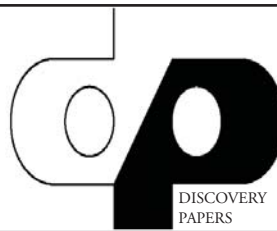


SEE, WANT, TAKE

SERIES: ONE NECESSARY THING



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In 2008, eminent Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith and his research team surveyed two hundred and thirty young adults, eighteen to twenty-three years old, about their moral lives. The default position of most of the respondents, when asked about morality, was that moral choices are just a matter of individual taste.

Is it true? Is morality simply a matter of individual taste? If it is, if we make moral choices solely on the basis of individual taste, where will such choices take us? Samson, who is featured in Judges 14-16, did whatever he wanted to do. Let's see where such choices took him, and let's see what we can learn about a moral lifestyle based on individual taste.

In Judges 13, the angel of the Lord—God himself—appeared to a married couple who were unable to conceive and told them that they would give birth to a son who would be especially devoted to the Lord. The son's name was Samson, and in Judges 14 he springs into action.

Samson sees and wants

Judges 14:1-4:

¹Samson went down to Timnah and saw there a young Philistine woman. ²When he returned, he said to his father and mother, "I have seen a Philistine woman in Timnah; now get her for me as my wife."

³His father and mother replied, "Isn't there an acceptable woman among your relatives or among all our people? Must you go to the uncircumcised Philistines to get a wife?"

But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me. She's the right one for me." ⁴(His parents did not know that this was from the LORD, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines; for at that time they were ruling over Israel.)

Samson, set apart for special devotion to the Lord even before he was conceived, shows no interest in the

things of the Lord. The only thing that interests him is what he sees, and he sees a Philistine woman. Instead of delivering his people from the Philistines according to the decree of the Lord, Samson seeks to marry one of them! No matter Deuteronomy 7:1-5, which prohibits Israelites from marrying foreign women lest they forsake the Lord and worship other gods. Samson wants the woman, and he wants her now.

His parents suggest that an Israelite woman would be a better choice, but Samson defends his preference by noting that the Philistine woman is literally "right in my eyes." Here he recapitulates the sin of Eve, who liked what she saw and therefore took from the forbidden tree (Genesis 3:6). Samson, as an individual, also sums up the period of the Judges, during which everyone literally "did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:5).¹

Things aren't looking so good either for Samson or for Israel. Nevertheless, and shockingly, the narrator notes that Samson's sinful determination to marry a Philistine is literally "from the Lord"—not in the sense that it originates with the Lord but in the sense that it will be used by him. Unbeknownst to Samson's parents, and even to Samson himself, the Lord envisions using Samson's desire for a pagan woman against the pagans, who are dominating the Israelites. What sort of scenario might the Lord envision? We'll have to keep reading.

Validation of desires

Our world, which is ruled by the eyes, is not unlike Samson's. We see something and we want it. Little in our world regulates our desires; on the contrary, much in our world validates our desires. In our time and place, virtually no desire deserves to go unsatisfied.

Those like Samson, who are especially gifted, find it relatively easy to get what they want. They quickly learn that many people are more than willing to say yes to the rich and famous, the beautiful and the brilliant. Rock stars become accustomed to getting what they want. Who needs God when you can get pretty much anything you want?

In the 2008 survey of young adults concerning their

moral lives, the following responses were typical:

— “It’s up to the individual. Who am I to say?”

— “I would do what I thought made me happy or how I felt. I have no other way of knowing what to do but how I internally feel.”

— “I mean, I guess what makes something right is how I feel about it. But different people feel different ways, so I couldn’t speak on behalf of anyone else as to what’s right and wrong.”

There is much to be said for making decisions based on how one “feels,” but there is little to be said for making decisions solely based on what one feels, to the exclusion of all other factors.

