

THE EMPTINESS OF GETTING WHAT YOU WANT

BY MICHAEL KELLER

If I just get that job. If I just get that title. If I just get that relationship. If I just get *out* of that job. If I just get *out* of that relationship — *then* my life would be different. Then I would be better off. Then I would have the comfort and security and validation I need to live the life I want.

As humans we connect our circumstances to our happiness. We can't help it. As a minister, you would think I wouldn't just know this truth, but I would be so aware of it so that I was inoculated against its effects. You would think that I would have seen the detrimental effects of trying to find your significance in things that won't bring

you the happiness you think they will.

Yet there I was, last November, grim, depressed, filled with gloom, emptiness, and despair. Why? There was no external trauma, no immediate pressing problems of life bearing down on me. I had, in fact, just received my PhD in computational linguistics of historical theology a few weeks earlier after a successful defense of my dissertation. Eight years of work, countless hours of preparation, using every last second of free time while working full-time in college ministry and planting Redeemer Lincoln Square had finally paid off. The congratulatory praise was all around me,

and yet I felt hollowed out, like someone had used one of those cantaloupe scoopers (that I have no space for in my New York City kitchen) on my insides. What had happened?

Unknowingly, I had done the very thing I teach, and preach, and speak against every week. I had placed my significance, I had put my hopes and value into a "thing." The "thing" for me was the PhD that was going to vindicate and legitimize my personhood. I had been chasing it for eight long years and during those years, the true meaning behind its usefulness gradually became unfocused. Receiving that degree became an identity marker

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HFNY AFFILIATE: GIFTED HANDS

Sophia Miller grew up in St. James, Jamaica and came to New York a few years ago. It wasn't long after moving here, though, that she and her two daughters ended up homeless. Sophia struggled to find work and started to lose hope all together. Then she met Dustee, the founder of Gifted Hands, a Hope for New York affiliate that provides educational art programs to build self-esteem and teach new skills.

Below, Sophia shares her story of how God used Dustee and Gifted Hands to restore her hope and introduce her to a new church family that supports and loves her and her two girls.

Growing up, we were poor, but it wasn't much of a difference because everyone was in that same situation. We didn't have much, but we were happy.

We went to church every week growing up, and my mother was always telling me about God.

Before coming here, I had worked at a bank for 17 years. I

was self sufficient. Then, in 2014, I moved to New York to marry a man I met here. But I haven't seen him from six months into

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CITY TO CITY EUROPE CONFERENCE

BY STPHAN PUES

At the end of October church planters and leaders from all over Europe gathered in Krakow, Poland for the sixth City To City Europe (CTCE) conference with over 30 countries represented. This gathering, which happens every other year, is always a significant moment for our European network.

During four keynote addresses, Tim Keller spoke about “Movements of the Gospel.” Each talk focused on four areas: me, my church, my city and my world. There were panel discussions, breakout sessions, Bible expositions, prayer and time given for community building and networking.

This time is a special opportunity to meet church planters, their leadership teams, pastors, network leaders and others from dozens of cities across Europe. Many use it as a time of vision casting, team building and sharing lessons they have learned to start gospel-driven churches in their city. And it also can't be stressed enough how thinly stretched these leaders often are. The reformed church in the UK

and Europe lacks the resources and support that churches have in other parts of the world. So the conference also gives leaders a time of shared fellowship and refreshment.

Andy Weatherley, a church planter from Birmingham, England said:

“Our city, like many cities across Europe, is a growing and dynamic ecosystem of human life and culture. Dr. Keller's works have consistently inspired me to think with care and precision about how urban church plants can bring the rich beauty of the gospel to bear upon the inhabitants of the city ... Connecting with other leaders, working in similar situations to our own, has sparked some our most fruitful ideas and has helped to sustain me in church planting ministry.”

During the conference, several new projects were announced, including a month-long residence training for church planters in Europe. This will be the first residency training program offered by CTCE on the continent. (For many

years European church planters have traveled to New York City for training.) CTCE will also begin a network of coaches and a formal faith and work learning community.

While this conference is the biggest gathering ever hosted by CTCE, it is different in another way: it is now reflecting an actual movement. In the first years of CTCE, it was just a couple of dozen church-planter pastors who were friends. We were those “weirdos“ who started churches in the urban centers of Europe. Today, 10 years later, it is a growing movement with more than 650 leaders.

