

iLove: The Addictive Desires of the Human Being

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- [0 : 0 0] Our first Bible reading for this morning is taken from Genesis chapter 3 verse 1 to 7. Genesis chapter 3 verse 1 to 7. You can find it on page 5 of the church Bible.
- Now the snake was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, did God really say, you must not eat from any tree in the garden?
- Then the woman said to the snake, you may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, you must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.
- You will not certainly die, the snake said to the woman, for God knows that when you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.
- When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it.
- [1 : 0 5] She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked.
- So they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Our second reading is from Romans 1, verses 16-23.
- Romans 1, verses 16-23. You can find it on page 1128 of the Church Bible. Page 1128. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.
- For in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last. Just as it is written, the righteous will live by faith.
- The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness. Since what may be known from God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.
- [2 : 1 4] For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made so that people are without excuse.
- For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile, and their foolish hearts were darkened.
- Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being, and birds, and animals, and reptiles.
- This is the word of God. Amen. Amen. Well, good morning, everyone.
- My name is Andy Gamel. I'm a member of the congregation here. A special welcome to you if you're here for the first time today. We're really glad that you're able to be with us. You should have been given a handout on the way in this morning, but owing to a personal fault on my part, and some of you may not have got that, so if you'd like one, please stick your hands up now, and there are various people who will come around and give you one.

[3 : 29] You'll find it also helpful to have your Bible in your hands. And as we start, let me lead you in prayer.

Let's pray together. We thank you, Heavenly Father, so much for all that you've revealed to us in the Scriptures, and through your Son.

And we pray, please, that you would help us now to understand better who you are and who we are, and the nature of the world in which you've put us.

We ask these things for Jesus' sake. Amen. Put your hand up, please, if you've been online this week. Nearly everyone.

Okay, excellent. Welcome to number three in our short series, Considering the Gospel and the Online World. Today, we're looking at the dark side of the online world, the nasty, self-destructive, subhuman bit, the addictive desires of the human being as manifested online.

[4 : 40] So we're going to think first about Christmas shopping online. I wonder if I'm the only person here in the room whose Christmas shopping experience has been absolutely transformed by the arrival of the Internet.

For those of you too young to have lived through the pre-Internet to post-Internet shift, there was a time when you actually had to leave home in the middle of winter to get presents for people at Christmas.

And it took, well, it took forever because everybody was doing that. And so it was so unpleasant you could only manage it in small doses at a time. Now you can do the whole thing in an hour on Amazon.

It's just brill, don't you think? Wonderful. It's a whole new life from my perspective. And not only is it easier that way, it's also strangely psychologically rewarding.

Don't you find? From my sofa, I survey the world. I choose. I command. And people from all over the place respond instantly to my command and bring things to me really quickly.

[5 : 57] I don't know about you, that just makes me feel good. It's a massive ego trip. Retail therapy has long been recognized as something that could give you a lift if you were feeling a little low.

Now, going online to possess things can make you feel like a little king or queen in the world. So this morning we're going to be thinking about the addictive desires of the human condition as opened up to us by the online world.

There are things online that most people recognize as manipulative, dangerous, damaging. There are the obviously addictive things, the pornography, the gambling.

There are other things intensely related to human desire, the desire to control others, the bullying, the internet grooming, the trolling, the desire to possess the Christmas shopping, the desire to be at the center of my little world, me, my selfie, and I.

Let's begin then with the Bible and with something more positive. Turn please to Genesis chapter 1. We'll need to flip around to various scriptures this morning, so it'd be great help to have your Bible open in front of you.

[7 : 16] Turn to Genesis chapter 1 and verse 28. We've been here before. We'll be here again. One of the most striking things the Bible says about we human beings is that we are made in God's image.

Let us make mankind in our image, says God. And had you been around to see Adam and Eve in action before the fall, you'd have looked at them and said, you know, the way they're living, it's so like their loving Father in heaven.

They're inside the creation, but they bear the stamp of the great one who's outside the creation in a way that nothing else does.

And even though that reflection is spoiled since the fall, it's not obliterated. There's still something image of God-like about we human beings.

And just as our first ancestors reflected God's character within the world, so we're still reflecting beings as human beings.

[8 : 25] We know this to be true just from observation. There is a mirror-like quality to a human being. We absorb and reflect things that we like, especially things that really interest us and people that we love.

We're great copiers of other. Children become more like their parents year on year. Yes, younger people here, you'll become more like your mom and dad every year.

