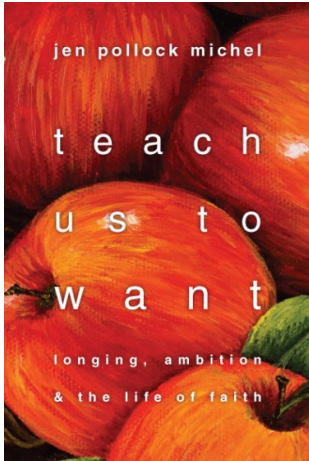




BOOK EXCERPT



Teach Us to Want: Longing, Ambition and the Life of Faith
Available August 2014
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What Do You Want?

As a mother with the will to write, I am plagued by self-doubt. Is this work I do career? Is it hobby? Is it calling? I am driven to define what I am doing in an effort to categorize it, to label it, to locate it on the map of good and bad, selfless and selfish. But I've realized that my efforts meet and challenge this theology of desire with which I've been stuck since my earliest days as a Christian, and I can't help but ask: am I really wrong to write because I want to?

Is it true that the hardest, least desirable choice is the most obviously holy? Is it true that personal desire must never be trusted? Am I right to immediately incriminate ambition? Many, like me, imagine desire and faith in a boxing ring, facing off like opponents. We don't suppose both can be cheered at the same time. At the end of the day, one will be left standing. The other will fall. *We easily dismiss desire, arguing that the goal of the Christian life is obedience.* Why promote desire? Doesn't that necessarily put us in the path of potential treachery?

These hesitations about desire are particular to my story, but they represent a common struggle for many Christians. One doesn't have to be a mother or a writer or even a converted reprobate to recognize the inherent tensions of desire. How do we ever know when desire isn't the apple of self-actualizing promise leading us far from God? Can it ever be possible to trust our own hearts?

We simply can't ignore desire. Like a heartbeat, desire pulses steadily in the backdrop of our lives. We may not always be aware of the work desire is doing, and yet it provides much of the necessary energy on which we rely. We get out of bed, go to work, get to the gym, marry (or not), have babies (or not), write books—follow Jesus—because in some measure, we want to.

Desire is primal: to be human is to want. Consider that wanting is the earliest language we learn. As infants, when we're yet incapable of forming words on our tongue, we're infinitely good at knowing what we want—and, for that matter, getting it. And if desire is as innate as I describe, it means that wanting, as part of the human experience, is not to be rejected but embraced. I don't mean to say that we should model our lives of wanting on the red-faced screaming of a baby who's hungry, needs her diaper changed or has lost her pacifier, which her mother, on the basis of principle, refuses to retrieve. There are better ways of communicating and healthier means of expression.

The gospel of Jesus Christ meets our holy hesitations about desire, without eliminating the tension or minimizing the dangers, yet suggesting it can be reformed. Though we can indeed want in ways that go tragically wrong, in the words of the apostle Paul, we are "buried with



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[Christ] by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). Might not this newness of life include a newness of desire?

Reflecting on our desires asks us to address the more naked parts of who we are and why we do what we do. When we talk about desire, we undress our hearts. We worm our way into intention and hope to arrive at self-awareness. When we’re stuck in patterns of chronic sin, we should think to ask, “What must I be wanting to continually persist in these choices?” We usually know that something is driving our behavior, but the forces often feel imperceptible to us. *The simple question, “What do I want?” can lead to important change.*

— Adapted from chapters one and two, “Afraid to Want” and “Aperture of the Heart”



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Delving into the Desires of our Hearts

Why is it important to admit desire?

Jen Pollock Michel: We need more than spiritual practices that shape our cognition, and more will be required of us than to simply “think rightly.” If we only deal with our *thinking*, rather than our *wanting*, we may end up in a frustrated state of spiritual impasse. We could fail to really understand ourselves. We could be prevented from identifying the obstacles that pose the greatest threat to our spiritual lives. And, we may remain ignorant of the passions meant to point us toward our most meaningful participation in God’s mission.

When we begin to examine desire, we make real movement out of our own darkness:

- We understand our persistence in patterns of chronic sin.
I nurture sin in my life because, in some real way, I think it does me a greater good than obedience will.
- We surface attitudes of resistance to God and his work in us.
I am divided between wanting God’s will and wanting my way.
- We identify our disappointments with God – and our failure to trust him.
I fail to surrender myself fully to God because I don’t know if his purposes are good.
- We behold our heart’s allegiance to lesser gods.
I have pet idols that I rely upon for my wholeness.
- We confront our fears and unwillingness to risk.
I refuse to want because I’m afraid of the responsibilities of that wanting.

What can the Lord’s Prayer teach us about desire?

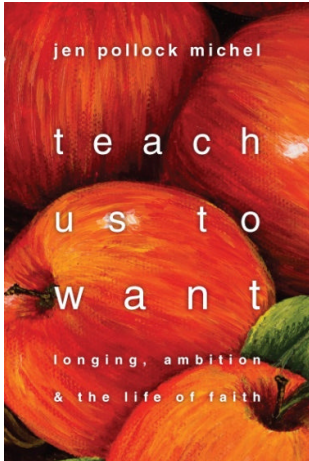
Jen: The Lord’s Prayer is like the confluence of two rivers: human longing and divine desire. Praying the Lord’s Prayer allows us to want for both holy and human things, and it is the space where we can be most fully ourselves and yet most fully surrendered to God.