Smith, the Notre Dame sociologist, and his researchers emphasize that schools, institutions, and families have not given young adults the resources to cultivate their moral intuitions, think more broadly about moral obligations, and check degrading behavior. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks observes, “In this way, the study says more about adult America than youthful America.” Samson’s parents, and the rest of Israel during the time of the Judges, would fit right in.²

If we are inclined to make an important decision solely on the basis of what we feel, perhaps God, in his grace, will give us some sort of warning before we get in too deep. He gives Samson a warning, anyway.

Samson takes

Judges 14:5-9:

⁵Samson went down to Timnah together with his father and mother. As they approached the vineyards of Timnah, suddenly a young lion came roaring toward him. ⁶The Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon him so that he tore the lion apart with his bare hands as he might have torn a young goat. But he told neither his father nor his mother what he had done. ⁷Then he went down and talked with the woman, and he liked her.

⁸Some time later, when he went back to marry her, he turned aside to look at the lion’s carcass, and in it he saw a swarm of bees and some honey. ⁹He scooped out the honey with his hands and ate as he went along. When he

rejoined his parents, he gave them some, and they too ate it. But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey from the lion’s carcass.

Just as we’re wondering how, or whether, the Lord will use Samson’s desire for a Philistine woman to accomplish his will, the narrator introduces us to another storyline. Samson, on his way to Timnah, the town of the Philistine woman, approaches some vineyards—playing with fire, because as a Nazirite, he was to abstain from the fruit of the vine (Numbers 6:2-5). Before he has a chance to note that the grapes look good to him, however, a threatening lion comes into view. Empowered by the Spirit of the Lord, Samson dispatches with the lion. On the one hand, in that the Spirit came upon Samson, the Lord, through the roar of the lion, is warning him both about returning to the Philistine woman and about violating his vow. On the other hand, the roaring lion has something to do with Lord’s quest to confront the Philistines. At the least, the Lord is showing Samson that he can, in the power of the Lord, begin to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines.

But why didn’t Samson tell his parents about his encounter with the lion? Probably because by killing the lion, he came in contact with a carcass and became ceremonially unclean and he couldn’t be bothered with going through the purification process (Leviticus 11:24-25, 39). Samson has more pressing matters to attend to, like a woman in Timnah.³

Oh yes, the woman. Samson pays her a visit and actually talks to her—not that he’s interested in anything she says, for the narrator simply echoes Samson’s earlier observation by noting that the woman literally was “right in his eyes.” Samson cares for what he sees, not for what she says.

On yet another trip to Timnah—this time not simply to see or talk to the woman but literally to “take” her—Samson turns aside to look at the lion’s carcass. Again, Samson plays with fire, drawing near to a carcass he’s not supposed to touch. Maybe he wants to do nothing more than admire his work, but the surprising presence of honey in the carcass, courtesy of a swarm of bees, proves too much to resist, not that it ever occurred to him to resist. Samson sees the honey, he wants it, and he takes it—ever so nonchalantly, for he eats as he goes along. He wants to take the woman he’s not supposed to marry, and on his way to do so, he takes some honey he’s not supposed to eat. The Lord, using the lion and the honey as illustrations, is telling Samson: stay away from the woman.

If Samson has become unclean, then by giving some honey from the carcass to his parents, he makes them unclean also (Haggai 2:13). Again, he leaves his parents

in the dark, lest they find him out. Furthermore, he again recapitulates the sin of Eve, for he not only takes from the carcass and eats, he also gives some to his parents, who also eat. Eve, who not only took from the tree and ate, also gave to her husband, who also ate (Genesis 3:6).

The right question

God probably won't send a roaring lion our way or place honeybees in a carcass, but he may send something or someone our way, seemingly out of the blue, when we're playing with fire. At the very least, he gives us his word, which warns us in many specific and practical ways. In one way or another, God throws up stop signs when we're heading in the wrong direction, but some of us, like Samson, run right through them. Some of us, like Samson, can't be bothered with the details of righteousness when we have more pressing matters to attend to, such as satisfying the lust of our eyes. Some of us, like Samson, see and want, play with fire, and skate close to the edge. Then, almost inevitably, we take.