There's nothing you can do about that. Children of parents, athletes of their sporting heroes, fans of the stars they love. So every time you see a middle-aged guy walking down the road, slightly overweight, jet black, slicked back hair, big dark glasses, spangled jacket, slightly curled lip, you'll know there's a guy who just loves Elvis.

This reflecting thing is not random. It's part of the way we're made. And it isn't a small thing either. However, what we reflect ultimately determines who we are and our destiny.

Some things are true and good and worth reflecting. Others, false and harmful. And here we need to think about what the Bible calls idolatry.

[9 : 45] Idolatry is one of the big issues in the Bible. It's a common feature of human sinfulness. If it's unfamiliar to you, just hang in there. We'll fill in some detail as we go along. I'd like you to turn to Psalm 135.

You'll find that on page 626. Psalm 135, page 626. This psalm is a great song of praise to God for His goodness, His greatness, His rescuing power, His splendid character and name.

And towards the end of the psalm, the great God of Israel is contrasted with the idols of the nations. Look at verse 15. The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by human hands.

They have mouths, but cannot speak. Eyes, but cannot see. Ears, but cannot hear. Nor is there breath in their mouths. And here's the chilling end.

Those who make them will be like them. And so will all who trust in them. The disturbing idea here is not just that idols misrepresent the true God.

[11 : 02] He can speak. He can see. He can hear. He can do whatever He chooses. It's that the human image of God, the person who worships the idol, comes to resemble not the creator in whose image he or she was made, but the idol He made Himself.

The blindness that the idol has, the idolater comes to share in. The deafness that the idol has, the idolater shares in.

The muteness that the idol has, the idolater also has. The falsehood. And ultimately, the lifelessness that the idol has, the idolater shares.

Now with that in mind, let's look at a different sort of reflecting. Turn over to the New Testament, please, to 2 Corinthians chapter 3. You'll find that on page 1100.

page 1160. 2 Corinthians chapter 3, page 1160. We read earlier on, Matthew read to us, that the Lord Jesus Christ is described in the Bible as the image of the invisible God.

[12 : 21] And people who believe His gospel are set free to see Him properly, to understand who He really is, the glorious Lord. And here the Apostle Paul, right at the end of this chapter, verse 18, describes how the person who sees Jesus clearly for what He is, will in the end be like Him.

Verse 18, we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His image with ever-increasing glory.

And so, you can become like your earthly idols, a false reflection of God, not what you were meant to be, not what you were made for, ultimately useless in the Maker's purposes, or, like the Heavenly Lord, resurrected, eternally alive, glorious, part of God's purposes forever, what you were made to be.

There really are two destinies for human beings, to become like the one who made and rescued you, or to become a grotesque, separate from God caricature of the human being you could have been.

That then is the big idea of this sermon. In the most important way possible, we human beings reflect what we desire, what we gaze on, what we long for, what we trust.

[14 : 05] And we human beings have massive capacity for desire. Turn, please, to Genesis chapter 3. We're going to spend a little bit more time here.

Genesis chapter 3. And to that passage that Angela read to us a little earlier on. There are many subtle and important things going on in these few short verses, but I want to draw your attention to one thing that Adam and Eve do in this story.

They do what Paul refers to in Romans chapter 1 as exchanging the glory of the immortal God for created things.

These people exchange the truth about their glorious creator and themselves for a deceptively reduced view of God and a deceptively elevated view of who they are.

In their minds, God is made small and they are made big. Let's look at the first of those. Think about how God is made to look here in the course of this dialogue.

[15 : 21] Verse 1. The snake was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, did God really say you must not eat from any tree in the garden?

The woman said to the snake, we may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say you must not eat fruit from the tree that's in the middle of the garden and you mustn't touch it or you'll die. You'll not certainly die, the snake said to the woman, for God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened and you'll be like God knowing good and evil.

It's such a brief dialogue, but look at how God is made to seem here. He's made to look ungenerous. Did God really say you mustn't eat from any of those trees?

He's made to look deceitful. No, no, actually, you won't die. He was lying there. He's made to look mean and restrictive. Actually, he was keeping something from you.

He knows that you could become like him. That's why he lied. In a few short sentences, the serpent paints a massively diminished picture of the loving God, which against all the evidence, they believe.

[16 : 38] It's a devastating deception. Notice also the inflated sense of self that's contained in this dialogue. They buy into that.

You could compete, you know. That's why he kept you from that tree. He was holding you back, keeping you in your place. You're a threat to him.

And they behave as though they really are in a position to call the shots. Look at verse 6. Verse 6, they become the point of reference. No longer are they listening to the word of their creator.

