

Getting what you want

Galatians 5:1-26

June 27, 2010

What do you really want?

A good steak? Lower prices at the gas pump? A do-over for the United States at the World Cup? A sunny day?

No ... What do you really want?

To win the lottery? A villa on the French Riviera? Six weeks in Tahiti?

No, be serious! What do you really want?

To feel appreciated? To be liked? To feel like you're making a difference? To feel that your work, your ideas, that you yourself, are valued by the people around you?

That's closer, isn't it? But it's more than that still, because what you really want is not just about you.

You want to see your children, your grandchildren succeed. You want them to be happy. You want them to know Jesus.

You want the folks who live along the Gulf Coast to catch a break, to be relieved of their suffering, to be able to pursue their lives and livelihoods without having to deal with the effects of epic disasters, natural and unnatural.

You want a government that works, that isn't debilitated by political posturing and servitude to money and power, a government that seeks the real welfare of all the people, a government that seeks to do not just what works or what is politically prudent, but what is right.

You want an end to senseless violence, to terrorism, to ethnic hatred, to the systematic oppression of one group of people by another.

You want ... peace. Peace that isn't merely a temporary cessation of hostilities, but real reconciliation among enemies, a growing realization of common destiny and mutual concern.

You want love. Not just to be liked or even to be valued, but to be loved, to feel that you matter to somebody, that you matter to God, just as you are. And you

want to be able to be loving yourself, to love God without reservation, to love the people around you without hidden motive and without restraint.

You want joy. To welcome the extraordinary gift of this moment, of this day, of this life, of this world, with open eyes and open heart, with overflowing gratitude and overwhelming gladness.

You want goodness. To be good yourself, not just successful, not just comfortable, not just secure, but good, to know you are doing what God wants you to do. And you want goodness to prevail over evil, everywhere, not ignored or defeated or devalued, but celebrated, goodness desired over everything else, goodness remaking this world as God intends it.

These are the things you really want: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, self-control.

But the truth is, it is very hard to get these things. You experience these things only in bits and pieces, only in fits and starts. As much as you want it and as hard as you try, love and joy and peace and patience and self-control and the rest usually remain out of reach. As Paul puts it: "You cannot do what you want to do."

You cannot do what you want to do, because the things you want most are not human achievements, but God's gifts. On our own, by our own strength, we miss the mark, we fall short. Our human nature, as Paul says, both our own personal human nature and the collective nature we share as a human race, is at odds with God's Spirit, pushing us and pulling us in a different direction.

What our human nature wants is opposed to what the Spirit wants, and what the Spirit wants is opposed to what our human nature wants.

As a result, instead of getting what we really want, we end up with something very different, only a dim shadow of the real thing.

We want love, but we pursue sex, substituting a fleeting physical gratification for a lasting union of the whole self, body and soul.

We want joy, but we settle for intoxication, for a temporary high induced by alcohol or a winning bet or a business coup or a triumphant sports team.

We want peace, but we're happy with security, ensured by any means available, usually by the threat or actual use of violence.

We want patience, but, in practice, we have little use for it. When things don't go our way or take too long, we just get angry.

We want to be kind, but we find ourselves more often than not envious of our neighbor's successes, put out and put upon by the incessant needs and demands of those around us.

We want goodness, but we are driven instead by ambition. If we can be successful and good, fine, but we will much more readily give up goodness for the sake of success, than sacrifice ourselves for the sake of goodness.

We want to be faithful, but more than that we want to be happy, or at least we want what we think will make us happy. And so we move from spouse to spouse, or from job to job, or from friend to friend, or from church to church, trying to find that happiness that proves so elusive.

We want to be humble, but we find ourselves constantly hungry for attention and affirmation, jealous of the acclaim others receive ahead of us or instead of us.

We want self-control, but -- oh, what the heck! -- we give in again and again to our most basic cravings, indulging ourselves in an orgy of desire.

These are the things into which our human nature leads us, the things Paul lists in Galatians 5: anger and ambition, jealousy and envy, drunkenness and orgies, fighting and immorality. You don't think so? You don't think of yourself as immoral or ambitious or angry or jealous?

But we all share a common human nature. Some of us are simply better at hiding our passions and desires, or in expressing them in more socially acceptable forms.

You've all seen that person talking most politely, but filled with anger seething just below the surface. Maybe you've been that person.

We may not get literally drunk, but, in the absence of real joy, we indulge ourselves in this guilty pleasure or that, seeking the pleasure fix that will keep us going until the next opportunity to distract ourselves.

We don't think of ourselves as violent, but we have no qualms about sending soldiers or passing laws to do violence on our behalf.

And all of us routinely substitute politeness for kindness, modesty for humility, pleasantries for love. We really want love and joy and peace and patience and

kindness and goodness and faithfulness and humility and self-control, but we settle for poor substitutes, mere shadows or even opposites of the real thing.

So, will we never get what we really want? Not by trying harder.

Let the Spirit direct your lives ...

This is the way, the way of the Spirit! Not by taking matters into our own hands, but by putting matters into God's hands. Not by taking charge, but by giving the Spirit control. By starting each day with these words: *Our Father, you are above all that is and above all we know. May your name be honored today. May your Kingdom come. May your will be done, here on earth, by me, as it is done in your realm.*

By recognizing day by day and moment by moment and situation by situation that your life is not your own, that it is given you as a gift, that you cannot live it, cannot live it well, by your own wisdom and by your own strength, by asking day by day, moment by moment, situation by situation for the Lord's help, for the Lord's guidance. Breathe on me, breath of God! Fill me with your Spirit, Lord!

This is one prayer God will answer without fail. The Spirit will fill you, and with the Spirit will come God's gifts: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, self-control. Just the things you really wanted!