We think it is reasonable to see about 400 churches planted in the next five years in about 40 cities. We are not merely dreaming — this is the trajectory we're actually seeing. Hopefully every leader traveled home encouraged, refueled and refreshed with a new vision for their churches and lives.

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REDEEMER REPORT

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Hunter College Auditorium
E. 69th St.
(btw Park & Lexington)
Services: 10:30 a.m.
& 5 p.m.

W83rd Ministry Center
150 W. 83rd St.
(btw Columbus & Amsterdam)
Services: 9:30 a.m.,
11:30 a.m. & 5 p.m.

West Side Church Plant:
NY Society for Ethical Culture
2 W. 64th St.
(at Central Park West)
Service: 10:30 a.m.

Salvation Army Auditorium
120 W. 14th St.
(btw 6th & 7th Aves.)
Services: 9:30 a.m. & 5 p.m.
DT LAB: Wednesdays at 7 p.m.

A SEASON TO THINK ABOUT TV (AND OTHER THINGS)

BY ANGELA ADOUR

Another Lenten season is upon us. As we prepare ourselves to gaze in awe at the Jesus crucified in our place, then raised to bring us new life, let us first turn our gaze inward to investigate the recesses of our own minds and hearts to discover any ways in which we may have gone off course and consider the process of reorientation.

Blurring the line between sin and righteousness

The Bible is filled with admonitions for Christians to abstain from sin. Believers affirm with our lips that sin is bad and righteousness is good. Sometimes, though, our classifications for that which is sinful become muddled. Perhaps there are places in our lives we have lingered too close and for too long near a once-clear border, so now our ability to see the border has all but disappeared. In other words, might we now have blind spots where once we had clarity? Might we now be desensitized in some areas where we once were sensitive to the Spirit's guidance?

Here is a non-exhaustive set of practical "heart probe" questions to consider as we examine the condition, priorities and practices of our hearts in preparation for Easter:

On what do my thoughts and eyes linger and what consequences have I observed?

Tim Keller approached this topic saying, "In Joshua 7, Achan, against the command of the Lord, stole three valuable objects for himself during a

military operation. He took the plunder for himself. When he was caught, he described how it happened. First, he gazed at the objects and assessed their value; and *then* he found himself desiring them; and, finally, he stole them. (Joshua 7:21) In other words, before he indulged in the kind of intense passionate lusting we might all recognize as temptation, he first gave himself the freedom to gaze and admire and ponder and imagine.

In the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus said we are not only to refrain from sex outside of marriage, but also must refrain from 'looking with lust,' as this is committing adultery 'in the heart.' (Matthew 5:28) So, while it is obvious that Scripture forbids sexually immoral *behavior*, Jesus also condemned a sexually immoral *imagination*, recommending the most proactive behaviors to avoid falling into sin. And in our highly sexualized culture it is almost impossible to avoid being confronted by pornography, in advertisements, digital and analog, as well as what passes for 'entertainment.'

Surely these texts show us that we must be careful with how and where we allow our gaze to linger."

Is there any practice or indulgence I keep secret from either my family at home or my church family in the areas of money or leisure or entertainment or _____?

This question is multi-faceted in its approach. First, it prods us to consider our underlying motivations for the things we

hide from others. Are we treasuring secret habits or indulgences because we know they are sinful and we don't want to be challenged to give them up? Or do we want help but our pride keeps us from the embarrassment that honest confession would entail?

Second, this question speaks to the consequences our sin has in relation to our place in community. The sin we hide and refuse to confess isolates us, splintering our unity with others. But staying in Christian community provides support and accountability. "You need more eyes than your own to help you walk right ... God will expose you to preserve you." - Jackie Hill Perry

What content am I absorbing from movies, television, or my Internet usage today that a decade or more ago I would have found objectionable or sinful?

In his book, *The Tech-Wise Family*, Andy Crouch expresses how our choice of media content can lead us toward a state of desensitization. Crouch states, "Twenty years ago *The Sopranos* was a critical favorite and audience hit in part because of its boundary-pushing depictions of sex and violence ... As I write, the hit show of the moment is *Game of Thrones*, whose levels of psychological drama, not to mention lurid sex, violence, and violent sex, make *The Sopranos* look like something from an age of innocence. A world in which *The Sopranos* can seem innocent is a world ratcheting its

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way toward being unable to be shocked by anything.”