Many scholars recognize this as an inherent architecture of the Lord’s Prayer. First we have three “thee” petitions: God, your name be made holy, your kingdom come, your will be done. These are of course primary to the call to follow Christ, and becoming God’s people means making these our most fundamental desires. But the prayer doesn’t end there. We arrive at three “we” petitions: give us our bread, forgive us as we forgive, lead us not into temptation. The Lord’s Prayer doesn’t deliver us into a higher, holier realm where desires cease to matter. Rather, it offers a sacramental lens for living in the everyday and provides a framework for seeing our desires rightfully ordered.

The Lord’s Prayer is what I would call a holy lexicon of desire: it gives us language for reconciling what is earthly of our lives (and our desires) with what is ultimately eternal.



Q & A



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How might our desires draw us closer to God?

Jen: Desire may be the very catalyst we need to move us beyond our spiritual sluggishness. Without desire pulsing through our veins, we are left with apathy, indifference, resignation and numb obligations. Very often, our spiritual practices feel more perfunctory than authentic and real. As we attend to our desires – seeing, confessing, trusting – we can move into God’s greater light:

- We acknowledge our sinfulness and receive more gratefully the grace of Christ.
I do and want wrong – and still, I am fully wanted by God.
- We discover new freedoms in Christ – even the freedom to want, however imperfectly.
I want wrongly, but God, in Christ, is committed to my transformation.
- We excavate our unique gifts and passions.
My desires can illuminate my gifts: in doing what I love, I can feel most alive.
- We clarify our callings and move into God’s mission.
How I uniquely see the world’s brokenness and want for its wholeness is a signpost for my calling.
- We recover greater courage to pray boldly and specifically.
My desires move me beyond generalities to humbly, confidently entreat God’s intervention.
- We mature in our understanding of God’s purposes and priorities.
My heart’s desires align with the character and content of faith as described and modeled in the Scriptures.
- We learn to abide seasons of waiting and disappointment.
I learn to want what God gives when he gives it.

Admitting desire can put us on a path of greater congruence with God’s will. We become people who, like Jesus, “delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart,” (Ps 40:8, cf. Heb 10:7).

How do we respond faithfully when we feel that a desire of our heart has been denied?

Jen: When God denies a good desire of our heart, we can’t help but be pained and perplexed, and lament is a perfectly appropriate response. We inhabit an in-between land. Though Christ has died, is risen and is seated at the right hand of the Father, he has not yet returned to claim eternal, earthly reign. The world is not yet fully redeemed, death is not yet fully conquered, and tears are not yet fully dried. Our longings for good cannot be fully satisfied here and now.

However, we can live faithfully with our disappointed desires by anticipating with hope the good world that is yet to come. Hope does not demand we numb our disappointments. Rather, hope invites us to confide in God our aches and continue imploring his goodness.

Nevertheless, we don’t give up on good desires unless God seems clearly to have said to us



Q & A

that this is necessary (cf. 2 Cor 12). The bulk of Scriptural witness seems to call us to persistence in prayer (and holy desire), rather than resignation.

What is the relationship between desire, obedience and holiness?

When we obey because we want to, our obedience promises to be stronger, more lasting, more resilient.

Jen: Holiness is consecrated conformity to God. A man or woman who is being made holy is being formed into wholehearted love for God and love for neighbor. With heart, soul, mind and strength, holy people are committed, in word and deed, thought and intention, to the glory of God and the good of the world.

Obedience is an act of our will: we move into holiness by obediently choosing conformity with God. But we can't *will* much that we don't *desire*. Certainly, we can sustain obedience, for a time, by duty and obligation. And often that is what we must do to begin in obedience. We do what we must, whether we want to or not. But *desire*, as it represents something more profound than behavior, is essential to obedience that is truly *willing*. When we obey because we *want* to, our obedience promises to be stronger, more lasting, more resilient. We are best off praying for a *willing obedience*. This produces genuine holiness, not just superficial conformity to God's law.

Why is it essential to be part of a Christian community as we negotiate our desires?

Jen: It is essential to be part of a Christian community because we alone cannot *see* ourselves. Spiritual myopia prevents each of us from recognizing ourselves. So we must involve others in the process of seeking answers to the question, "What do I want?" We invite them to mirror our reflections and to reflect our desires back to us. Additionally, the Lord's Prayer calls us to the regular practice of confession, which, elsewhere in the Bible, seems to be something we do not only in God's hearing but in the company of others (cf. Jas 5:16).

Furthermore, we need others to believe for us when we doubt, to hope for us when we despair, to fight for us when we prefer surrender. Because our desires would often carry us far from Christ, because it is easiest to prefer our comfort and convenience over the cross, only in Christian community are we sustained for wanting as Jesus did, "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God," (Heb 12:2).

The Scriptures bear witness to the togetherness we need for walking faithfully with God.