

What do you really want? 1. What Do You Want?

James 4:1-3, 8, 10

November 4, 2018

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So, let's begin with the question: What do you want? We all want something. The older we get the less it is about "what" we want. We reach a point where it's not about things. In fact, we are trying to get rid of things, but we still want. The younger we are the more it's about "what" we want. What do you want? We answer the question differently at different points in our lives. When you were a child, there were lots of wants. Kids, with Christmas coming are there a few things you might want on your Christmas list? Even as a young adult, I had a long list of wants and then things I wanted for my children. And now my wants tend to be what I want for the world. There is always something we want!

Anyone here want your way? There are things we can control and things we cannot control. It's like Rolling Stones said: You can't always get what you want. And sometimes, even when we get our way, it turns out not to be the way we really want. Recently, I was at a restaurant with a group of people. I looked at the menu and immediately knew exactly what I wanted and so I placed my order. But once everyone's order arrived, I looked around and I suddenly wanted what someone else I had. What I thought I wanted no longer looked like anything I ever wanted. We want what we want and that's part of the problem. We don't know enough. I didn't even know that was an option! What do you want? is a tricky question.

Or we want pleasure all the time. When I was a child, I could not imagine a time when I wouldn't want Saturday morning cartoons, or chocolate chip cookies all the time. We all have something. It's a food or a beverage. It's travel or entertainment. We take interest in something. It might be golf or sports or photography, but the challenge is that after a while it becomes addictive and gets to be so much of a good thing that it stops being a good thing. It controls you until you wish you never wanted it in the first place.

Or what we want is to get it now. We can't wait. But have you ever gotten something now only to realize by the time you got it home you should have waited, so you put it in the basement only come across that thing in its original package months later – that thing you had to have right now. Or have you been to a high school reunion and realized just how thankful you are for unanswered prayer? You once thought he was the one or she was the one, until twenty years later you went to your reunion and you had to look at their nametag twice or you heard what they did after high school, and suddenly you were so glad God didn't answer that prayer.

When you think of your greatest regret, didn't it begin with "that's what I want." And if you could just go back in time and not say "I do," or not sign that lease, or not move your family, or not quit that job, or not take that first drink. You got what you wanted but what you wanted turned out not to be what you really wanted.

So, what do you want?

C.S. Lewis was a British writer who died 50 years ago. He taught at Oxford and Cambridge and wrote more than 30 books – some were fiction, like the Chronicles of Narnia and others were non-fiction like Screwtape Letters and Mere Christianity. He grew up in the church but as a teenager he fell away and became an atheist, but at the age of 32, he became a follower of Jesus. One of his books was *The Great Divorce* which is not actually about divorce but a fascinating story about heaven and hell. He describes hell as a place where everybody gets

what they wanted just by thinking of it. Maybe some of you are thinking that sounds like heaven – to get everything I want just by thinking of it without even having to buy a lottery ticket. But C. S. Lewis says that's hell. Because in his picture of hell, nobody gets along because nobody needs anybody. What do you want?

This morning, we hear from the book of James, a man who was the brother of Jesus who did not believe who Jesus said he was until after the resurrection and then he became a follower and leader in the church. He wrote this letter to early Christians to address the challenges in daily living. And in chapter four, he says: **What is the source of conflict among you? What is the source of your disputes?** And the answer he says is “what you want.” **Don't they come from your cravings that are at war in your own lives?** That's our human condition isn't it? There is a war going on inside of us. We have these wants and desires and eventually they leak out onto the lives of others and when we can't get what we want isn't that the true source of our conflicts: “I'm not getting what I want!” And neither are you. And James says, **You long for something you don't have, so you commit murder.** Not literally, at least not most of us. This is hyperbole. Have you ever wanted something to death? Wanted something so much, so badly – wanted a relationship to death and the pressure and expectation killed the relationship – or you wanted a deal so much or a promotion so much. And then you didn't get it. We can want so much that it destroys. **You are jealous for something you can't get, so you struggle and fight. You don't have because you don't ask.** And we end of blaming: “if it weren't for so-and-so or that thing that happened or you...” Our challenge is not - knowing what we want but knowing what we really want because we are distracted by what we want. And when we put our focus there, we miss what we really want. We miss the joy. We miss the satisfaction.

I've been with people at the end of their life who suddenly realized what they really wanted and it was too late. They wasted their whole lives pursuing what they thought they wanted. It was that bittersweet moment, they suddenly realized what life was really about, but they didn't have any time left. So much of Jesus' teaching was focused on living at a deeper level, because Jesus knew you can spend your whole life pursuing something only to miss out on what life is really about. **You ask and don't have because you ask with evil intentions, to waste it on your own cravings.** The Greek word that has been translated as evil intentions is *kakos* which is hard to translate into English. Literally it's evil-ly or badly. We tell God what we want, instead of asking what God wants for us. What does God want for me? What's important – what is of true value? And isn't that why God sent Jesus into this world? To point us toward what is of greatest value.

