

WHAT DOES GOD WANT FROM ME?

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UNDERSTANDING GOD'S
DESIRE FOR YOUR LIFE

Next



DIRECTION

MARK MATLOCK

FOREWORD BY JOSH MCDOWELL

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What Does God Want From Me?: Understanding God's Desire for Your Life
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Youth Specialties products, 300 S. Pierce St., El Cajon, CA 92020 are published by
Zondervan, 5300 Patterson Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49530.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Matlock, Mark.

*What does God want from me? : understanding God's desire for
your life / by Mark Matlock.*

p. cm.

ISBN-10: 0-310-25815-4 (pbk.)

ISBN-13: 978-0-310-25815-5 (pbk.)

1. Teenagers--Religious life. I. Title.

BV4531.3.M395 2007

248.8'3--dc22

2006025329

This edition printed on acid-free paper.

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Web site addresses listed in this book were current at the time of publication. Please contact Youth Specialties via e-mail (YS@YouthSpecialties.com) to report URLs that are no longer operational and provide replacement URLs if available.

*Creative Team: Randy Southern, Holly Sharp/SharpSeven Design, Laura Gross, Heather Haggerty, Ryan Sharp/SharpSeven Design
Cover Design by Burnkit*

Printed in the United States of America

06 07 08 09 10 11 12 • 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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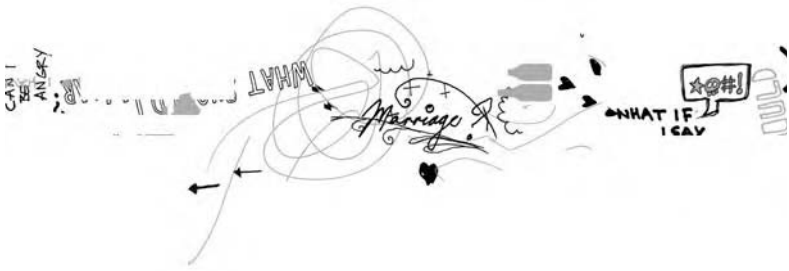
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CHAPTER



WHAT DO YOU GIVE THE GOD
WHO HAS EVERYTHING?





I was almost five years old when I first understood who Jesus was and what he'd done by dying on the cross for my sin. The details of where my awareness began and how it led to my decision to trust Christ as my Savior are a little murky, lost in the haze of time. But what I do know is that at the age of four and three quarters, I trotted down the aisle of my church to make public something I'd realized and discussed with my father the night before.

Mrs. McGannon, a nice older lady in my church, met me at the front of the sanctuary and escorted me to a room backstage. That's when I knew I was "in." I had a backstage pass to where the pastor and special music people hung out. Mrs. McGannon peppered me with questions and Scripture passages to make sure I "checked out" as the real deal. As I answered each question to her satisfaction, I could feel her excitement grow. I knew I was passing my test with flying colors.

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Mrs. McGannon told me Jesus had been knocking on the door of my heart, and now I'd answered by opening the door and letting him in. She touched my chest and told me Jesus was going to live inside me. She asked me to repeat after her a prayer—a magic spell of sorts, I supposed—that would seal the deal in her eyes and, more importantly, in the eyes of God.

When we were done praying she gave me a certificate and a booklet I couldn't read—except for the title, which had “John” in it. That was exciting to me because John was the name of one of my friends. I walked out of the backstage area and experienced something I could not have imagined. People were genuinely excited about the little walk I'd taken to the front of the church. Some hugged me; others cheered. My grandma Nora had tears in her eyes.

None of my friends were present. They were all on the playground. Meanwhile their parents were hugging me and telling me that someday their kids would have to take the walk too. Sure enough, over the next several months many of my friends did exactly that. I couldn't say what the walk meant to them or whether they felt pressured to do it because of my short pioneering trip, but there's one thing I did know: No matter what the people at church thought, my little walk wasn't nearly as important to me as the realization that prompted it, that I wanted to follow Jesus. I took my newfound desire pretty seriously—at least as seriously as my almost-five-year-old mind could handle.

When I got home from church that night, I asked my mom why my heart was still beating. Puzzled, she asked

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what I meant. I said, “If I opened the door of my heart to Jesus, why is he still knocking?” Obviously I had much to learn on my spiritual journey.

Years later, during my sophomore year of high school, I began to sense there was something more I should be doing with my life. People in my church and various Christian speakers made me feel as though I was obligated to do something for God. They made me feel guilty for taking God’s free gift of salvation and not giving anything back.

Their expectations reminded me of the time Jerry, a friend at school, gave me a box of Jujubes. I thought, *How cool, this guy could be a great friend.* Later, however, Jerry used his gift of candy against me when I wouldn’t let him copy off my homework. Jerry’s gift had strings attached. Strictly speaking, it was free. But it also bound me (in his eyes) to do things I didn’t want to do.