Many of us, if we actually care about what's right in God's eyes, want to know where the line is. The typical motivation for asking about the location of the line is so that we can get as close as possible to it. As you move closer to the line, however, you also expose yourself to greater temptation. If you get as close to the honey as possible without touching it, you'll have to fight the overwhelming urge to touch it. If you cross the line and touch the honey and then draw a new line and say, "I'm not going to eat it," you'll have to fight the overwhelming urge to eat it. Asking where the line is, if you're asking so that you may edge up to it, is the wrong question. At some point, instead of asking where the line is, ask what's profitable (1 Corinthians 6:12). It may lead you to better answers.

Where will making decisions based solely on our feelings lead us? Let's see where it leads Samson.

A little contest

Judges 14:10-14:

¹⁰Now his father went down to see the woman. And there Samson held a feast, as was customary for young men. ¹¹When the people saw him, they chose thirty men to be his companions.

¹²"Let me tell you a riddle," Samson said to them. "If you can give me the answer within the seven days of the feast, I will give you thirty

linen garments and thirty sets of clothes. ¹³If you can't tell me the answer, you must give me thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes."

"Tell us your riddle," they said. "Let's hear it."

¹⁴He replied,

**"Out of the eater, something to eat;
out of the strong, something sweet."**

For three days they could not give the answer.

Samson's father, despite his earlier protestations, accommodates Samson's request and makes arrangements for his marriage to the Philistine woman. Samson throws a Philistine-style party, which amounts to a seven-day drinking bout, his Nazirite vow notwithstanding. The Philistines send thirty men to join in the revelry, not so much as "companions" (they don't know Samson from Adam) but to keep watch over him.⁴

Samson, aware of the hostility of his new friends, and perhaps feeling no pain after hoisting a few, challenges them to a little contest, with the winner getting thirty sets of clothes, underwear (linen garments) included. What, pray tell, is one man going to do with thirty sets of clothes? In any event, Samson propounds a riddle, which relates to his recent encounter with the lion. The partygoers are stumped. Samson wins, right? Well, keep reading. A sure thing is never a sure thing when you're flaunting God.

Sweeter than honey, stronger than a lion

Judges 14:15-18:

¹⁵On the fourth day, they said to Samson's wife, "Coax your husband into explaining the riddle for us, or we will burn you and your father's household to death. Did you invite us here to steal our property?"

¹⁶Then Samson's wife threw herself on him, sobbing, "You hate me! You don't really love me. You've given my people a riddle, but you haven't told me the answer."

"I haven't even explained it to my father or mother," he replied, "so why should I explain it to you?" ¹⁷She cried the whole seven days of the feast. So on the seventh day he finally told her, because she continued to press him. She in turn explained the riddle to her people.

¹⁸Before sunset on the seventh day the men of the town said to him,

**“What is sweeter than honey?
What is stronger than a lion?”**

Samson said to them,

**“If you had not plowed with my heifer
you would not have solved my
riddle.”**

Desperate to solve Samson’s riddle, his antagonists blackmail his wife and accuse her of conspiring to steal the shirts off their backs and send them to the poor house. The Philistine woman resorts to the classic “you don’t love me” plea and turns on the water works to extract the answer to the riddle from her husband. Samson’s reason for not telling his wife is a flimsy one: he hasn’t even told his parents. He’s shown little respect for his parents, and his reason for not telling them about his encounter with the lion had to do with self-preservation. From what we know about Samson, he keeps secrets only to protect himself. From this we may surmise that he’ll also divulge secrets to protect himself.

We surmise correctly, for after seven days of tears, Samson can’t take anymore and he spills the beans. He may have the strength to tear a lion apart with his bare hands, but he can’t resist the tears of a woman. Samson’s wife explains the riddle to “her people,” demonstrating that her heart is with neither Samson nor the people of God. It is not for nothing that the Lord warned his people against marrying foreign women.

Just before time is about to run out on the terms of the bet, Samson’s antagonists cloak their answer to Samson’s riddle in a riddle of their own. In so doing, they tell Samson, in so many words, two can play at that game. What’s sweeter than honey? A woman’s words. What’s stronger than a lion? A woman’s tears. Indeed, the lion and the honey within it were warnings: the woman is too strong to overpower and too sweet to resist: stay away from her. In Samson’s case, justice is poetic—literally. Having seized what he desired, Samson composed a poem, and then a poem is composed against him.

