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Desiring Rightly: A Review of Wanting

Abstract

"We learn to want what we want by seeing what other people find desirable."

Posting about the book *Wanting* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/desiring-rightly-a-review-of-wanting/>

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Desiring Rightly: A Review of *Wanting*

Donald Roth

February 1, 2022

Title: *Wanting: The Power of Mimetic Desire in Everyday Life*

Author: Luke Burgis

Publisher: St. Martin's Press

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Pages: 304 (Hardcover)

ISBN: 978-1250262486

Why do you want what you want?

We often take our desires as a given, and philosophers like James K.A. Smith argue that our desires actually make up the core of who we are, but how do we come to desire things in the first place? In his recent book, *Wanting: The Power of Mimetic Desire in Everyday Life*, Luke Burgis offers valuable insight into this question. He does this by translating the thought of philosopher René Girard into language that average people will be able to understand and apply.

Like many books that undertake the task of bringing complex thought to the masses (particularly when the author offers a range of free and paid resources to dig further), the book makes big promises. Burgis argues that “wanting well, like thinking clearly, is not an ability we’re born with. It’s a freedom we have to earn.” Then he promises that his presentation of Girard’s thought will take the reader from “*Oh, sh*t* to *Holy sh*t*” as they start to apply these insights in their everyday lives.

Unlike many books that I’ve read that make such promises, Burgis delivers. While I don’t have the space to unpack all the reasons why I come to that conclusion, I’ll share a couple of the key insights that I think should be part of the broader Christian conversation around the way desire reaches the core of who we are.

Models of Desire

The key insight into the question of “why do we want what we want” is the concept of *mimesis*. This concept is really a fancy way of saying “imitation,” that is, we learn to want what we want by seeing what other people find desirable. Burgis calls these “models of desire,” and he

contrasts this with the “Romantic Lie.” That lie is the myth that our desires are autonomous or that they well up from the core of our being in some way disconnected from others.

The essential idea is that we see other people suggesting that something is desirable, and, depending on how we relate to that person, this may lead us to desire the same things. The concept is rooted in the deep inclination toward imitation that is a hallmark of humanity’s remarkable social (and mental) capacities. From a Christian perspective, we could even think of this in terms of how we are inherently image-bearers. We often link this concept to certain higher capacities (e.g. reason, language, righteousness), but theologian Richard Lints argues persuasively that it is more basic than that. He links idolatry to a misdirection and inversion of our image-bearing nature away from the God we were meant to point to. In other words, we are imitators at heart.

Mimetic Rivalry

Mimesis is more than just imitation, though, and it often has a darker side. We are not only natural imitators; we also tend to be competitive. As a parent, I think of the many times one of my kids has shown little interest in a toy until their sibling decides to start playing with it; suddenly that toy becomes one of the most desirable things in the world. This is a simple form of what Girard calls mimetic rivalry. Burgis offers a number of deeper and more serious examples, most of which end up looking like the personal reenactment of the Cold War that we often call “keeping up with the Joneses.”

Burgis adds on to Girard by offering helpful phrases to conceptualize some of the conditions that might descend into mimetic rivalry. According to mimetic theory, we tend not to get into rivalry with models who are separated from us by time, space, or social sphere. Girard called this “external mediation.” Burgis offers the more colorful “celebristan,” that is, a mythical world where celebrities live. We can safely imitate these models of desire because we do not view ourselves as in competition with them for the objects of our desire.

When our models live inside our immediate world, the story changes. Burgis calls this world “freshmanistan,” and, just like the archetypal freshman year of high school, our interaction with models in this environment is far more likely to entail competition, jealousy, and many other negative attributes.

Further complicating things, while we often openly acknowledge who we admire when we feel safely removed from the prospect of competition (celebristan), we struggle to acknowledge that imitation is part of our relationship with those we consider to be rivals (freshmanistan). In fact, it’s quite possible for two rivals to view one another as mimetic models. Burgis describes this in talking about a friend who would never leave work until after his rival did. It turned out both were doing the same thing, and both of them were feeling burned out and unhappy as a result. Burgis builds on this, pointing out that social media can have this same effect, pulling all of us into freshmanistan. The grim potential in this is destructive cycles of desire that end up

making all of us into emotional photo negatives of the happy images we project. How often isn't this just what we find?

Making it Work

Ultimately, *Wanting* delivers because Burgis provides a wealth of practical strategies for navigating the concepts he covers; further, he embeds them in lived examples that help to make application more concrete. Most of these examples come from the world of business, and many of them are oriented toward entrepreneurs and business leaders seeking to foster creativity and happiness in their organizations. The book is great on that front, but there are a few applications that I think Christians in general can appreciate.

The Sunday school application would be to just try to cut off our mimetic relationship with models other than Christ. In fact, there is a sense of truth to that inclination that this book (and Girard's work) has to offer. Girard was deeply interested in the ways that desire spurred original sin, and he was fascinated by how the sacrificial system might serve to resolve the crisis of disordered desires. He even referred to our mimetic models as "mediators of desire," and there could be a whole other article written on the ways this interacts with Christ as mediator.

However, this would reduce mimesis to less than what it is in the human experience. We *will* have models of desire other than Christ, and that's not just a critique of our sin. There are plenty of positive aspects of learning to want well from others. Paul encourages the Corinthians to imitate him in imitating Christ, and I can see many examples in my own life where my parents and grandparents presented powerful models that made desiring God an attractive prospect.

Burgis encourages his readers to establish hierarchies of value and to pay attention to how mimetic models are affecting us. He argues that we have to learn to cultivate thicker desires that provide lasting satisfaction and prioritize those in the face of forces pulling us toward more fleeting pleasures. He states that we need to learn to recognize negative cycles and develop the ability to step away from them. All of these concepts (and the examples and tools he provides) have potentially profound resonance with a Christian life well-lived.

Ultimately, one application that goes beyond the book is that we can think about the ways that we act as models. What we show our friends, our children, our significant others to be worthy of our desire will affect what they desire. Even our rivals may be affected by what we see as worthy of pursuing. This may offer a partial explanation why the witness of the martyrs is so powerful. We have a responsibility to cultivate rightly-ordered desires, and we have a calling to present models of rightly-ordered desire to others. There is only one desire that can never become competitive because it rests in something truly boundless and infinite, and that is a deeper relationship with our sovereign, personal God.