Come near to God, and God will come near to you. That's really what we will be doing here in a few moments. This sacrament of Holy Communion is one of God's ways of reaching out to you, drawing you in, trying to fill that place inside that can never be filled by what you want. It may look like a few crumbs of bread and drops of grape juice, but if you will look deeper than that you will discover something far greater than anything you can get by yourself.

When I was a child, there was a prayer that we prayed every time we came for communion. It was called the Prayer of Humble Access. *We do not presume to come to this thy table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to partake of this Sacrament of thy Son Jesus Christ, that we may walk in newness of life, may grow into his likeness, and may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.* Maybe it is time to recover this in your life, today. We don't get what we want because we don't know what we want. And God doesn't want from you. God wants for you.

And as we begin this series, let me leave you with the words of James and what he had found. **Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.** Who are you going to trust? You who never seems to get what you really want. Or the Creator of the Universe who wants for you far greater than anything you can ever get for yourself.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of November 4, 2018

Weekly Prayer: Lord Jesus, keep us connected to you today and every day. Let us be channels through whom your divine love can flow freely to bless the lives of people around us. Help us to offer mercy and grace to everyone, even those we don't really like or approve of, so that we keep loving and merciful hearts growing within us. Amen.

Monday, November 5

Scripture: Matthew 13:3-9

He said many things to them in parables: "A farmer went out to scatter seed. As he was scattering seed, some fell on the path, and birds came and ate it. Other seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. They sprouted immediately because the soil wasn't deep. But when the sun came up, it scorched the plants, and they dried up because they had no roots. Other seed fell among thorny plants. The thorny plants grew and choked them. Other seed fell on good soil and bore fruit, in one case a yield of one hundred to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of thirty to one. Everyone who has ears should pay attention."

Observation: Farming, like fishing, was a common occupation in Galilee (Matthew 13:2 tells us that Jesus sat in a fishing boat by the shore to tell this story). One can imagine a farmer in plain view sowing seed by hand as Jesus told his story. Even today, some seeds grow, some do not. That was even truer in hand-tilled fields, with the seed thrown out by hand. It was the same seed—the soil made the difference.

Application: What person or persons played the biggest role in planting the seed of God's message in your life? As you look back, is there anything you wish they had done differently in the planting process? What are the main ways that your time, talents, and temperament equip you to "sow the seed" into other lives?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you said, "A farmer went out to scatter seed." Your story never hinted that the farmer got depressed and quit. Help me to keep my "sack of seeds" at hand, always ready to scatter the story of your love into the lives of others. Amen.

Tuesday, November 6

Scripture: Matthew 13:18-23

"Consider then the parable of the farmer. Whenever people hear the word about the kingdom and don't understand it, the evil one comes and carries off what was planted in their hearts. This is the seed that was sown on the path. As for the seed that was spread on rocky ground, this refers to people who hear the word and immediately receive it joyfully. Because they have no roots, they last for only a little while. When they experience distress or abuse because of the word, they immediately fall away. As for the seed that was spread among thorny plants, this refers to those who hear the word, but the worries of this life and the false appeal of wealth choke the word, and it bears no fruit. As for what was planted on good soil, this refers to those

who hear and understand, and bear fruit and produce—in one case a yield of one hundred to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of thirty to one."

Observation: If you didn't already know, you surely at least suspected that Jesus' story about sowing seed wasn't mainly about farming. When his disciples asked him about the story's meaning, Jesus made it plain to them (and us) that the different soils actually described different kinds of people and experiences. The central issue he wanted each person to consider was, "How open is your deepest self to God's message?"

Application: What kind of soil are you? How are you responding to God's message in your life? In his commentary on this parable, N.T. Wright writes: "This takes time, and sometimes hard work. A quick glance at the Bible, an occasional sitting in church or a study group and being entertained by some new idea, is probably not enough. Care and thought needs to be put into the task of hearing the word of the kingdom until it has taken proper root." To learn more about growing deeper in your faith, contact our Director of Community Engagement (kpohl@messiahchurch.org).

Prayer: Loving God, I want to be receptive, to have the "seed" of your kingdom growing strongly and bountifully in my heart. Guide and help me in cultivating the "soil" of my heart to always be receptive to your word to me. Amen.

Wednesday, November 7

Scripture: Matthew 3:1-10

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!" He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said: The voice of one shouting in the wilderness, "Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight." John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. People from Jerusalem, throughout Judea, and all around the Jordan River came to him. As they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. Many Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by John. He said to them, "You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. And don't even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones. The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire.

Observation: The desert of Judea is harsh and bleak. The people who created the famous Dead Sea Scrolls lived in a part of this desert, near the coast of the Dead Sea. The prophet John, Jesus' forerunner, lived in this rugged land. He heralded the Messiah's nearness, and because he baptized those who repented, he became known as John the Baptist.

Application: In verse 2, the phrase "Change your hearts and lives" translates the single Greek word *metanoiēte*. It's often translated just "repent," but the Greek word does not mean simply "to be sorry about" or "to regret," but rather involves a change both of attitude (or heart) and of conduct. In what ways has a change of attitude or heart showed itself in changed conduct in your life?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, as I consider living as you call me to live, making the changes that might involve, I feel some fear. But I feel excitement stirring, too! Give me the boldness of John to step into the adventure you began 2000 years ago. Amen.