Samson knows he’s lost, but, in riddle-like fashion, he accuses them of cheating by having plowed with his heifer (a young cow)—conspiring with his wife. (A word to the wise: Men, never, under any circumstances, in jest or in seriousness, to any person at any time refer to your woman as your “heifer.”)

The power that attracts also destroys

We don’t often realize, when we see, want, and take irrespective of the will of God, that, like Samson, that we will reap what we take. Especially if we celebrate the satisfaction of our desires, in the manner of Samson, we’re sowing the seeds of our own destruction. Short-term satisfaction often leads to long-term dissipation. Our poems of defiance, so to speak, through which we boast that we can get away with anything, come back to haunt us. Our “companions,” whoever or whatever they may be, who serve our interests now, turn out to be our enemies.

If we see, want, and take irrespective of God’s will, then what we take, like the woman whom Samson took, will be used against us. That which tastes sweet turns to bitterness in your mouth. The power that attracts also destroys. “For the lips of the adulterous woman drip honey, / and her speech is smoother than oil; / but in the end she is bitter as gall, / sharp as a double-edged sword” (Proverbs 5:3-4).

If everyone does what is right in his own eyes and abides by the adage that “what makes something right is how I feel about it,” where will such an ethos take us? Or, where has it taken us? It has created, and if present trends continue, it will increasingly create a world of loneliness and insecurity, where you can never be sure whether the one who wants to be with you today will want to be with someone else tomorrow. For that matter, you can’t be sure of yourself, for, after all, tomorrow you might be happier with someone else, or someone on the side, right? The United States has witnessed “a coming and going of partners on a scale seen nowhere else.”⁵ “One is the loneliest number that you’ll ever do / Two can be as bad as one / It’s the loneliest number since the number one.”⁶ And what happens to children in such a world, where people move in and out of sexual relationships, which may or may not produce children, and commitments snap like twigs?

Samson, defeated by the tears and words of the woman from Timnah, takes his anger out on some unsuspecting Philistines.

Making good on a bet

Judges 14:19-20:

¹⁹Then the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon him. He went down to Ashkelon, struck down thirty of their men, stripped them of everything and gave their clothes to those who had explained the riddle. Burning with anger, he returned to his father’s home. ²⁰And Samson’s wife was given to one

of his companions who had attended him at the feast.

For the second time in Judges 14, the Spirit of the Lord comes upon Samson, this time for the sake of killing thirty Philistines to make good on his bet. Remember, the Lord said that Samson would begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines and that Samson's sinful desire for a Philistine would be used toward that end (Judges 13:5). Samson has no interest in delivering Israel from the Philistines; at this point, he's only interested in taking out his anger on the Philistines.

A righteous deliverer Samson is not, yet the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him—and uses his unrighteous desire for a pagan woman to further righteous purposes.⁷ God is not the author of evil; on the contrary, he subjugates it and makes it serve his purposes, which doesn't excuse evil in the least: "Better a patient person than a warrior, / one with self-control than one who takes a city" (Proverbs 16:32). (See also Genesis 50:20 and Romans 8:37). In a world polluted with sin, salvation is messy business. Just look at the cross.

Not even killing thirty Philistines satisfies Samson's anger, for he is burning with anger as he returns to his father's house. His father's house? Hasn't he left his father and mother to be joined to his wife? Not exactly. Samson, in his anger, has distanced himself from the Philistines, including his Philistine wife, who had betrayed him. While he's away, his wife's father gives her to one of his attendants who had outwitted him to win the bet. Samson loses the bet, and he loses the girl—to a "companion" who was, uh, celebrating with him at his wedding. What ignominy! Yet, the Lord accomplishes his purposes, even if Samson has no interest in those purposes.

