

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Desiring the Kingdom

Luke 13:31-35

We know him as Saint Patrick. His name was actually Patricius. Around 430, when he was 16 years old, Irish warriors invaded his town and carried him off into slavery. After six years of forced labor and harsh living conditions in Ireland, Patricius escaped and returned to his homeland in Britain, where many scholars believe he spent some time training for ministry. While he's often remembered for driving the snakes out of Ireland or using the shamrock to teach people about the Trinity, Saint Patrick was most of all a humble missionary. We easily let all the parades, the advertising, and the flood of green beverages drown out the fact that Saint Patrick played a huge role in evangelizing Ireland.

He spread the word of God in response to God's word to him. In his autobiographical *Confession*, Saint Patrick says that after being back in Britain with his family, he received God's call to spread the gospel. He wrote,

I had a vision in my dreams of a man who seemed to come from Ireland; his name was Victoricius, and he carried countless letters, one of which he handed over to me. I read aloud where it began: 'The Voice of the Irish.' And as I began to read these words, I seemed to hear the voice of the same men who lived beside the forest of Foclut . . . and they cried out as with one voice, 'We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us.' I was deeply moved in heart and I could read no further, so I awoke.¹

Here was a plea for the good news, a deep desire for the word of God. The door was being thrown open for Saint Patrick to come and make known what God had done through Jesus Christ. Contrast this with the closed door that Jesus laments in today's Scripture passage from Luke. Remember that our Lord is headed toward Jerusalem, the seat of power within his own religious tradition. But that tradition includes many episodes where messengers sent from God have been rejected by the very people whom God desires to redeem. In other words, the holy city has a history of saying "No" to those through whom God is saying "Yes." "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem," says Jesus. "You who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you. . ." (v. 34).

And yet, Jerusalem's record of rejecting God's messengers, including the impending suffering and death of Jesus himself, doesn't extinguish our Lord's longing for the repentance and restoration of God's people. "How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, . . ." Jesus envisions Jerusalem as a brood of vulnerable chicks in need of the mother bird's protection. It's a picture of refuge, of salvation. Jesus wants the people to be brought into the reign of God. That's God's will. That's Jesus' will.

But God's will is getting pushback from the people's will. Today's text contains a series of uses of the Greek word *thelo*, which has the basic sense of "to will." Or similarly, "to wish, to want, or to desire." So this is a term that conveys a sense of longing. Jesus longs for God's people to repent and be restored. He longs for them to receive him and the kingdom of God that he proclaims and practices. But over against what he wants is what the people want. "How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" The people don't desire what the Lord desires.

Our desires are crucial in determining who we are and how we live. That's why it's important to examine ourselves and see more clearly what we want, what we wish for, what we long for in life. Our desires aren't necessarily obvious and easy to identify. They usually run below the surface, taking on visible, concrete form in our attitudes and actions. In other words, our desires mold our mentality and motivate our conduct. I like the way that Jen Pollock Michel puts it when she says, "Desire is the powerful subtext of our lives. It determines our decisions. That's why we need to pay attention to it."²

As we pay closer attention to our longings, we need to keep in mind that desire itself isn't automatically a bad thing. True, we have to beware of going to the extreme of indulging all our desires. But we also have to avoid the extreme of stifling all our desires. What we need most of all is God's help to examine our desires, and to see what's consistent with his will and what's not.

A few years ago I learned that there's a relatively new field of psychology called wantology. A wantologist is someone whose expertise is in helping people discern their wants, their desires, and identifying ways that they can pursue and satisfy those desires. Basically, it's a way of helping people move toward achieving greater happiness by fulfilling more of their vision of life. But as Jen Pollock Michel rightly points out, "As followers of Jesus, we're asking different questions and in need of different answers. We're asking not just *What do I want?* But *Is what I want right?* We're interested in congruence: *Is what I want what God wants for me? Am I following God's will?*"³

As we ask ourselves these kinds of questions, we need to do so prayerfully. Our Lord Jesus has given us the pattern and the priority in the prayer he taught us. That prayer pivots on one petition in particular: "Your kingdom come." And with that, "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:9-11; Luke 11:2-4). That's Jesus' longing and desire. That's what he preached, taught, and practiced. That's the purpose of his life, death, and resurrection. As we follow him, his prayerful longing is to be our longing. His desire is to be our desire. This means that all the things you and I may want have to be shaped and sharpened by our yearning for the coming and consummation of the kingdom, the reign of Christ.