Thursday, November 8

Scripture: James 2:8-17

You do well when you really fulfill the royal law found in scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself. But when you show favoritism, you are committing a sin, and by that same law you are exposed as a lawbreaker. Anyone who tries to keep all of the Law but fails at one point is guilty of failing to keep all of it. The one who said, Don't commit adultery, also said, Don't commit murder. So if you don't commit adultery but do commit murder, you are a lawbreaker. In every way, then, speak and act as people who will be judged by the law of freedom. There will be no mercy in judgment for anyone who hasn't shown mercy. Mercy overrules judgment.

My brothers and sisters, what good is it if people say they have faith but do nothing to show it? Claiming to have faith can't save anyone, can it? Imagine a brother or sister who is naked and never has enough food to eat. What if one of you said, "Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal!"? What good is it if you don't actually give them what their body needs? In the same way, faith is dead when it doesn't result in faithful activity.

Observation: During his life on earth, Jesus was often censured for showing mercy (Luke 5:30, Luke 15:2). Jesus' brother James saw that same merciless spirit showing up in some early Christian churches. The lack of love produced both judgment toward others' weakness, and an unwillingness to actively help suffering, struggling people. James evoked his brother's teaching that we find in Matthew 7, saying our attitude and actions reveal our inner reality. In the end, in God's world, mercy triumphs over judgment.

Application: James didn't describe a balance between faith and works, as though we need a 50/50 mix of the two. We need 100% of both – our actions grow out of our faith, as a grateful response to God's gracious acceptance of us. What are some of the actions, the works, which you have seen grow in your life as you respond to God's grace?

Prayer: Lord, when I'm honest with myself, I know I need your mercy and grace. When you call me to offer mercy and grace to people I don't like or approve of, well, that's tougher. Keep growing a loving, merciful heart in me. Amen.

Friday, November 9

Scripture: Matthew 25:1-12

"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten young bridesmaids who took their lamps and went out to meet the groom. Now five of them were wise, and the other five were foolish. The foolish ones took their lamps but didn't bring oil for them. But the wise ones took their lamps and also brought containers of oil. "When the groom was late in coming, they all became drowsy and went to sleep. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Look, the groom! Come out to meet him.' "Then all those bridesmaids got up and prepared their lamps. But the foolish bridesmaids said to the wise ones, 'Give us some of your oil, because our lamps have gone out.' "But the wise bridesmaids replied, 'No, because if we share with you, there won't be enough for our lamps and yours. We have a better idea. You go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' But while they were gone to buy oil, the groom came. Those who were ready went with him into the wedding. Then the door was shut. "Later the other bridesmaids came and said, 'Lord, lord, open the door for us.' "But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'

Observation: Jesus told a story, set in a multi-day Hebrew wedding, about ten bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom (Jesus) to arrive. Five of them brought extra lamp oil, were ready

even though he arrived late, and went into the wedding. Five others were unprepared. But they weren't just missing oil, they'd missed a relationship. When they got back, the bridegroom hauntingly told the unprepared bridesmaids, "I don't know you."

Application: Jesus' parable clearly showed that we cannot borrow some things, particularly relationships. Have you ever wished you could borrow the connection your pious friend has with God? Doesn't work. God wants a loving relationship with you, and you only build that by relating to God yourself. How can you take ownership of a relationship with God?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for inviting me to be a part of your "wedding feast." Help me to value that privilege highly, and to stay connected with you every day. Amen.

Saturday, November 10

Scripture: John 15:1-8

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vineyard keeper. He removes any of my branches that don't produce fruit, and he trims any branch that produces fruit so that it will produce even more fruit. You are already trimmed because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. A branch can't produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine. Likewise, you can't produce fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can't do anything. If you don't remain in me, you will be like a branch that is thrown out and dries up. Those branches are gathered up, thrown into a fire, and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified when you produce much fruit and in this way prove that you are my disciples.

Observation: In Jesus' day, Israelites often pictured themselves as vines in a vineyard God tended (Psalm 80:8-18, Isaiah 5:1-7). Jesus adapted and expanded that image. When his followers stayed united to him like branches to a vine, Jesus said, they would love each other as he loved them. How will you measure your life? Jesus suggested that the answer is simple (but not easy): produce fruit that brings glory to God.

Application: Who was Jesus thinking of when he spoke of the fruitless branches? William Barclay (commentary) said some of Jesus' followers "are lovely fruit-bearing branches of himself; others are useless because they bear no fruit... He was thinking of Christians whose Christianity consisted of profession without practice, words without deeds; he was thinking of Christians who were useless branches, all leaves and no fruit." Spend some time in prayer today asking God to guide you in bearing fruit, perhaps in an area where your spiritual life to date has been mostly leaves.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, keep me connected to you today and every day. Let me be a channel through which your divine love can flow freely to bless the lives of other people around me. Amen.