Considering Crouch’s comments we must ask ourselves whether we have come to tolerate in our media consumption images or scenes which would have been categorized as pornography, brutality, or blasphemy in the past, but that we are now accepting under the guise of artistic license.

We, the body of Christ, must not become so jaded to the content to which we are exposing ourselves and our family that we risk losing our discernment to “call evil good and good evil.” (Isaiah 5:20) Staying sensitive to the nudges from the Holy Spirit when it comes to our media consumption means that we must have a regular practice of asking God to convict our hearts concerning the content we ingest.

How am I handling the temptations I face from the culture around me?

Am I regularly seeing God as ultimate or has my obedience to him become labored or lackadaisical? Do I really believe his plans are for my good or am I struggling to trust him? (Romans 8:28) Here is another way to consider this question: “When obedience to God contradicts what I think will give me pleasure, let me ask myself if I love him.” - Elisabeth Elliot

Sin is alluring

The saints of bygone years were not afraid to inventory their thoughts and their lives to discern whether they were living as would please God or not.

“In defiance of my best judgment...I find something within me which cherishes and cleaves to those evils from which I ought to be horrified by and flee from.”

- John Newton

“Of all things difficult to rule, none were more so than my will and affections.”

- Elisabeth Elliot

“My deepest love is for myself and my own will.”

- Jack Miller

“In my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind making me a prisoner ... of sin.”

- The Apostle Paul (Romans 7)

If you are struggling with attraction to sin, take heart, you are not alone. You are in the company of many saints before you and beside you. The temptation to choose our own desires over God’s desires originated in the Garden and it’s not going away until we exchange our sinful nature for glorification.

Learning to guard your heart: A gift you can give to God

Some practical ways to “guard (and reorient) our hearts” (Proverbs 4:23):

A consistent prayer life

Get so comfortable talking to God that you talk to him all day long. No one knows you as intimately as God and talking to him throughout your day is a healthy practice to cultivate.

Regular Scripture meditation

You can’t know how to obey God unless you are reading/meditating on his Word. (John 14:23) You also can’t know God unless you know his Word because his Word is part of God himself. (John 1)

Self-examination (in light of Scripture)

The intersection of your motives and behavior should be continually analyzed through the lens of Scripture. “Heart probing” questions (like those above) can help with this.

Christian community

Christian community sharpens you, cares for you, keeps you accountable, and will point you to the hope of Christ.

Instilling spiritual disciplines

With spiritual discipline comes spiritual maturity. What does spiritual discipline look like practically? Plainly, when we don’t feel like obeying God or reading Scripture or praying, we do it anyway. Labored obedience eventually becomes a more habitual obedience. Thabiti M. Anyabwile encourages us by saying, “It is normal for Christians to grow, to work for growth, and to expect increasing spiritual maturity.”

Gazing on Christ

Look at the cross. See his body broken for you. Let this image be the driving force in moving your heart toward a desire for obedience in response to what Jesus, your savior, has done for
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EMPTINESS OF GETTING WHAT YOU WANT ... (CONT'D FROM PAGE 1)

for me — or at least I had allowed it to become so. *Now* people would have to take me seriously as *Michael Keller*, not as *Michael Keller*. If I got that degree I would finally receive the respect I felt I so fully deserved.

Imagine my disappointment when, after the ceremonies were over, and the diploma was in hand but *I was still the same person*. Same old Mike. Same character flaws, desires and needs. Ironically it took me days, even weeks to figure out what was bothering me. It happens to me frequently, there is a nagging sensation that something is off, something is wrong, but I can't put my finger on it. I moped around, worried my wife, grouched at my children, and was heading towards a serious depression.

C.S. Lewis was right — when you think the solution to your malaise is a new romantic partner, or a new house, or a new job to quell the inner sense of emptiness, you are chasing the wrong

answers to the right question. The right question is “What *will* fill that neediness in me that will last?” My answer of more work, career success, and increased professional status had not worked. That answer will never work. Yes, you can delude yourself for years — for me, eight years — but it will never work.