Sometimes that may involve coming to see that what you want isn't what God knows that you actually need. Wayne Oates tells about an evening that he and his wife spent in the home of an elderly couple in rural Kentucky when he was serving as their pastor while in seminary. After an early evening meal, the two couples sat and talked for a while. Then the man rose to speak. "Brother Oates, are you okay?" he asked. "Yes sir, we are," replied Oates. The man continued, "Brother Oates, are you or the missus sick?" "Well, no, sir, we are not!" Oates answered. "Well, Brother Oates, since you and your wife are not sick, me and the missus find no reason to sit up with you. We are going to bed. Make yourself at home. If you see anything you want, help yourself to it. If there is anything that you want that you do not find, come upstairs and wake us up. Then the missus and I will come downstairs and teach you how to do without it!"⁴

In some parts of the Christian community, we're currently in the season of Lent, a period of time devoted to preparing for the celebration of Easter. People who observe Lent often focus on giving something up. A few years ago, one source that tracked in real time what Twitter (now called X) users said they were giving up for Lent, indicated that perennial favorites were showing up again, such as alcohol, chocolate, meat, swearing, or even Twitter itself. Like the previous year, food items were two to three times as popular to abstain from as technology items or personal habits. Interestingly, another item that was moving its way up the rankings was plastics.⁵ For many people, Lent is a season for

discerning what you can do without, and in a way that actually enhances, rather than hinders, a kingdom-focused life of following Jesus.

During an interview several years ago, Apple CEO Tim Cook said, "Our whole role in life is to give you something you didn't know you wanted. And then once you get it, you can't imagine your life without it. And you can count on Apple doing that." Apple has been very successful at doing just that, as many of us iPhone owners here this morning could testify. In fact, Apple and other technology companies have been so good at it that many Sunday bulletins contain a printed announcement about silencing your devices when you enter your house of worship. That in itself says something about how our wants and desires don't just happen. They come from who we are on the inside and from what forces are shaping us from the outside. So we need to pay attention to how our desires are created and cultivated.

One of the ways we do that is through worship. This place where we silence our phones is also the place where we hear from God and respond to God. Our singing, praying, giving, and preaching are ways of remembering God's longing for us to be his people, and our longing for him to be our God. But often, our desire for God, and for the reign of God in our lives and in the world, grows weak, or gets pushed to the side by other wants that seem more pressing. God is saying yes but we're saying no. God is saying "I'm willing," but we're saying, "We're not." We desperately need the mercy and life-giving power of God to turn our hearts toward him, and to give us a stronger desire for what he desires.

In a sermon titled "The Weight of Glory," C. S. Lewis talks about how we settle for things that don't really enable us to be who God intends us to be. Lewis says,

Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.⁶

In the course of our daily lives, and especially here on Sundays, we need to bring our desires and longings into the presence of God, so that he can take them and do what he needs to do with them in order to make us more like he intends us to be through Christ. Some of your desires may need to be refined because they're polluted with self-centeredness. Some of your desires may need to be reformed because they've gotten distorted and off track. Some of your desires may need to be replaced because they're leading you away from the Lord. Some of your desires may need to be renewed because you've failed to tend them and cultivate them. And some of the desires you need may not even be there yet, because God needs to create them in you. All these are ways that God wants to work to give you a new heart with longings that are in sync with his longings.

I once passed by a church sign that captured it well. The message read: DO YOU WANT WHAT GOD WANTS? May God give you new desires in Christ. May he give you a transformed longing for his kingdom. May he give us a renewed willingness to be his people.

¹ Mary Cagney, "Patrick the Saint." Christianity Today website. Accessed March 13, 2019 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-60/patrick-saint.html>>.

² Jen Pollock Michel, *Teach Us to Want: Longing, Ambition, and the Life of Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2014) Kindle edition.

³ Michel, *Teach Us to Want*.

⁴ (Originally accessed February 19, 2009) <<http://www.galepresbyterian.com/FileRetrieval/2007-0930,%20The%20Soundest%20of%20Investments.pdf?resourceID=387>>.

⁵ What to Give Up for Lent 2019? Consider Twitter's Top 100 Ideas." Christianity Today website. March 4, 2019. Accessed March 14, 2019.

⁶ <<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2004/september/15488.html>>.