



"Occasional conquests of sin do not amount to a mortifying of it."  
—John Owen

07-Jan-22

## Concupiscence

The word of the day is [\*concupiscence\*](#). It is an archaic English noun taken directly from a Latin verb that literally means "with desiring," that is, "to yearn" or "to long" for. "Concupiscence" gets little circulation in these modern days, but a few centuries ago—probably because of the ubiquity of the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible—it was a standard part of the Christian vocabulary.

Modern dictionaries like the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* define *concupiscence* as "strong desire, especially sexual desire," and while this meaning is not wrong, it tips our perception toward things sexual. It lists more than a dozen synonyms—such as "eroticism," "libidinousness," "lustfulness," "passion," and "salaciousness"—and all but the more general "desire" have an obvious sexual connotation. Most people, seeing this implication, think no further, which, in terms of our Christian understanding, is a mistake.

The KJV employs this word three times in the New Testament: [Romans 7:8](#); [Colossians 3:5](#); and [I Thessalonians 4:5](#). The first of these presents the reader with the notion that, when *concupiscence* was in wider circulation, it did not necessarily mean just "sexual desire." The apostle Paul writes, "But [sin](#),

taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence" ([Romans 7:8](#), KJV). Are we to believe that sin generated only sexual desire in him? Obviously not, for the translators understood that the apostle was writing generally of wrong desires, inserting "all manner of" to broaden the scope of "concupiscence." We see this idea more readily in the New King James Version (NKJV): "But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire."

While his use of "concupiscence" ("lust," NKJV) in [I Thessalonians 4:5](#) appears in the context of [sexual immorality](#) (see verse 3), Paul's usage of it in [Colossians 3:5](#), also in the context of sexual sins, shades toward a more general kind of desire. Paul writes, "Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; [fornication](#), uncleanness, inordinate affection [*passion*, NKJV], evil concupiscence [*evil desire*, NKJV], and [covetousness](#), which is idolatry."

Paul seems to have ordered his list from the physical act of fornication back to the original, abstract source of the sin. The apostle James uses a reverse sequence of a similar sort in [James 1:14-15](#): "But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death." Thus, we can deduce that Paul is teaching in [Colossians 3:5](#) that [Christians](#) must mortify—"put to death" (NKJV) or overcome entirely—not just the physical sin but also all its associated wrong acts, emotions, desires, and motivations, that is, all the way back to the very roots of their sinfulness, their covetousness and idolatry.

In this context, "evil concupiscence" appears second-to-last, indicating that it refers to more than sexual desire. It is the "next step" on the road to sin after a person's original covetous inclination. Like its usage in [Romans 7:8](#), it encompasses every kind of wrong desire, though sexual ones are certainly foremost in Paul's mind in [Colossians 3:5](#).

In all three cases, the underlying Greek word is *epithymia* (*Strong's* #1939), which is in its simplest form "earnest desire." While its object can sometimes be a good thing (see [Galatians 5:17](#), "desires of the Spirit"), it is most often craving, lusting, longing, or yearning for forbidden things.

What occurred in the Garden of Eden is a prime example of *epithymia* in action. In no uncertain terms, [God](#) forbade Adam and Eve to eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil ([Genesis 2:16-17](#)). The serpent did his deceptive work of clouding the issue for Eve ([Genesis 3:1-5](#)), but ultimately, the first humans chose to sin based on craving what God had forbidden. "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that is was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate" ([Genesis 3:6](#)).

In this example, their evil desire was not for anything sexual in nature but for tasty, good-looking food that promised forbidden knowledge and understanding. They directed their concupiscence toward getting for themselves what God had denied them. Human nature does not like being denied anything, and it invariably turns its desires and resources toward acquiring the prohibited thing. The apostle John calls this ungodly desire "the lust [*epithymia*] of the flesh, the lust [*epithymia*] of the eyes, and the pride of life [the arrogant and unwarranted confidence in self (rather than God)]" ([1 John 2:16](#)). He sums up all such evil desires as "the lust [*epithymia*] of [[the world](#)]," which is passing away (verse 17).

In the end, the theological meaning of *concupiscence* is "worldly desires," "ungodly desires," or "desires for what God has forbidden." It is the opposite of seeking to do the will of God, as John notes in the latter half of verse 17: ". . . but he who does the will of God abides forever." To this process of reversal God has called us: to cease longing for forbidden, carnal, worldly, ultimately useless things and to turn our desires toward approved, spiritual, godly, and eternal things. In short, He has set us on a path of conversion and transformation from earthly to heavenly.

Paul provides an example of this change in his instructions to young Timothy:

Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from [dishonor], he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work. Flee also youthful lusts [*epithymia*]; but pursue righteousness, [faith](#), [love](#), [peace](#) with those who call on the Lord out of a [pure heart](#). But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes,

knowing that they generate strife. And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition . . . . ([II Timothy 2:21-25](#))

The formula is simple in principle: We must jettison our concupiscence, our ungodly desires of every sort. In their place, we endeavor to live righteous lives and grow in God's character. Instead of picking fights and quarreling, we behave gently, patiently, and humbly toward everyone, teaching what is right and good, even if only by our example. While in our fleshly bodies, we will always be tempted to pursue things that are contrary to God's way, but God desires to see us resist them and overcome them, which we can do if we seek Him always, "strong in the Lord and in the power of His might" ([Ephesians 6:10](#)).

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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by David F. Maas

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