I began to wonder if that’s how Jesus worked too. Was he a slick salesman, offering a gift that seemed almost too good to be true and then obligating people with the fine print at the bottom of a contract?

Follow Me

The Gospels make it clear that Jesus was totally upfront about what it takes to follow him. He left no doubt as to the degree of commitment he required. He instructed his 12 disciples to leave what they were doing and join him—not for a day or a week or even a month, but forever. Peter,

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James, John, and Andrew understood the seriousness of their decisions when they dropped their fishing nets—and their fathers—to follow Jesus. They left their source of income lying on the ground (Matthew 4:18-22).

Later, when a rich young man expressed interest in following Jesus, Jesus told him to sell everything he had first (Luke 18:18-25). The young man walked away sad because he couldn't make the sacrifice. If you read the passage, you'll notice that Jesus didn't go after him. He let the young man leave. It seems Jesus didn't want someone following him who wasn't prepared to sacrifice everything and endure anything.

As extreme as it sounds, that stipulation wasn't a problem for me as a teenager. In my youthful zeal, I wasn't bothered by the cost or pain of following Jesus. While it seemed certain people wanted to make me feel obligated to do something for Christ, I didn't feel it was a duty. It was something I *wanted* to do.

Think about the last Father's Day gift you gave, if you can remember it. Chances are, you didn't put a lot of thought into it. For many people, Father's Day is more of an obligation than a celebration. They don't buy gifts for their dads because they *want* to; they do it because they've been told they *have* to. Now that I'm a father, I have to admit that attitude bothers me a little more than it used to.

For some of us, the problem is that we don't know what our fathers really want. They seem to have almost everything they need, and what they don't have is often beyond

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our ability to give. One year I solved that problem when I discovered my dad wanted a particular Bible study software package. The problem was, his computer wasn't powerful enough to run it. That gave me an idea: my brothers and I would pool our resources and buy him the computer he needed.

Obviously this was no small gift. I was just starting out in ministry and my brothers were in college. Saving the necessary amount of money took several months, but we did it. We bought the computer and we couldn't wait to give it to him. While previous Father's Day gifts had been given out of obligation, this one was different. We were excited to give it. We'd carefully chosen the present and made personal sacrifices to purchase it. It was the most difficult gift I'd ever given and the one that cost me the most; yet it was the one I took the most joy in giving.

Could the same thing be said of our devotion and service to God? There are times when we feel obligated to give something back to him. And we do so without much feeling or personal investment. Other times, however—when we get a sense of what he truly desires—we realize that no sacrifice on our part is too great when it comes to fulfilling those desires.

The question is, what are those desires? What does God want? What does he need?

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What Does God Need?

If that question seems absurd to you, you're not alone. Check out the Lord's words in Psalm 50:9-15:

I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats? Sacrifice thank offerings to God, fulfill your vows to the Most High, and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me.

In this psalm Asaph describes a courtroom drama in which God has called the people of the earth to account for their lives. One of his accusations is that people have misunderstood what he wants from them. God had put a sacrificial system in place to remind the people of Israel of their sin—and the fact that blood was required to forgive it (Hebrews 9:22). He wanted them to be sorrowful about their sin and thankful for his forgiveness.

There was nothing magical about the animal blood itself; it was just a reminder that God would provide the blood needed to save the people. The people, however, mistakenly believed that what God wanted was the actual animals and food they offered. They overlooked the attitude of the heart God wanted from them.

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God responded by making it clear that he was not in need and that even if he ever was in need, the human race would be the last place he would turn for help. Think about it. When you need money, you go to someone who has it, right? I typically started with my parents. If that failed, a call to my grandparents usually solved the problem. God won't turn to us because we have nothing to offer him. We can't give him anything that's not already his. He doesn't even need our worship. He's God. He needs nothing.

That sacrificial system he set up for Israel has now been rendered unnecessary because Christ shed his blood for us—once and for all. However, God is still concerned about the attitudes of our hearts. He wants us to be genuinely thankful for all he's done for us. It shouldn't be hard for us to do.

The Art of Appreciation

Have you ever admired someone? When I was eight, I saw *Star Wars: Episode IV—A New Hope* for the first time. The film changed the way my friends and I played. Instead of guns and bows and arrows, we imagined blasters and light sabers. At recess we competed to see who could make the best Darth Vader sound. The winner got to play the villain.

I became interested in the man who made the movie, George Lucas. I wanted to be like him. He created whole new worlds to dream about and creatures I never could have imagined. I read magazine articles and a book about his life. I decided I wanted to be a filmmaker; and I started my own

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movie company called Animated World, which was dedicated to producing the most fantastic special effects films known to man. Of course, if I'd ever run into George Lucas on the street, I would have been speechless—too afraid to even tell him how much I appreciate his work.

