a Christ, and of peace with God, and preparation for eternity, and what need thy darkened mind hath of more knowledge, and thy dead and carnal heart of more life, and tenderness, and love to God, and communion with him; feel these as thou hast cause, and the eagerness of thy carnal desires will be gone.

Direct. II. Remember how much your carnal desires do aggravate the weakness of your spiritual desires, and make the sin more odious and inexcusable. Are you so eager for a husband, a wife, a child, for wealth, for preferment, or such things, while you are so cold and indifferent in your desires after God, and grace, and glory? Your desires after these are not so earnest! They make you not so importunate and restless; they take not up your thoughts both day and night; they set you not so much on contrivances and endeavours: you can live as quietly without more grace, or assurance of salvation, or communion with God, as if you were indifferent in the business; but you must needs have that which you desire in the world, or there is no quiet with you. Do you consider what a horrible contempt of God, and grace, and heaven, is manifested by this? Either you are regenerate or unregenerate. If you are regenerate, all your instructions, and all your experience of the worth of spiritual things, and the vanity of things temporal, do make it a heinous sin in you to be now so eager for those things which you have so often called vanity, while you are so cold towards God, whose goodness you have had so great experience of. Do you know no better yet the difference between the

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creature and the Creator? Do you yet no better understand your necessities and interest, and what it is that you live upon, and must trust to for your everlasting blessedness and content? If you are unregenerate, (as all are that love any thing better than God,) what a madness is it for one that is condemned in law to endless torments, and shall be quickly there, if he be not regenerate and justified by Christ, to be thirsting so eagerly for this or that thing, or person, upon earth, when he should presently bestir him with all his might to save his soul from endless misery! How incongruous are these desires to the good and bad!

Direct. III. Let every sinful desire humble you, for the worldliness and fleshliness which it discovereth to be yet unmortified in you; and turn your desires to the mortifying of that flesh and concupiscence which is the cause. If you did not yet love the world, and the things that are in the world, you would not be so eager for them. If you were not too carnal, and did not mind too much the things of the flesh, you would not be so earnest for them as you are. It should be a grievous thing to your hearts to consider what worldliness and fleshliness this showeth to be yet there. That you should set so much by the creature, as to be unable to bear the want of it; is this renouncing the world and flesh? The thing you need is not that which you much desire; but a better heart, to know the vanity of the creature, to be dead to the world, and to be able to bear the want or loss of any thing in it; and a fuller mortification of the flesh: mortifying and not satisfying it, is your work.

Direct. IV. Ask your hearts seriously whether God in Christ be enough for them, or not? If they say, no, they renounce him and all their hope of heaven; for no man takes God for his God that takes him not for his portion, and as enough for him: if they say, yea, then you have enough to stop the mouth of your fleshly desires, while your hearts confess that they have enough in God. Should that soul that hath a filial interest in God, and an inheritance in eternal life, be eager for any conveniences and contentments to the flesh? If God be not enough for you, you will never have enough. Turn to him more, and know him better, if you would have a satisfied mind.

Direct. V. Remember that every sinful desire is a rebelling of your wills against the will of God; and that it is his will that must govern and

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dispose of all, and your wills must be conformed to his; yea, that you must take pleasure and rest in the will of God. Reason the case with your hearts, and say, Who is it that is the governor of the world? and who is to rule me and dispose of my affairs? Is it I or God? Whose will is it that must lead, and whose must follow? Whose will is better guided, God's or mine? Either it is his will that I shall have what I desire, or not if it be, I need not be so eager, for I shall have it in his time and way; if it be not his will, is it fit for me to murmur and strive against him? Remember that your discontents and carnal desires are so many accusations brought in against God; as if you said, Thou hast not dealt well or wisely, or mercifully by me; I must have it better: I will not stand to thy will and government; I must have it as I will, and have the disposal of myself.

Direct. VI. Observe how your eager desires are condemned by yourselves in your daily prayers, or else they make your prayers themselves condemnable. If you pray that the will of God may be done, why do your wills rebel against it, and your desires contradict your prayers? And if you ask no more than your daily bread, why thirst you after more? But if you pray as you desire, Lord, let my will be done, and my selfish, carnal desire be fulfilled, for I must needs have this or that; then what an abominable prayer is this! Desire as you must pray.

