

Week 17

Two Ways of Desiring

Guide: What Do We Want?



We have begun to contemplate the life of Jesus. We have seen how, from the very beginning, his life was shaped by profound trust in God, surrender to God's plan, and the acceptance of poverty and rejection. We have been praying to know, love, and be with him more deeply. Before we move on to contemplate his active ministry, we will take a few weeks to prepare for how this retreat will shape our lives and the choices we will make as we draw more closely to Jesus.

It is desire that leads to choice. To understand the choices we make, and to prepare to make new ones, we must understand our desires and prepare to reform them.

Throughout this week, in all the in-between times, especially in the busiest and most pressured moments, we will try to understand the way of desiring that places us with Jesus. And to freely

respond to Jesus' way, we will try to understand the very opposite way of desiring, a way that surrounds us in our culture today.

The clearest message from our society today, and the values that shape the advertising that tries to seduce us, is that we will be happier if we *have more*. It's subtle but consistent. If *some* is good, then *more* is better. It seems so natural to work hard to earn more so that I can have more. We acquire and consume and become addicted to some bad things, but normally we just adopt a lifestyle that fits what we can afford. And it's not just *things* that we accumulate. We experience a desire to gather *accomplishments* or *attractive relationships*—other indications of our success. What is closely associated with this movement is the inevitable connection between what we possess and *our identity*. It's tempting to think that we *are* more, because we *have* more. We judge one another by these *measures of success*. And while there is nothing inherently bad about having things or achievements, or with the recognition and adulation that goes with them, they can seductively lead to pride, arrogance, and independence from God. *Riches, leading to honors. Honors, leading to pride*. This is a pattern of desiring we want to understand insofar as it is at work in us.

We've already seen that the way Jesus desires is quite different. His way of making choices is formed by a pattern of desiring that we've already been attracted to and that we want to understand more deeply this week. Jesus attracts us to the fundamental desire of trusting in God. When we place our lives in God's hands, as Jesus did, we experience the vulnerability of that surrender. When all is gift, we can no longer measure ourselves by what we've accumulated. This poverty of spirit, and the freedom that comes with it, often feels wonderful. Jesus, however, wants us to understand that it is quite countercultural. If riches lead to honors, poverty of any kind inevitably leads to *dishonor*. Much of our society doesn't respect simple trust in God. From the desire for spiritual poverty comes the free openness to actual poverty, if it should come to us. The less we desire to acquire, the less we will be well regarded by others. Therefore, the desire to trust in God alone leads to the incredible desire for the dishonor, humiliation, and contempt that will place me with Jesus. For, ultimately, this is the path to humility and humble readiness for any service with him. *Spiritual poverty leading to humiliation. Humiliation leading to humility.* This week we want to understand this way of desiring.

The help that follows will assist us in entering into these reflections more deeply. They will help us get started and to turn these reflections into prayer. The photo of the land mine victims can help us reflect upon those who are on the margins of society.

Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week

Meditating on the two ways of desiring this week is really simpler than it first may seem. It isn't about making a choice between independence from God and union with Jesus. We've already made that choice. All we are asking for this week is the grace to become aware of the ways of desiring that are at work around us. Our Christian faith tradition has long pictured this struggle as a battle being waged for our very souls. Our effort this week is to understand the movements at work in this spiritual warfare. There are these two competing *strategies* for attracting our hearts and shaping our desiring, and therefore the choices we ultimately make. The grace of spiritual freedom that is being offered us is based on the wisdom that comes from this insight into these underlying movements.

All we have to do this week is reflect on the two ways. I might keep repeating in my head, no matter what I'm doing or where I'm going, *Riches, honors, pride. Poverty, dishonor, humility.*

Eventually, I'll find ways to *flesh it out* as I keep rolling it around in my head and let it interact with my daily experiences: *Having more leads to thinking I am more, which leads to pride. Being spiritually or actually poor leads to being perceived as being less, which leads to humility.*

My desire to really understand these dynamics is fed by my growing desire to know, love, and serve Jesus. It is almost exhilarating to see clearly how Jesus, who loves me and is attracting me to himself, is *liberating me* with these insights and with a growing desire to be *with him* in the patterns of his life.

If we are faithful to this reflection all week, we will see how these movements are at work in our everyday life. We will also experience the *taste* of a desire to reach for the freedom being offered us here.

As our devotion grows, we might use a very simple exercise to dramatize the seriousness of our desire and the depth of our sincerity. It's as if we say to ourselves, "I really *do* want these graces."

We might first turn to Mary, Jesus' dear mother, whom we spent time imagining these past weeks. We can ask her to beg her son, on our behalf, to give us these graces. We can name them. We can say we want to understand these ways of desiring and to be given spiritual poverty, and even actual poverty, if that would help us serve God more and help us save our souls. If it helps, our prayer to Mary could end with the Hail Mary.

Then we might turn to Jesus and ask him to beg his God and Father, on our behalf, for the same graces. And if it helps, our prayer to Jesus could end with the Soul of Christ.

Finally, we might turn to our God and beg on our own behalf for these graces. And our prayer to God could end with the Lord's Prayer.

We remember that our progress is by God's gift. And one gift opens the way for our receiving another. We have seen how these graces prepare us for new graces. All we need to do is stay open and trusting that the One who brought us this far along our journey will graciously remain faithful in bringing us to its conclusion.