While George Lucas gave me some ideas to dream about, God has done so much more. He made the world I live in (Genesis 1:1). He created humankind (Genesis 2:7). What's more, even though I've offended his perfection and holiness with my sin (Romans 3:23), he made it possible to escape the punishment of death because he gave his son to die for me (Romans 6:23). God has changed my life more than George Lucas ever could. On top of everything else, God calls me his friend (John 15:13-15). I don't have to be intimidated by him. I can approach him as I would someone I know very well, even though his power is awesome.

Such loving acts call for serious appreciation. If you're interested in showing God the appreciation he deserves, you need to ask yourself two questions: *What do I know about God?* and *What do I think about what he's done for me?* If you ponder those questions long enough, you'll develop a desire to do something in response. My admiration of George Lucas caused me to read books about him and pursue the things he was interested in. I know people who admire certain musicians. They show their admiration by dressing like the artists and trying to learn all they can about them. They spend their money to buy CDs and support the artists' favorite causes. I know students who admire certain athletes. They show their admiration by watching the players' games, wearing their jerseys, and buying whatever shoes they endorse. The

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bottom line is, when you *really* admire someone, it changes the way you think and the way you live certain areas of your life. It can influence the decisions you make and the way you spend your money.

The same applies to our appreciation for God. The question is: In what ways should our thoughts, actions, and decision-making be changed? Or, to put it another way: What does God want from his admirers?

What Does God Want?

Early in the Bible we get a clue as to God's preferences. The clue can be found in Genesis 4:2-8, the story of Cain and Abel. Both brothers gave gifts to God, but each one received a different response from him. See for yourself:

Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And while they

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were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

It's an intense story—and a confusing one too. After all, what was wrong with Cain's gift? A couple passages in the New Testament shed some light on the issue:

By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead...And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Hebrews 11:4, 6)

Abel's gift pleased God because of the faith that accompanied it—something that Cain's gift apparently lacked. Perhaps Abel was active in his desire to know God and to please him with his life, whereas Cain had no real interest in knowing who God was or in delighting him. Cain was simply doing the duty of giving God a gift; but Abel delighted in serving God because Abel understood who God was.

Then 1 John 3:12 tells us that not only was Abel right in his living, but Cain was in fact evil. His gift was offered only because he felt he should:

Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous.

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I have to confess that many times I've given God gifts that were more like Cain's than Abel's. I've gone to church because my parents made me feel guilty about not going. I've given money for God's work because I felt I had to or because I was afraid God would take something away from me if I didn't. I've done service projects in the Lord's name only because a girl I was interested in was going on the trip too.

My freshman year in high school, Wendy Colman gave a testimony about the importance of going on a certain service project. That same day I signed up for the project because Wendy was a babe. I remember how every time I saw her at church I'd say, "Hey, Wendy, sure can't wait for the service project!" I didn't notice it at the time, but Wendy never really said much to me about it. Finally the big day for the trip arrived. As we loaded the vans, I kept asking, "Has anyone seen Wendy? I'd sure hate for us to leave her behind." Finally, one of the leaders said, "Oh...no...Wendy's not coming on this trip."

My reply went something like this: "Well, if Wendy's not coming on this stupid trip, then what the heck am I doing here?" Everyone looked at me like I was an idiot. The truth is, I was an idiot. I was going on the trip for the wrong reason; and as it tends to go with those kinds of things, I got out of it just exactly what I put into it.

I guess what you have to determine at this point is whether or not you really care about what God has done for you. If you do, and I assume you're somewhat interested or you wouldn't be reading this book, then you need to ask

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yourself what you can do for God that would show your thankfulness. While God is more interested in the motive behind a gift than the gift itself, my guess is that the gift matters too.

When I was a kid, a friend and I were at a 7-Eleven store with his mom. I wanted candy, but his mother wouldn't let us buy any. When we got home, my friend pulled a piece of candy from his pocket and said, "Here, I got this for you." When I asked how he did it, he told me he'd put it in his pocket when nobody was looking. His act was selfless (he didn't cop any candy for himself), but that didn't change the fact that I didn't want him to steal for me.

In the next few chapters, we'll discover what God wants—and doesn't want—from us.

Questions to Ponder

1. In this chapter Mark recounted the events leading up to the moment when he realized who Jesus was and what he had done. Can you remember when you came to realize you could put your trust in Christ's death on the cross as payment for your sin?
2. Mark's parents, his church youth group, and a woman named Mrs. McGannon helped shape his understanding of who Jesus is and what he meant to Mark's life. Who has helped shape your understanding of Jesus?

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3. Have you ever felt pressure to “do” something for God? If so, what? Why did you feel pressure?
4. Like Cain, have you ever given something to or done something for God with a wrong heart? If so, do you feel as though you have peace with God about that now?
5. Mark talked about his appreciation and admiration for George Lucas. Whom do you really admire? Mark read books about George Lucas, and he even made extremely low-budget movies in order to be like him. How does your admiration for a certain person affect your life?
6. Can you honestly say you have an admiration or adoration for God? If so, how has it made a difference in your life?

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