Direct. VII. Remember what covenant you have made with God; that you renounced the world and the flesh, and took him for your Lord, and King, and Father, and yielded up yourselves as his own, as his subject, and as his child, to be disposed of ruled, and provided for by him; and this covenant is essential not only to your Christianity, but to your taking him for your God. And do you repent of it? or will you break it, and forfeit all the benefits of the covenant? If you will needs have the disposal of yourselves, you discharge God of his covenant and fatherly care for you; and then what will become of you, if he so forsake you?

Direct. VIII. Bethink you how unfit you are to be the choosers of your own condition. You foresee not what that person, or thing, or place will prove to you, which you so eagerly desire: for aught you know it may be your undoing, or the greatest misery that ever befell you. Many a one hath cried with Rachel, "Give me children or else I die," Gen. 30:1, that have died by the wickedness and unkindness of their children. Many a one hath been violent in their desires of a husband or a wife, that afterwards have broken their hearts, or proved a greater affliction to them than any

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enemy they had in the world. Many a one hath been eager for riches, and prosperity, and preferment, that hath been ensnared by them, to the damnation of his soul. Many a one hath been earnest for some office, dignity, or place of trust, which hath made it a great increaser of his sin and misery. And it is flesh and self that is the eager desirer of things that are against the will of God, and nothing is so blind and partial as self and flesh. You think not your child a competent judge of what is best for him, and make not his desires, but your own understanding, the guide and rule of your dealings with him, or disposals of him. And are you fitter choosers for yourselves in comparison of God, than your child is in comparison of you? Either you take God for your Father, or you do not. If you do not, call him not Father, and hope not for mercy and salvation from him: if you do, is he not wise and good enough to dispose of you, and to determine what is best for you, and to choose for you?

Direct. IX. Remember that it is one of the greatest plagues on this side hell, to be given up to our own desires, and that by your eagerness and discontents you provoke God thus to give you up. "So I gave them up to their own heart's lust, and they walked in their own counsels: Oh that my people had hearkened to me!" &c. Psalm. 81:12. "Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, through the lusts of their own hearts," &c. Rom. 1:24, 26. "For this cause God gave them up to vile affections," verse. 28. "And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient," 2 Thess. 2:10-12. God may give you that which you so eagerly desire, as he gave "Israel a king, even in his anger," Hosea. 13:10,11. Or as he gave the Israelites "their own desire, even flesh which he rained upon them as dust, and feathered fowls as the sand of the sea; they were not estranged from their lust but while their meat was yet in their mouths, the wrath of God came upon them, and slew the fattest of them," Psalm. 78:27, 29-31. "They lusted exceedingly in the wilderness, and tempted God in the desert, and he gave them their request, but sent leanness into their souls," Psalm. 106:14,15. God may say, Follow your own lust, and if you are so eager, take that which you desire; take that person, that thing, that dignity which you are so earnest for; but take my curse and vengeance with it: never let it do you good, but be a snare and torment to you. "Let a fire come out of the bramble and devour you," Judges. 9:15.

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Direct. X. Take heed lest concupiscence and partiality entice you to justify your sinful desires and take them to be lawful. For if you do so, you will not repent of them, you will not confess them to God, nor beg pardon of them, nor beg help against them, nor use the means to extinguish them; but will cherish them, and be angry with all that are against them, and love those tempters best that encourage them: and how dangerous a case is this! And yet nothing is more ordinary among sinners, than to be blinded by their own affections, and think that they have sufficient reason to desire that which they do desire. And affection maketh them very witty and resolute to deceive themselves. It setteth them on studying all that can be said to defend their enemy, and put a deceitful gloss upon their cause. Try your desires well (as I before directed you). Q. 1 Is the thing that you desire a thing that God hath hid you desire, or promised in his word to give you, (as grace, Christ, and heaven)? If it be so, then desire it, and spare not; but if not so, Q. 2. Why then are you so eager for it when you should at most have but a submissive, conditional desire after it? Q. 3 Nay, is it not something which you are forbidden to desire? If so, dare you excuse it?

Direct. XI. Remember that concupiscence or sinful desire is the beginning of all sin of commission, and leadeth directly to the act. Theft, adultery, murder, fraud, contention, and all such mischiefs, begin in inordinate desires. For "every one is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust and enticed: then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin; and sin when it is finished bringeth forth death," James 1:14, 15. By "lust" is meant, any fleshly desire or will; therefore when the apostle forbiddeth gluttony and drunkenness, chambering and wantonness, strife and envying, he strikes at the root of all in this one word, "make no provision for the flesh to satisfy its lusts," (or wills,) Rom. 13:13, 14.