They, mere creatures, are choosing to do what they've been told will be really bad for them. They buy into a grotesque misrepresentation of God and a grotesquely exaggerated view of themselves.

But notice the role that desire plays here. Verse 6, the critical point in the drama. Center stage, in the spotlight, all alone, the man, the woman, and the tree.

[17 : 48] When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye and desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it.

She also gave some to her husband who was with her and he ate it. Do you see how their mind has been filled with thoughts about that created thing and what it will do for them if they have it?

And their creator and his great loving plans, they just disappeared off the scene. Instead of gazing around the garden and thinking, look at this amazing garden that the Lord has made and our job that he's given us is to make the world like this, instead of that, they gaze at the one thing, the one prohibited thing and think, I want that.

I'll only be complete when I've had that. That's how to be all that I could be. At that critical point, the desire to have, to possess, to consume the created thing totally fills their imagination and the glorious plans of the immortal God for them fade into the background.

Many of you will be familiar with the Lord of the Rings probably through the film, some of you through the book. The character of Shelob in the Lord of the Rings is an interesting character.

[19 : 35] Not really given a character in the film, so read the book, but given a character in the book. This is what's written of her. Little did she know of or care for towers or rings or anything devised by mind or hand who only desired death for all others, mind and body, and for herself, and for herself, a glut of life, swollen till the mountains could no longer hold her up and the darkness could not contain her.

It's a brilliant picture of self inflated to the nth degree, of solitary self at the center consuming everything.

In Genesis 3, that's the direction that the man and woman move towards. The people made in God's image move from being glad possessors to dissatisfied consumers.

From we have it all to there's something we lack. from we're here to serve the world to we want that thing.

From lovers to blamers. It's a terrible, terrible degradation of what it means to be a human being. We've already mentioned idolatry, the representation of God by images.

[21 : 12] In many ways, idolatry encapsulates all those features of Genesis chapter 3. A reduced image of God. The idol, well it represents God but it's so small I can pick it up and carry it around.

An inflated sense of self. Yes, the idol is made by people and how powerful they seem in comparison to it. It can't move around on its own. And a desire for the created thing.

People bow down to idols all over the world but actually they're totally in control of the things they bow down to. But idolatry is not the ultimate expression of what's going on in Genesis 3.

There's something that even more inflates humanity and diminishes God. When people no longer represent God by anything at all.

It's absolutely typical of modern western culture. The culture that we live in. the air that we breathe to look out on the world and view all those people all over the world who do bow down to real physical idols as being strangely primitive.

[22 : 25] primitive. But we are doing something much more primitive than that. Like Genesis 3 chapter verse 6 God is not in the field of vision at all and the human being is paramount and boy oh boy do we want things.

let's think about human desire online for a moment. How do we express love for things or people?

Well the answer is we give them time energy investment financial and otherwise we talk to them we talk about them it's always been the case that some of the things that human beings desire are particularly destructive we tend to call those things addictions often our addictive desires are things that pay out in various bodily sensations so food sex alcohol all have physical payouts that are obvious there are of course addictions that don't pay out physically in quite the same way but are equally destructive the rush the excitement of gambling for example many of the things we desire seriously no one would quite call addictions and yet though not quite so obviously destructive they're no less powerful I can think of offhand of lives absolutely obsessed by imaginary worlds the person who for example regularly gets the stack of novels for the library and spends all their spare time reading them

I can think of lives obsessed by golf bowls music stock market investment family gardening home improvement none of those things of course inherently wrong but totally inadequate as ultimate obsessions things now notice it's not wrong that we like the things that are in the world it's not wrong we feel insecure without food and rightly so or without shelter or without friendship and these are God given needs and God given comforts they're really good things God doesn't only comfort us with his words but with his gifts and that includes material things of all sorts it would be perverse to say that we derived no sense of pleasure from those ordinary everyday things it's when the creator's gifts eclipse him that there's a problem when instead of loving the giver we love his gifts as though they didn't come from him at all let's think about online desire the addictions of humanity are well represented online there's the pornography and the gambling

