

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

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For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate (Romans 7:14-15).

Much of our unhappiness in life has to do with what we want. Either we don't know what we want, or we want the wrong things, or we want contradictory things, or we're unable to do what we want to do. Any of those conflicts can make us miserable.

The link between desire and unhappiness is so strong that Buddhism says it's our problem in a nutshell. Buddhism says: life is full of suffering; suffering is the result of unfulfilled desire; therefore the way to eliminate suffering is to eliminate desire; and there are techniques to help us do that, and ultimately reach Nirvana, a state of total bliss.

Most of us here are Christians and not Buddhists, but there's great wisdom in Buddhist psychology, and I often counsel people to look hard at what they want as a way of resolving some things that make them unhappy. Christianity has a lot to say about what we want too, and how we can find greater peace by reordering our desires.

Some people are unhappy because they don't know what they want. This shows up in simple ways, like not being able to decide what to wear, or what to order from a menu – which is frustrating to the indecisive and often annoying to the people around them. You probably know someone like that. More importantly, though, some people have no idea what they want out of life, or what to do with themselves. They drift from day to day without a purpose, not very happy but not sure what to do about it. Sometimes they just fall into whatever lies in front of them: a job, a relationship, casual sex or drugs or alcohol – anything to relieve the boredom and bring a little stimulation, even if it isn't good for them. Not knowing what we want can lead us down all sorts of dead-end paths.

Some people know what they want, but they want the wrong things. I did a search in the Bible last week, and I was struck by some of the things people want. In Deuteronomy, the people want to worship false gods, because that's what their neighbors do, and they want to keep up with the Philistines. King David wants Bathsheba, the wife of his loyal soldier Uriah, so he arranges to have Uriah killed and takes Bathsheba for himself. King Herod asks a young woman what she wants because she pleases him dancing; she says she wants the head of John the Baptist on a platter. The mother of James and John, the disciples, asks Jesus for a favor, and when he says, "What do you want?" she replies that she wants her boys to have the best seats next to Jesus in heaven. Pontius Pilate asks the crowd whom they want him to release, the criminal Barabbas or Jesus of Nazareth, and the crowd cries out, "Give us Barabbas!" "Then what do you want me to do with Jesus?" Pilate asks. "Crucify him!" says the crowd.

People often want the wrong things. The devil knows this, apparently; in fact, much of what he does for a living depends on it. So when the devil finds Jesus in the desert, tired and hungry from fasting, he offers up some items from the menu of temptation. "If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread" – an innocent thing in itself, but Jesus knows it's wrong because it's for the wrong reason. "All right, then throw yourself down from the top of the temple, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone'; but Jesus knows that much mischief comes from quoting the Bible out of context. Finally the devil says, "Look, I'll give you the whole world if you just fall down and worship me"; but Jesus is not tempted by power, any more than by appetite or

the need to prove himself. Jesus doesn't want the wrong things, or even the right things for the wrong reasons. He wants to do God's will, and the devil's agenda isn't it.

Some people don't know what they want, some want the wrong things, and some want contradictory things – things that are mutually exclusive. Most of us are like that in one way or another. We want to eat fattening foods and skip the exercise, but still be trim and in shape. We want the yard to look good, but we don't want to mow the lawn or pull the weeds. We want government services, but we don't want to pay taxes. We want a dynamic, vital church with activities to meet our needs and reach out to others, but we want to give only a tiny percentage of our income to the church. Sometimes people in the public spotlight want conspicuously contradictory things, like the governor who wants to be known as a champion of family values and maybe run for president, while having his mistress on the side.

People often want things that are mutually exclusive, and they'll go to great lengths to have it both ways. They'll be hypocritical, claiming to hold the values people admire while secretly living a lie. They'll run up enormous debt, living beyond their means, until they go bankrupt; and when enough people do that, the economy itself comes crashing down. They'll harm their health and plunder the planet, and by the simple strategy of denial tell themselves it's all right, until reality catches up with them – and reality always wins in the end.

Some people don't know what they want, some want the wrong things, and some want contradictory things; and all of us are some of those people some of the time. It's the prophet's task to tell us the truth, even the truth we'd rather not hear, so we can stand on the rock of reality instead of being crushed beneath it.

But what happens when we finally get it, when we finally understand that we've wanted the wrong things, or things that are contradictory, and now we want what is right? What then? Does knowing what's right automatically enable us to do it?

Christianity says no, it's not that simple. It's hard enough even to know what is right sometimes, because our short-term self-interest hides the truth from us. But even if we see clearly what we ought to do, doing it is another thing. That was Paul's great insight. Paul was a Pharisee, devoted to knowing what's right and doing it. But the more clearly he could see the good, the more he realized he could not live up to it:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.... So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.... Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Christianity has a sober view of human nature, not because of some sour predisposition to pessimism, but because the facts point in that direction. All we have to do is look around the world and within our own heart, honestly comparing what we want, and what the world wants, with what God wants, and we'll see that humanity is deeply flawed, fundamentally messed up. That's what Christians mean by "sin."

But Christianity doesn't stop there. Reinhold Niebuhr talked about "the pessimism of nature and the optimism of grace." The answer to Paul's question, "Who will deliver me?" comes in his very next sentence: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" The grace of God that we find in Christ forgives our sins and wipes the slate clean; but more than that, God gives us power, by the Holy Spirit, to become a new creation. So David's prayer in the fifty-first psalm, after his affair with Bathsheba, says,

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.... Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Christianity says God can do exactly that. “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.” Paul knows this from experience, and so does every Christian who really prays for God to give him or her a heart transplant. God causes us to want what’s right, and then God gives us the grace to do it – even though it’s often a struggle in this fallen world.

The first question in the Shorter Catechism is “What is the chief end of man?” The answer is, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” To know and glorify God is to find joy – because knowing God, we want the right things, and God helps us to do them. Then much of our misery dries up and goes away. We have a purpose worthy of a soul made in God’s own image, and living out that purpose is the very source of joy. Figuring out our purpose – our vocation, or calling, from God – is one of the keys to happiness.

That doesn’t mean life will be easy, or that we’ll be spared from struggle and suffering in this world. Jesus wasn’t, so why should we expect an easier life than the Son of God’s?

Jesus faced temptation to do the wrong things, and he even briefly wanted contradictory things. In Gethsemane, facing an agonizing death, he prayed, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me....” But he wanted to do God’s will most of all, and he knew that his purpose was to redeem humanity through his own sacrifice. So when he had to choose between his desire to avoid suffering and his desire to serve God, Jesus prayed, “Not my will, but your will be done.”

Jesus asks each one of us, “What do you want?” Few questions are more important, because what we want determines who we are. Our desires shape our destiny.

There is a twist, Jesus says. “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” Nobody knows better than Jesus that “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” For him, it’s literally true; for us, more often, it’s a metaphor. Unless we die to self, we can’t be born to God. But God is where the good things are. God is so much wiser than we are, so much more loving and more powerful, that if we really want the good life, we must want God first.

That’s why Jesus asks us, once again, “What do you really want?”