What's right in God's eyes

Judges 14 relates to seeing, wanting, and taking anything against God's will, but it especially relates to seeing, wanting, and taking in relationship to our sexuality. Samson sees, wants, and takes a woman who is right in his eyes, and he doesn't consider what is right in God's eyes. Let us, then, consider what is right in God's eyes.

God made almost all of us male or female, as sexual beings with sexual desires. We see, and, perhaps, we want. We must evaluate what we see and what we want, however, in light of what God sees and wants. For many of us, God wants, at a certain point, marriage—to one person of the opposite sex. He does not want us to have a sexual relationship with someone to whom we are not married. If you are not married and you want sex with

someone of the opposite gender, God does not want you to have sex with that person, at least not yet, so, for your own benefit and for the benefit of others, do your best, through immersion in prayer, the Scriptures, and spiritual community, to channel your desires, and even your failures, into a relationship with God. Similarly, if you want a sexual relationship with someone of the same gender, God does not want you have such a relationship, so, in like manner, for your own benefit and the benefit of others, channel your desires, and even your failures, into a relationship with God.

All of this needs to be emphasized because many in our world are saying, like the survey respondent, "I mean, I guess what makes something right is how I feel about it." In our world, sexual fulfillment is no longer considered simply a desire; it is considered a necessity and even a right, God's will notwithstanding.

If you're single, you might see someone and want that person. Should you "take" him or her as your husband or your wife?

First, is he or she a follower of Jesus? If you are a follower of Jesus and the object of your desire is not, you should not marry that person. Deuteronomy 7:1-5, which Samson ignored, and other texts from the Hebrew Scriptures, carry through: God does not want us marrying people who aren't following Jesus not because they're bad people but because they're following something else. As the apostle Paul says, we should marry only "in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 7:39).

Second, if the object of your desire is a believer, what is that person's character? Samson cared for what he saw, not what the woman said. He took no time to discern the woman's character; indeed, he had no interest in her character. Similarly, the impetus of our world is to base relational decisions mostly on feelings. In the long run, however, you will be more satisfied with a man or woman whom you can trust with your heart.

Third, if the object of your desire is a follower of Jesus whose character checks out, is God leading the two of you together? Clearly, not only by his revealed word but also by the stop signs he threw up, God was not leading Samson and the Philistine woman together. How do you know whether God is leading you together? Take a journey of discovery with God. Spend time together, pray, seek counsel, watch for what God does—and he'll nudge you in the right direction. (I have spoken and written more extensively concerning the search for a spouse in my message "Boy Meets Girl" from Genesis 29:1-14: www.pbc.org/messages/boy-meets-girl.)

When I first expressed interest in Karen, who is now my wife, she suggested that we do a Bible study together. She told me later that it was her way of checking me out. She wasn't going to accept, as a matter of course, that I had a strong relationship with the Lord simply because I was a pastor. Then, when I asked her to marry me—on the same bench in the park where we did our weekly Bible studies, by the way—she didn't immediately say yes. Well, she almost immediately said yes. She said, "Let me check with God first." She looked up for two seconds, then looked at me, and said, "Yes." For her, our time together was a journey of discovery with God, right up to the final question.

Finally, if you are married, enjoy your spouse and serve your spouse. Have sex! Have lots of sex, lest you be tempted to see, want, and take outside of God's will (1 Corinthians 7:3-5).

Desire for God

God, of course, is not opposed to desire. In fact, he'd like to see more of it. C.S. Lewis, in the classic passage from his essay, *The Weight of Glory*, observes,

"Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak."⁸

We settle for something like seeking satisfaction in the woman of Timnah when God wants us to see, want, and take Christ. We can contemplate, or "behold," the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18, 4:6). We can "desire" to be with Christ (Philippians 1:23). We can "take" the bread and the cup, the body and blood of Christ (Mark 14:22-25).

Yes, God desires, too. He wants us to want him. David writes of the scriptures, "They are more precious than gold, / than much pure gold; / they are sweeter than honey, / than honey from the honeycomb" (Psalm 19:10-11). If the word of God is thus, how much more precious, how much sweeter is God himself? The Sons of Korah write, "As the deer pants for streams of water, / so my soul pants for you, my God. / My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. / When can I go and meet with God?" (Psalm 42:1-2). These are words of desire, biblical words of desire: desire for God.

