

# Wanting God More than Anything

Bob Kauflin<sup>1</sup>

From the moment of birth, we become aware of wants. Our first wants are genuine needs. We realize Mom is no longer supplying oxygen, so we frantically flex our lungs, gasp for air and let the world know we're not particularly happy about what just happened to us. Soon we crave nourishment, and gladly receive whatever is provided. But soon our wants move beyond basic needs. As we grow, we increasingly desire a variety of things we don't possess or think we don't have enough of—toys, clothes, friends, free time, cars, money, pleasure, prestige, CDs, tools, hobbies. The list grows faster than we do.

It's not wrong in and of itself to want anything (as long as that thing isn't inherently sinful). The real issue is how much we want it. Any desire can compete in our hearts for the place that only God should hold. The Psalmist Asaph expressed his unique affection for God in these words: "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Ps 73:25–26).

This is the heart of a worshiper. The Bible knows nothing of a worship that relates to God out of mere duty or performance. In fact, the essence of worship is wanting God more than anything on earth. Or as John Piper puts it, "I believe it can be shown Biblically that all our behavior should be motivated by a thirst for more and more satisfaction in God....When our whole life is consumed with pursuing satisfaction in God, everything we do highlights the value and worth of God. Which simply means that everything becomes worship."<sup>2</sup>

In other words, wanting God more than anything shows that he is more important to us than anything else that might appeal to us. Of course, worship is about exalting, praising and honoring God. However, the glory these actions bring to God is directly related to how much we *want* to do them. And that depends on how much we want God himself.

In the Old Testament, the primary sin confronted is idolatry. "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex 20:3). Time after time, God's people are guilty of esteeming other

---

© 2006 Sovereign Grace Ministries. All rights reserved. This paper is made available free of charge in this format from Sovereign Grace Ministries for use by individuals, churches, or other groups. Reproduction and distribution of up to 50 paper copies of this material is encouraged; under no circumstances may a charge be rendered to the recipient. For permission to reproduce more than 50 paper copies, or for permission to reproduce this article online, please contact Sovereign Grace Ministries.

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

<sup>1</sup> Bob Kauflin is director of worship development for Sovereign Grace Ministries. Bob also writes on worship at his blog, *Worship Matters* ([www.WorshipMatters.com](http://www.WorshipMatters.com)).

<sup>2</sup> John Piper, from his message "What is Worship? (Part 2)," delivered at the 1994 Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology (April 8–9, 1994)

people and things as more important than God. In the New Testament, the focus shifts from addressing idolatry to confronting sinful desires of the heart. “As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance” (1Pe 1:14). However, the root issue is the same—desiring something other than God to rule or satisfy your life.

The idols we seek to worship in God’s place are rarely as obvious as a golden calf or a tottering wooden image. They surprise us with their subtlety, pervasiveness and power. We find ourselves wanting the silliest things more than we want God.

We’ll identify some of the idols we most frequently want more than God, exposing their inadequacy to fulfill God’s role, and extolling the uniqueness and desirability of the one true God.

I trust your love for God and his all-surpassing greatness will grow deeper in the process.

## More than the Praise of Men (Part 1)

Few of us appear more “spiritual” than when we gather with the church to praise God in song. Voices raised, faces bright, hands uplifted (or maybe holding a hymnal)—surely, worship is taking place, right?

Worship is definitely taking place. The question is: To whom is it directed? It can be dangerous to assume that, if we’re surrounded by other Christians exalting God, we must be exalting God, too. As you’re probably aware, self-focused and ungodly thoughts can pass through our minds even as we sing worshipful words. Is it possible to worship God on the outside while worshiping myself on the inside? Sadly, yes.

Jesus confronted this type of hypocrisy among the religious leaders of his day. “Everything they do is done for men to see” (Mt 23:5). What a sobering indictment. While others esteemed the piety of their clothing, prayers, and teachings, Jesus detected their true motives. He pointed out how they loved the most important seats in the synagogues and enjoyed having others call them “Rabbi.” What was the issue? “They loved praise from men more than praise from God” (John 12:43).

