

LESSON 5

Learning to Want What God Wants

Trust in the LORD and do what is good; dwell in the land and live securely. Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you your heart's desires. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act, making your righteousness shine like the dawn, your justice like the noonday. Be silent before the LORD and wait expectantly for him; do not be agitated by one who prospers in his way, by the person who carries out evil plans.

— Psalm 37:3–7

I say, then, walk by the Spirit and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you don't do what you want.

— Galatians 5:16–17

God means to change more than what we do. He is after what we want, and that change comes slowly, the way a child's wish list changes as he grows.

The Drawer of Lists

A LOT OF MOTHERS KEEP A DRAWER OF THINGS NOBODY ELSE WOULD THINK TO SAVE. Often there's a stack of Christmas lists, written in pencil and badly spelled, one for every year a child was young enough to write one. Read them in order, and you are watching a boy grow up. At six he wants a dog and a fire truck. At nine it is a BB gun, underlined twice. At thirteen the list is shorter, and every item has a brand name. Twenty years later he has quit writing lists for himself, and he is the one standing in a store in December trying to read his own children's handwriting.

Nobody sat him down at seven and explained why he ought to stop wanting a fire truck. His parents could have made him stop asking for one, and that would have changed what went on the paper. The list changed because the boy grew, and what he wanted grew along with him.

Most of us would be glad for God to change what we do. We are a good deal more nervous about letting him near what we want. Yet that is where this quarter has been heading from the first week. A Christian who behaves well and still wants every one of the old things has learned to manage himself, and there is more to growing than that. Lesson 4 said a renewed mind can discern the will of God. This lesson asks whether we will ever come to want it.

Do Not Envy

Psalm 37 opens on a problem of wanting. *Do not be agitated by evildoers; do not envy those who do wrong. For they wither quickly like grass and wilt like tender green plants,* Psalm 37:1–2. David is talking about the

look across the fence at someone who cuts corners and prospers anyway, and the pull we feel toward his side of it.

Envy is desire pointed the wrong way. It rarely announces itself, and most of us would never say it out loud. We simply notice who got the promotion, who retired early, whose life seems to run smoothly with no God in it at all, and something in us keeps score.

David built this psalm on the alphabet, each new stanza starting with the next letter,¹⁹ and he wrote it late: *I have been young and now I am old, yet I have not seen the righteous abandoned or his children begging for bread*, Psalm 37:25. It's an old man's psalm, written by someone who had been wanting things for a long time.

Last week's reading asked us to count the commands in verses 3 through 7. There are ten: trust, do what is good, dwell, live securely, take delight, commit, trust a second time, be silent, wait expectantly, and do not be agitated. Six of the ten amount to waiting on someone else. Trusting and committing both hand the outcome to God, and the last three say so outright.

In the middle of all that waiting sits verse 4.

Delight Comes First

Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you your heart's desires, Psalm 37:4.

It is easy to hear that as a bargain. Be devoted enough, and God will hand over whatever you've been wanting. A good deal of popular preaching reads it that way. Look at the order, though. Delight comes first, and its object is the LORD himself.

The word translated *desires* is a word for requests, the things a person asks for.²⁰ Its only other appearance in the Old Testament is a few pages earlier, in a blessing: *May the LORD fulfill all your requests*, Psalm 20:5. David is talking about the list, what the heart writes down when it goes to God. And the one making that list has already been changed by the first half of the verse. When we have spent years delighting in the LORD, we don't bring him the list we brought at the start. God keeps the promise. By the time he does, the requests have usually changed, the way the lists in that drawer did.

Take delight is a word for real enjoyment. It is used for enjoying the best food on the table,²¹ and David reaches for it again seven verses later: *But the humble will inherit the land and will enjoy abundant prosperity*, Psalm 37:11. The same verb stands behind *take delight* in verse 4 and *enjoy* in verse 11. The one who delights in the LORD ends up enjoying the peace God gives. Jesus lifted the first half of that verse almost word for word into the Sermon on the Mount: *Blessed are the humble, for they will inherit the earth*, Matthew 5:5.

Two Desires in One Person

Galatians 5 shows us the same struggle from the inside. *I say, then, walk by the Spirit and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you don't do what you want*, Galatians 5:16–17.

We looked at this collision in Lesson 3. This time, notice that the Spirit has desires too. Paul writes the verb once and lets it carry through both halves of his sentence,²² so the flesh desires and the Spirit desires in the same breath. Desire itself isn't the problem. Jesus used this same word for his own longing to eat

the Passover with his disciples, Luke 22:15. A growing Christian still wants things, and wants them hard. What changes is which desire he follows.

Then comes the last clause: *so that you don't do what you want*. Every Christian has lived that sentence. We have wanted to be patient and snapped anyway. We have wanted to pray and picked up the phone instead. The wanting was real, and it lost.

So verse 16 is the promise to hold. *You will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh* is about as strong a negative as Greek can build.²³ The flesh will keep wanting what it wants; verse 17 makes that plain. Paul's promise is that its desire won't get its way while we walk by the Spirit.

Where God Is Working

Philippians 2:13 carries the thought one step further. *For it is God who is working in you both to will and to work according to his good purpose*. Lesson 3 read this verse for the pace of the Spirit's work. This time, look at one word. The verb *to will* is the same verb as *what you want* in Galatians 5:17.²⁴ In Galatians our wanting is caught in the crossfire. In Philippians God is at work inside the wanting itself.