For the Journey: Who Are We?

When Jesus is baptized, he publicly assumes his position or mission as the Beloved. We contemplate this scene and wonder whether we want to go with him. He is heading for his temptation by the devil to not be obedient to what he has heard. He remains faithful to his baptismal dignity and destiny. Throughout his life he will hear other calls and identities that will call him away from being the Savior.

At this point in the retreat we consider how we answer the universal human question, "How do I know who I am?" Our identities are fragile enough, and we wonder about and we hear various invitations to just how to answer this most important question. This is a week of considering and evaluating the strategies of the two main contestants in the battle for our souls' identities. There is the Evil One and his minions in one army and there is Jesus peacefully inviting us.

We pray this week to understand how positively attractive the plan of the Evil One is to answer the question about our identity. First the Evil Spirit will attract us to solve the question by accumulating possessions that we will be able to point to and say, "There! I must be somebody, because I have all these material trophies."

So we pray about how attracted we can be by those things that in themselves might be very good. Do we possess them or do they possess us? The rich young man was tied up by what he had, because those things told him and others who he was.

The next step the enemy of our human nature tries, after we still cannot peacefully answer the question by the amount of our goods, is to attain a position of importance by which we have other people telling us who we are. Prestige and power are so attractive, and the Evil One tempts Jesus and us as well to define ourselves by our titles and honors. The advance is toward greater and greater dependency on something outside ourselves to create a sense of worth and self. The third and most fatal trap of the Leader of Destruction is a radical stance of independence from God, a prideful appreciation of ourselves as our own cause and sustainer. We need not God but more things and people as testimonies to our undaunted spirit.

We turn then to the camp of Jesus and he who has heard from his Father exactly who he is, who invites us to listen to that same baptizing and confirming voice telling us that we too are the beloved of God. We have listened to the Tempter and his offerings; we spend time considering how attractive the invitation is to so believe who we are that we need not solve the question by having something outside us affirm ourselves—a spirit of simple openness, which Jesus called poverty of spirit. We know what things are, what they are for, and where they have come from.

We hear the freedom from and freedom for expressed when Jesus invites us to not be concerned about being humbled or even humiliated because our names and identities are given to us by the Creator.

Freedom from possessions and prestige allows us to walk the walk of the free Jesus, whose actions and style we are contemplating this week. He knew who he was and simply asks us these days to so accept ourselves as the beloved of God that imitating him becomes our way of expressing who we are. We live now not merely as our independent selves; Christ lives in and through us.

This week we face our own ways of being attracted by the tricks and trade of the Seducer. We also find our hearts and minds being drawn to the ways and wisdom of Jesus.

In These or Similar Words . . .

Dear Mary,

I haven't spent a lot of time talking with you since I was a child. Now, doing this retreat, I want to move closer to your son, and I find myself wanting to get to know you. In the past weeks as I've been praying, I

have been picturing your life and the way you lived it with Joseph and Jesus. I see the way you taught Jesus, and as I watch you struggle with being a parent and dealing with married life, I find myself able to connect with you more.

I want so deeply to receive the grace and courage to live my life the way Jesus did. Please ask Jesus to accept me in my struggle to serve him. I can see the many ways I cling to my pride, arrogance, and independence from God. I always think of independence as a very good thing, and yet when I try to be independent from God, it's really my way of trying to be God. Go to your son, please, Mary. Ask Jesus to help me to accept my limitations, to embrace them as sources of grace in my life. My struggle for perfection won't bring me closer to God, but my struggle to accept my flaws might.

Hail Mary, full of grace . . .

Oh, Jesus,

I turn to you in such humility. I am so drawn to the kind of life you led on earth, but it seems impossible for me! I am so caught up in the subtlest kind of struggle: a few honors or awards here or there are nice, but they're never enough. I want more honors, more recognition. I have restructured my life to fit the opinion of the world, and slowly I have drifted away from the kind of life I want to lead.

I ask myself, "What can it hurt?" At first, it's just some applause, some people telling me how wonderful I am. But then I read the retreat guide for this week and I know what is wrong—how subtly the world has changed my viewpoint. Suddenly I am the honors and awards, and if they stop, what will become of me? I have lost myself in this career-climbing, out-of-balance life. It's not that my job is bad or even that the honors are harmful; it's that I have lost my perspective. Dear Jesus, ask God to help me to resist the

things in this world that keep me from the humility and poverty of a life like yours.

Jesus, may all that is in you flow into me . . .

Loving God,

You put your son on this earth to become one of us—for us. Help me to watch how he lived and pattern my life after his. I know that with my arrogance and independence I want to do this myself, but now, at least for today, at this moment, I know I can't. Please, God, give me the grace to imitate Jesus in all things, even those that frighten me. I'm not even looking at the dramatic things like torture and crucifixion, but at the way he simply put the needs of other people ahead of his own. Dear God, I want to live like that, but I am sometimes so far away from it.

Be with me in my struggle. Let me only seek your approval for my life. Let me become aware of the quiet ways in which I am seduced away from following your son to becoming a slave to the world.

Our Father, who art in heaven . . .

Scripture Readings

Matthew 5:1–16

Galatians 5:16–26

Philippians 4:11–15

1 Timothy 6:6–10, 17–19

1 Peter 5:1–11