Desire for God is not unrelated to our desire for anything. I used to wonder if my passion for fly-fishing was in conflict with passion for God, but I have since found passion for God in fly-fishing. Now, when I head for a

trout stream, I know that I'm going to worship God—not the stream, not the trout, not the experience, but God, who gives it all.

Consider, also, our sexual desires. Writers in both testaments relate them to our desire for God. We are, as it were, God's bride (Isaiah 54:5, Revelation 19:7-8). As a man pursues a woman, God woos us: "Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her" (Hosea 2:14). Our sexual desires—even, say, our desires for someone like the woman of Timnah—are intimately connected with our desire for God. Find God in your desires, including and especially your sexual desires.

Few have written of this connection as eloquently as Frederick Buechner, who remembers a friendship he enjoyed as an adolescent when he was living in Bermuda:

She was a girl going on thirteen as I was, with a mouth that turned up at the corners. If we ever spoke to each other about anything of consequence, I have long since forgotten it. I have forgotten the color of her eyes. I have forgotten the sound of her voice. But one day at dusk we were sitting side by side on a crumbling stone wall watching the Salt Kettle ferries come and go when, no less innocently than the time I reached up to the bust of Venus under my grandfather's raffish gaze, our bare knees happened to touch for a moment, and in that moment I was filled with such a sweet panic and anguish of longing for I had no idea what that I knew my life could never be complete until I found it. "Difference of sex no more we know / Than our guardian angels do," as John Donne wrote, and in the ordinary sense of the word, no love could have been less erotic, but it was the Heavenly Eros in all its glory nonetheless—there is no question about that. It was the upward-reaching and fathomlessly hungering, heart-breaking love for the beauty of the world at its most beautiful, and, beyond that, for the beauty east of the sun and west of the moon which is past the reach of all but our most desperate desiring and is finally the beauty of Beauty itself, of Being itself and what lies at the heart of Being. ...

And let anyone who dismisses such feelings as puppy love, silly love, be set straight because I suspect that rarely if ever again in our lives does Eros touch us in such a distilled and potent form as when we are children and have so little else in our hearts to dilute it. I loved her more than I knew how to say even to myself. Whether in any way she loved me in return, I neither knew nor, as far as I can remember, was

even especially concerned to find out. Just to love her was all that I asked. Eros itself, even tinged with the sadness of knowing that I could never fully find on earth or sea whatever it was that I longed for, was gift enough.⁹

Find in your desires, even your desires for someone or something like the woman from Timnah, the heart-breaking love for the beauty east of the sun and west of the moon. Find in your desires a desire for the beauty of Beauty itself. See, want, and take Christ.

NOTES

¹The Lord, in Deuteronomy 6:18-19, warned his people, “Do what is right and good in the Lord’s sight, so that it may go well with you and you may go in and take over the good land the Lord promised on oath to your ancestors, thrusting out all your enemies before you, as the LORD said.”

²David Brooks, “If it Feels Right . . .” (*The New York Times*, September 12, 2011), A31.

³Samson, who was traveling to Timnah with his parents, had evidently separated from them by the time he crossed paths with the lion, for they were not there to witness the encounter.

⁴See Judges 20:15-16, 2 Samuel 23:13, 1 Chronicles 11:15.

⁵Caitlin Flanagan, “Unfaithfully Yours,” (*Time Magazine*, July 13, 2009), 45-49.

⁶Harry Nilsson, “One,” recorded by Three Dog Night, *Three Dog Night* (ABC-Dunhill/MCA Records, 1969).

⁷God is against much of the violence depicted in the Scriptures. In some cases, however, he not only favors it, he also ordains it, however grievously, as in this case. See my first message in this series: “Place of Tears” (www.pbc.org/messages/place-of-tears).

⁸C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 26.

⁹Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey* (San Francisco: Harper, San Francisco, 1982), 52-53.