We shouldn’t be too quick to comfort ourselves that we’re not first-century Pharisees strutting about in flowing robes. The spirit of the Pharisees is alive and well in our generation. Let’s take a moment to look at some of the ways it’s revealed.

Ask yourself a few questions. What am I most conscious of as I’m standing in front of my closet on Sunday morning, picking out the clothes I’ll wear? Have you ever thought,

“Oh, I can’t wear that old thing. It’s so out of fashion.” Or perhaps, “This new outfit is going to make people sit up and take notice!” Or maybe, “I just don’t have anything to wear!” Of course, wanting to look your best is not evil in itself. It’s when we are more concerned with how we appear to others than how we appear before God that idolatry has been exposed. Whose opinion matters most to you? That’s the real question.

Here’s another example. When we arrive at the Sunday meeting, what fills our minds? Do we eagerly look forward to expressing wholehearted devotion to the King of the universe? Or do our minds drift to checking out what everyone’s wearing, taking note of who doesn’t greet us, or struggling with the attention that someone else is receiving?

I’m glad that while I sing praises to God, no one’s projecting my thoughts on a screen. Sometimes those words could read, “I want people to praise ME like I’m praising YOU, O Lord.” Let’s be thankful we have a Savior who cleanses even our “holy” acts, as well as a Deliverer who can turn our hearts to truly desire his glory above our own.

## More than the Praise of Men (Part 2)

We looked at the temptation we all face to be more concerned about what others think than what God thinks, even as we worship him. I believe worship leaders and worship teams face a unique challenge in this area. While seeking to draw attention to God during worship, we can be tempted to draw attention to ourselves. (A pop culture that tends to worship trendy musicians only complicates the issue.) In reaction, some churches limit the role of the worship team, perhaps by placing the band off to the side or restricting the role of the leader. I believe such efforts ultimately fail to address the real issue: the sinful human heart.

Leadership is always a temptation to self-glorification, although most of us are smart enough to avoid blatant expressions of arrogance. “Wasn’t I great this morning?” isn’t something we typically ask, even though we might be thinking it! However, here are some practical questions that will help reveal what’s going on in our hearts, even when we’re unaware of it.

- Am I insecure about how others might perceive me, sometimes leading to fear of stepping out into a new area of worship leading? When I’m asked to do something I’m not completely confident in, do I anticipate God using my weakness, or do I brace for being embarrassed when my pride is exposed?
- Am I distracted by, threatened by, or ungrateful for the gifts God has given others? Am I able to sincerely encourage those who are more gifted than I am?

- Do I often compare myself to others? Whether I think I'm better or worse, the root issue is the same.
- Do I constantly belittle my own contribution or talents? This can lead others to balance my assessment through encouragement and flattery. Sometimes we secretly hope that will be the result. Speaking negatively of your own gifts makes it more difficult for others to give you an honest assessment.
- Am I bitter or depressed about not being chosen or used more? This is more likely to happen when singers and players are on a rotating schedule, or when a special event is approaching. God gives out gifts of varying degrees; we're foolish to think otherwise.
- In remembering a meeting where I was particularly effective, do I tend to reflect on how God used me, as opposed to all the other people who may have been used?

Are any of these questions painful? A preacher I know likes to say, "If it still hurts, it ain't dead yet." What ain't dead yet is our desire to receive more glory than God. Or maybe just to share a little bit with him. Fortunately, God won't let that happen. He loves us too much to let us live in that deception.

When questions like these hurt, we must be ruthless in dealing with the sin thus revealed. One of the most effective ways I've found is to confess proud thoughts to others on the worship team. It may be frightening at first, but God has promised to give grace to the humble (1Pe 5:7). And what sweet fruit humility bears!

## More than This Life

Who wants to die? When we hear of someone no longer eager to live, we might assume he struggles with manic depression, is fighting a painful and incurable disease, or has simply lost the will to live. But in some cases, such assumptions would be dead wrong.

Listen to these words from a man of superior intellect, in the prime of his life, with a ministry that was affecting thousands. "We...would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2Co 5:8). "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain....I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body" (Php 1:21, 23-24).