I mentioned last week second life the virtual realm that you can inhabit if you want one of the first things that people do when they log on to second life is to try deviant sexual expression now I'm not going to go into loads of detail about specifics here suffice to say that online gives you access instantly in your living room on your phone to powerful and highly destructive things and you ought not to be unaware of those or to go online unaware of them naively things that because of their instant sensory or psychological rewards are positively dangerous let me give you a couple of non-online examples to illustrate there is a reason that controlled drugs are controlled they're often really good for you in the right setting but really bad for you not in the right setting take heroin for example in its medical setting called diamorphine the most exceptional painkiller around not so good when uncontrolled fire fire is really good in the fireplace it's really good not so good elsewhere in the house haven't you found that sexual desire a god given gift but a meant to be controlled one left lying all over the place becomes dangerously ensnaring some things are pretty much always dangerous there's a reason that gambling's controlled some things are not always dangerous online gives you plenty of access to the obvious ones it would be stupid to go unprepared wouldn't it surveys of christians and pornography all come to the same conclusion about a third of people surveyed admit to being addicts or regular accesses of porn amongst younger people the figures are much much higher than that for men higher than women though the proportions of women are increasing for those in church leadership no different than amongst congregation members over a quarter of internet searches are pornography searches that means that almost certainly you will have seen porn recently or currently use it or will be exposed to it in the near future it is absolutely no help friends to be naive here if you are online without some sort of protection content filtering accountability you are a fool there are good reasons for keeping yourself away from things that are bad for you for keeping the fire in the fireplace in your home rather than in the middle of the kitchen floor if this is an area you need to find out more about

[28 : 30] I can recommend an excellent book by Tim Chester called Captured by a better vision Tim Chester Captured by a better vision really really helpful read he writes this look beyond the frame when you look at porn whether it's a still image or a movie you need to look beyond the frame within the frame you see a beautiful smiling woman or a couple enjoying amazing sex but think what's happening outside the frame see the film crew gathered around see the makeup artists the plastic surgeons the image editors see the drugs and the suicides just off screen there are women throwing up taking drugs committing suicide look beyond the frame see the warping of your view of sex of your wife of your sisters in Christ see the damage to your relationship with

God your service of his people see God's wrath against your sin look beyond the frame highly likely that we're struggling in the room with this if you are it's not only damaging but isolating it's a lonely place to be help is available perhaps the best help you can get is to talk to somebody about it a friend of mine talking about issues of his own in the process of talking about it I found its grip on me was weakened there are the obvious things there are also the less obvious some are less obvious but not less dangerous we thought earlier on about how one of the big things that happens in Genesis 3 is the inflation of the human image online makes it possible for you to inflate your human image in all kinds of ways I've come across a number of examples recently of people whose lives have been completely destroyed not by porn but by online gaming you pick the character you control the action you are the center of this amazingly exciting imaginary world the reinforcement of an inflated sense of self is massively strong in gaming and so it's not a surprise to find that massive destructive addiction issues have been reported in relation to online gaming world of warcraft now has only only five million active subscribers it used to be more than twice that many

I've come across in the last few years a couple of marriages that have fallen apart largely as a result of world of warcraft gaming obsession there are other major players now player unknown battlegrounds has sold 30 million copies and has over a million active players at any one time like right now there are more than a million active players people the 11th international classification of diseases ICD-11 will come out later this year and include gaming disorder as a disease but it's obviously more subtle than that as well isn't it online we've already said that pleasure and meaning and the sense of control can give you a full sense of significance or security without God and the virtual world brings massive opportunity for those things that give pleasure and a sense of significance and control without

God think of insignificant things just like instant messaging it's just saying hi but it gives you a sense of significance when you get one doesn't it someone says hi it makes me feel significant if loads of people say hi it makes me feel really significant do you count how many people like your Facebook posts does it make you feel better about yourself if more people like them I suspect it does and then there's Christmas shopping which I can assure you gives at least some people a real buzz online and there are all the other online consumptions that so easily represent me at the center of a world where God has become peripheral think of all the time invested online just the time time spent browsing messaging shopping learning think of the time it must be rewarding us mustn't it in some way to give so much time why is it that I must go online does it give me a sense of significance of control all that information at my fingertips

[35 : 04] Christian things or very familiar he's worth looking at how does Paul put it here we all who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory are being transformed into his image with ever increasing glory Jesus holds out to us the possibility of knowing him beginning to grow an understanding of him and in the end when he returns being totally transformed as human beings into his character remade to be the people that we were always meant to be deep down exactly the person God designed you to be Jesus holds that out to us so here's the question where is he in your vision in your imagination in your dreams in your hopes in your longings where is he in your online life helping you to see him more clearly or is it a distraction

God's image let's pray together just a minute to respond in the quiet to what God has said to us and then I'll lead us in prayer gracious God and heavenly father we thank you that you made us in your own image you've made us to reflect your character in the world you've given us the great privilege of being your representatives of pursuing your concerns and now through the

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