What will be enough? What will fill you? The answer is both simple and hard at the same time. Simple, just take the words of Romans 8:1 — that there is “*Now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*” and hold that statement as more true than any other statement in your life.

Now the hard part — doing that over and over and over again in all areas of your life. It will mean living your life through that statement. That means putting to death hopes and dreams and desires that you think will bring about “no condemnation” when really they won't. It also means saying yes to things that

the world might not think is that great, but which are the pillars of an unshakeable life. Like spending time in prayer, time reading the Bible, remembering God's promises, remembering what he has done, and doing it with others.

I knew and believed that there is “now no condemnation” for me in Jesus intellectually, but I had not made it functionally real. Don't be like me. Don't let years go by not realizing what your functional trust is really in. Look in and around your life — asking each part — “Are you what I really need? Are you what I'm hoping in?”

As Lewis concludes, if the answer is that nothing in this world seems to satisfy you completely or assuage that sense of neediness, then it must be something *outside of this world*. I have been a Christian since my college years, but I am just beginning to learn what it means that “Jesus is all I need.”

GIFTED HANDS ... (CONT'D FROM PAGE 1)

the marriage. He left, and my life just spiraled out of control. I have two little girls. They're five and two. We wound up homeless. Now we're in a family shelter on 28th street. It's the worst thing any mother can experience, homelessness with your two young kids.

I can't get any job because I have to drop my daughter off and pick her up and the time span doesn't let me. Being homeless, it feels like you've lost your sense of security. It feels like you've lost

everything, like there's no hope. I didn't have a family. I felt abandoned, rejected — like I'm not part of society. Or I'm a burden to society. It is unbearable.

One day, the family worker at the shelter we are staying at told me about a jewelry class Gifted Hands had in the shelter. At the time, I was right on the line between suicide and wanting to live. I told the woman I was not in the mood, but I just went anyway. The minute I went, I felt different. I met Dustee, the

founder of Gifted Hands, and she just started talking to me. She started to give me hope and one day at a time, I just began to feel I could do this.

By doing the jewelry design with Gifted Hands, it just relaxed me and made me want to do more. I brought my kids with me, and they were playing, and it made me feel like I can do this. It started to inspire me. Then Dustee invited me to church. Instead of sitting home crying and

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A SEASON TO THINK ... (CONT'D FROM PAGE 4)

you. You can never repay him for how he has suffered to remove the condemnation you were under; but you can daily look for ways to offer him the gift of obedience, as a child might offer his father a shiny pebble on the

beach. In itself it will not buy the Father's love, but in the offering love is given and received.

Many people "give up" something for Lent. The spiritual value of that can be debated, although practicing self-control

is never a wasted effort. But ask yourself this:

What can you offer to God this Lenten season — and beyond — from your life?

GIFTED HANDS ... (CONT'D FROM PAGE 4)

worrying, I went, and it started to give me back life.

I had times where I felt like giving up. To be honest with you, I'm done. I'm going to just give the kids up for adoption, and I'm done. And then my phone rings, and it's Auntie Dustee. And I'm like, God, how did you know that I needed to hear from her? We don't really have anyone here, so the church is like the only family that we have, and God used the church community to save my life.

When I started going to church with Dustee to hear the Word of God, that's what saved me. And it started with God

using Gifted Hands and the jewelry class. Through the class, I felt the love, the patience, and the respect that the world doesn't give you when you're homeless. My self esteem was boosted. But even more, Gifted Hands has connected me back with my faith.

It feels like I'm somebody. God made me. No matter where I'm at, I'm still somebody. I'm still a human being made in God's image. And I'm worthy just like anyone else. I love that Gifted Hands teaches self-sufficiency, it teaches motivation, love, and dedication.

Now, I'm working on get-

ting my GED. I went through the Potential, Empower & Train program at Gifted Hands, so now I can make and sell my own jewelry. My hope is to get a job and a home for me and my girls. And I'm so grateful to God for this new family I have.

Will you consider giving generously to support the work of Hope for New York this Easter? Your Easter Sacrificial Offering will go toward Hope for New York's work to strengthen programs at more than 50 non-profits across the city, including immediate food and shelter, job skills training, youth mentoring, and more. Visit hfny.org/donate today.