What kind of person would write such things? Someone like the apostle Paul, a man who desired the joys of eternity with God in heaven more than all this earthly life can offer.

Paul had no morbid interest in death. Nor was he unappreciative of God's temporal gifts. He simply knew where his greatest treasures lay.

In this series of columns, we've looked at some of the idols that can woo us away from loving and worshiping God. None of these are evil in themselves:

- The praise of men—Scripture commends living in such a way that we earn a good earthly reputation (Pr 22:1).
- Control—God expects us to exercise good stewardship over our responsibilities (Pr 6:6–8).
- Pleasure and possessions—We were created to drink deeply of the temporal pleasures that God provides (1Ti 6:17).

Yet, if we set our hopes and longings only on the things of this life, we are mistaking the introduction for the story!

Paul was certainly well positioned to seek a ministry that brought him fame and glory. Why didn't he? Because Paul was a worshiper of God, first and last. He lived for a purpose greater than himself or his own life: to prepare for the moment when he would look into the eyes of his Maker and receive what was due him for the things he had done on earth (2Co 5:10). Paul's view of death was an informed view. He knew that our time on earth is only a preparation, that death is the beginning of the life that is truly life. So, Paul commanded the Colossians to do what he did: "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:2–3).

If you're a believer in Jesus Christ, your life, too, is hidden with Christ in God. Is that how you live? What are the greatest desires of your heart? Where are you storing up your treasures?

Worshippers of God understand that, even with all the good of this life, nothing is better than God himself. A worshiper lives in eager anticipation of the time when he or she will bow at the very throne of God to declare the glories of the Lamb. On that day our words, our worship, and our passion for God will have no bounds.

May God, by his Spirit and grace, make each of us that kind of worshiper here, in this life.

## More than Control

Are you a control freak? Maybe you know one. Control freaks are people who can't rest until everything in their world lines up with their will. Sometimes they admit that God is in control of the really big things—the weather, the identity of their birth parents, natural disasters—but they'd rather take on responsibility for everything else.

Control freaks (idolaters in biblical terms) are on a collision course with reality. A basic starting point in worshiping God is acknowledging, "There is a God, and I am not him." God is the One who rules ultimately, who governs sovereignly, and who answers to no one. As Paul writes in Romans 11:34–36, "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen." Or, in the words of Twila Paris, "God is in control."

The idol of control will directly hinder our worship of God. It's revealed in different ways, and can be seen even in those who don't see themselves as control freaks. When my plans are interrupted or messed up completely, or when my perspective on a situation is ignored, it quickly reveals who I think is in ultimate control.

Some of us face issues much more serious than these. Perhaps it's an illness for which doctors can find no cure. Maybe you're attempting to make sense of an unexpected death. Someone desiring control might withdraw in discouragement, or internally shake a fist at God in anger, insisting that he explain what's going on. Control freaks find it difficult to submit to God's always wise, loving, and all-knowing plans. But who knows better, God or me? The answer is painfully obvious, even as our hearts work overtime to convince us otherwise. This is not to minimize the place of appropriate grief. But grieving is worlds apart from implying that we would make wiser choices if only we were in control.

A few years ago a friend shared with me how God became bigger to her during a family crisis. Her twelve-year-old daughter had developed a life-threatening infection after an otherwise routine surgical procedure. As the situation grew worse, the mother's fears deepened. She had no control over her daughter's life, and she knew it. Her pastor's wife suggested she leave the hospital and spend time worshiping God at home. For 45 minutes she allowed the truths she was singing to override her craving to be in control of her life. The result? I'll let you read her own words: "I returned to the hospital at about 9 o'clock, totally at peace, and even cheerful. I was sure that whatever the outcome, no power on earth or above could make him forego his purpose, nor sever my soul from his love." In other words, she refused to serve her desire to control her life, and joyfully submitted to God's sovereign hand. In God's mercy, her daughter was healed, and came home a few days later. More importantly, the mother refused to serve the false idol of being in control, and chose to worship the Almighty One instead.

May the same be true of us.