That goes a long way toward explaining why this kind of change is slow. Behavior can change in an afternoon. We can stop a speech habit on Monday because we decided to on Sunday. What we find funny, what we reach for when we're tired, what we envy when the neighbor pulls a new truck into his driveway: those run much deeper. God is working down there, where we can't hurry him. David knew that too. *A little while, and the wicked person will be no more*, Psalm 37:10. David's little while was long enough that he gave six commands for how to wait through it.

What Is on Your List?

If you wrote down everything you've actually asked God for this month, what would that list say about what you love?

Some of us would find the list hasn't changed in years. Others might find an item or two that would have been unthinkable the week they were baptized. It might be a request for someone else's good, or for patience with a person who wears us out, or simply to know God better. Trying harder to want the right things will not write that second list, because none of us can want something on command. It gets written the way the boy's lists were, by growing. That takes a lot of ordinary weeks, and God is working in the wanting the whole time.

All of this is grace. God didn't wait for our wants to straighten out before he took us. He took us with the list still full of fire trucks, and he has been at work on it ever since.

On the night before the cross, Jesus went into Gethsemane with a request of his own. *He went a little farther, fell to the ground, and prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, "Abba, Father! All things are possible for you. Take this cup away from me. Nevertheless, not what I will, but what you will,"* Mark 14:35–36.

He told his Father plainly what he wanted. The cup was something he asked to be spared; the Father's will was something he chose. Mark's word for *will* there is the same one Paul used in Galatians and Philippians. Then he woke his disciples with *Get up; let's go*, Mark 14:42. Judas arrived while he was still speaking, Mark 14:43.

Key Concepts

Complete each statement. Answers in endnotes.²⁵

1. Psalm 37:1 says, do not _____ those who do wrong.
2. Psalm 37:4 says, take _____ in the LORD, and he will give you your heart's desires.
3. Psalm 37:7 says, be silent before the LORD and _____ expectantly for him.
4. Galatians 5:16 says that if we walk by the Spirit, we will certainly not carry out the _____ of the flesh.
5. Philippians 2:13 says God is working in you both to _____ and to work according to his good purpose.

Discussion Questions

Opening

1. What is something you wanted badly as a child that you would not want now? What changed, you or the thing?
2. Think of a food, a kind of music, or a pastime you once disliked and now enjoy. How did that happen?

Core

3. Read Psalm 37:1–7. Why do you think David starts a psalm about trusting God with a warning about envy?
4. Psalm 37:4 is often read as a promise that God will give us whatever we want. How does the order of the verse, delight first and desires second, change the way we should hear it?
5. Read Galatians 5:16–17. Paul says the Spirit has desires too. What difference does it make to know the Christian life is a contest between two desires, rather than a slow emptying of all desire?

Deeper

6. Philippians 2:13 says God works in us *to will*. Why would God bother with what we want, when he could simply command what we do?
7. Read Mark 14:35–36. Jesus told the Father honestly what he wanted before he yielded to the Father's will. What does that teach us about how to pray when our wants and God's will don't match?

Journaling Prompts

15–20 minutes. Nobody reads these but you.

1. Write down what you have asked God for in the past month. Don't edit it or tidy it up. Then read it back and write one sentence about what the list says you love.
2. Is there someone whose life you have quietly envied? Write about what exactly you envy, and what Psalm 37:1–2 says about it.

3. Write about a desire that has changed since you became a Christian. When did you first notice it had changed, and how long had it been changing before you noticed?

Weekly Practice

THIS WEEK. Keep a list.

Every time you pray this week, write down in a single column what you asked for, in plain words, with no editing. Before you pray each morning, read Psalm 37:3–7 aloud. Put the list somewhere you will find it again. Lesson 13 will ask you to read it at the end of the quarter.

Looking Ahead

Lesson 6 – Learning to Say No to Sin, Colossians 3:5–10; Romans 8:13

Lesson 5 asked what we want. Lesson 6 asks what we do with the wants that have to die.

Paul doesn't negotiate with them: *Therefore, put to death what belongs to your earthly nature*, Colossians 3:5. Then he names them, and some of what he names we could never do with our hands.

Read Colossians 3:5–10 before the next class. In verse 5, mark the items that are desires rather than actions, and notice what Paul calls the last one.

¹⁹ Psalm 37 is an alphabetic acrostic. Its stanzas, most of them two verses long, begin with the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet in order. Psalms 25, 34, 111, 112, 119, and 145 are built the same way.

²⁰ *Desires* in Psalm 37:4 is *mish'alot*, from the verb *sha'al*, to ask. The noun occurs elsewhere only in Psalm 20:5 (20:6 in the Hebrew), where the CSB renders it *requests*.

²¹ *Take delight* is the reflexive form of *'anag*, to take pleasure in something. Isaiah 55:2 uses it of enjoying the choicest of foods. It returns in Psalm 37:11, where the CSB renders it *enjoy*, and the *prosperity* the humble enjoy there is *shalom*.

²² Galatians 5:17 states the verb *epithymeō* once, with the flesh as its subject, and lets it carry into the second clause with the Spirit as subject; the CSB supplies *desires* a second time. The verb is not a bad word in itself. Jesus uses it with its noun in Luke 22:15, *I have fervently desired to eat this Passover with you*.

²³ *Certainly not* renders *ou mē* with the aorist subjunctive, the most emphatic way of denying a future possibility in New Testament Greek.

²⁴ *Want* in Galatians 5:17 and *to will* in Philippians 2:13 are both *thelō*. It is also Jesus' verb in Mark 14:36, *not what I will, but what you will*.

²⁵ ANSWERS: 1. envy · 2. delight · 3. wait · 4. desire · 5. will