Direct. XII. Pull off the deceiving visor, and see that which you so eagerly desire, as it is. What will it be to you at the last? It is now in its spring or summer; but see it in its fall and winter? It is now in its youth; but see it withered to skin and bone in its decrepit age. It is now in its clean and curious ornaments; but see it in its uncleanness and in its homely dress: cure your deceit, and your desire is cured.

Direct. XIII. Promise not yourselves long life, but live as dying men, with your grave and winding-sheet always in your eye; and it will cure your thirst after the creature when you are sensible how short a time you

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must enjoy it, and especially how near you are unto eternity. This is the apostle's method, 1 Cor. 7:29-31, "But this I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth that both they that have wives be as though they had none; and they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and they that buy, as though they possessed not; and they that use the world, as not abusing it (or as if they used it not): for the fashion of this world passeth away." So you will desire as if you desired not, when you perceive well how quickly the thing desired will pass away.

Direct. XIV. In all your desires, remember the account as well as the thing desired. Think not only what it is now at hand, but what account you must make to God of it; "for to whom men give or commit much, of them they require the more," Luke 12:48. Will you thirst after more power, more honour, more wealth, when you remember that you have the more to give account of? Matt. 25: Have you not enough to reckon for already, unless you had hearts to use it better?

Direct. XV. Keep yourselves to the holy use of all your mercies, and let not the flesh devour them, nor any inordinate appetite fare ever the better for them when you have them, and this will powerfully extinguish the inordinate desire itself. We are in little danger of being over eager after things spiritual and holy, for the honour of God; resolve therefore that all you have shall be thus sanctified to God, and used for him, and not at all to satisfy any inordinate desire of the flesh, and then the flesh will cease its suit, when it finds it fares never the better for it. You are able to do much in this way if you will. If you cannot presently suppress the desire, you may presently resolve to deny the flesh the thing desired, (as David would not drink the water though he longed for it, 2 Sam. 23:15, 17,) and you may presently deny it the more of that you have. If you cannot forbear your thirst, you can forbear to drink; if you cannot forbear to be hungry, you can forbear to eat whatever is forbidden or unfit: if Eve must needs have an appetite to the forbidden fruit, yet she might have commanded her hands and teeth, and not have eaten it. If you cannot otherwise cool your desire of ostentatious apparel, wear that which is somewhat homelier than else you would have worn, on purpose to rebuke and control that desire: if you cannot otherwise quench your covetous desires, give so much the more to the poor to cross that desire.

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You cannot say that the outward act is out of your power, if you be but willing.

Direct. XVI. When your desires are over eager, bethink you of the mercies which you have received already and do possess. Hath God done so much for you, and are you still calling for more, even of that which is unnecessary, when you should be giving thanks for what you have? This unthankful greediness is an odious sin. Think what you have already for soul and body, estate and friends; and will not all this quiet you, (even this with Christ and heaven,) unless you have the other lust or fancy satisfied, and unless God humor you in your sick desires?

Direct. XVII Understand how little it will satisfy you, if God should give you all that you earnestly desire. When you have it, it will not quiet you, nor answer your expectations. You think it will make you happy, and be exceeding sweet to you; but it deceiveth you, and you promise yourselves you know not what, and therefore desire you know not what. It would be to you but like a dreaming feast, which would leave you hungry in the morning, Isa. 29:8.

Direct. XVIII. Remember still that the greatest hurt that the creature can do thee, is in being over-loved and desired, and it is never so dangerous to thee as when it seemeth most desirable. If you remembered this aright, you would be cast into the greatest fear and caution, when any thing below is presented very pleasing and desirable to you.

Direct. XIX. Consider that your desires do but make those wants a burden and misery to you which otherwise would be none. Thirst makes the want of drink a torment, which to another is no pain or trouble at all. The lustful wanton is ready to die for love of the desired mate which nobody else cares for, nor is ever the worse for being without. A proud ambitious Haman thinks himself undone if he be not honoured, and is vexed if he be but cast down into the mean condition of a farmer; when many thousand honest, contented men live merrily and quietly in as low a condition. It is men's own desires, and not their real wants, which do torment them.

Direct. XX. Remember that when you have done all, if God love you he will be the chooser, and will not grant your sick desires, but will correct you for them till they are cured. If your child cry for a knife, or for unwholesome meat, or any thing that would hurt him, you will quiet him

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with the rod if he give not over. And it is a sign some rod of God is near you, when you are sick for this, or that, or the other thing, and will not be quiet and content unless your fancy and concupiscence be humored.