## More than Stuff

It happens every few years. I finally reach a place of contentment because I think I've got the fashion thing down. But then I find out that what I'm wearing is actually out of date. Not that I'm seeking some ultimate state of "coolness." I just don't enjoy hearing stifled laughter or gasps of disbelief when people see what I'm wearing. So I now let my wife, Julie, select my wardrobe. I also encourage my kids to give me clothes for Christmas, and seek their input when buying a new pair of glasses.

But as I said, it never lasts. Clothing styles seem to change before I'm aware of it. I have similar struggles in other areas—computers, for example. When I bought my computer four years ago, it ran like lightning, processing information at what seemed then to be an inconceivable rate. No longer. I now groan weekly as I read the Sunday ads to see how much more computing power I could have bought if I had only waited.

It's a subtle but pervasive temptation. Sometimes I really think that my life will be more fulfilling if I just get some more stuff. Whether clothes, computers, cars, or careers, the root issue is the same. I am serving an idol—the desire for things.

The things of this life have a peculiar ability to engage our hearts. Computers frequently expose this idol in my life. Have you ever sat down to a new computer game or software program, only to look up "a few minutes" later and find that an hour has passed? Or two hours...or three! I can't count the times that has happened to me. Sadly, we don't often relate to God with a similar passion. When's the last time you lost track of time while worshiping God?

Jesus said, "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Mt 6:31–33).

"Seeking first his kingdom" means, among other things, that my heart is drawn more strongly to explore the majesty of God than the inner workings of my computer. It means that my idle moments are more often spent reflecting on God's mercy revealed at the cross than on what new CD I want to buy.

This doesn't mean that we can't enjoy the many things we own, or that God never wants us to improve what we have. But even as I write these words I'm saddened by the

innumerable hours I give to pondering how I'm going to add to or update my current possessions.

May the Lord both convict us of and deliver us from the tragic notion that our lives consist in the abundance of our possessions (Lk 12:15). May we instead realize that the person who possesses God plus a thousand marvelous created things owns no more than the person who possesses God alone.

## More than Earthly Pleasures

Have you ever considered that God, if he had wanted to, could have created the world to be a very bland place? What if rainbows and sunsets only came in shades of gray? What if all food tasted like yesterday's overcooked oatmeal? But God's creation explodes with colors, sounds, textures, tastes, and smells we're able to enjoy. Our taste buds can distinguish between lobster and tofu, chocolate and gelatin (and aren't you glad?). Our sense of smell enables us to appreciate apple pies baking, freshly cut evergreens, and brewing coffee. We spend untold dollars and hours on art, music, and drama for the pleasure we derive from them.

All this points to a creation God intended us to enjoy. God "richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (1Ti 6:17). But in a fallen world, each gift from God is also a temptation to value the gift over the Giver. So we find another idol opposed to our worship of God: the desire for earthly pleasures.

Our problem is not that we desire pleasure. It's that we look for it in all the wrong places. We fail to delight ourselves in the Lord, as we are commanded in Psalm 37. C.S. Lewis says it like this:

Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a [vacation] at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."<sup>3</sup>

Most of us have been taught that we should worship God, not because we enjoy it, but because it is a command. This is an unhelpful comparison. Duty and delight were meant to work with, not against, each other.

When it's Sunday morning, and you'd much rather be at home catching up on your sleep, reading the paper, or playing a round of golf, how do you handle it? If you're like most Christians, you make the right decision and go to church. We're told this is a "sacrifice of

praise,” meaning that even though we don’t feel like telling God how great he is, we do it anyway.

Let me suggest an alternative method of dealing with our attachment to earthly pleasures. First, acknowledge your lack of passion for God as sin, as evidence that we are indeed fallen. Second, cry out to God to give you a desire for him. If God doesn’t give me love for himself, then I’ll surely love something else. Then, and only then, turn to worship God with all your heart, expecting him to give you a greater joy in his presence than in all the pleasures this earthly life offers.

The pleasures of this life were never meant to satisfy completely our desires for beauty, fulfillment, wonder, and love. They only point to the fuller and more complete pleasures we find in a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. May our worship in this life, then, prepare us for the time when we will enjoy pleasures at his right hand forevermore.

---

<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis quoted in John Piper, *Desiring God*, p 17