



The Church of England  
in Essex and East London  

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Diocese of Chelmsford

## **I don't want to! – Getting it right a bit at a time**

Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> July 2026

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-end

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**'I don't want to!'** how many times have you said (or thought) that?!

How many different tones of voice have you used?

Maybe as I say it, you imagined a petulant 5-year-old stamping their feet?

Or maybe you imagined yourself as a teenager I don't want to! Maybe the tone changes, perhaps it's more sulky.

Or is it a wail, possibly because your boss has you to do something, 'I don't want to do that'.

And after you've said it, what do you do? In Matthew 21 (28-32) two brothers are asked to go and do some work. One immediately refuses, but then does it anyway; and one who says he'll do it, then doesn't. We've all known people like that.

In fact, my dad once commented to me that there was no point him telling me what to do about my career, because I was so stubborn, that I'd immediately go and do opposite! Until he mentioned that I had no idea that this is what he thought, neither had I realised that this was a pattern, or even that I was doing it at all. I had thought I was compliant, doing what he wanted, obeying the rules, but he didn't see it like that.

And these behaviours can go through generations. When my son was primary age, picking him up from school was exhausting. In the 10 minute car journey, he would disagree with everything I said, or that had friends had done that day. Finally, I challenged him. Do you really think that or do you just need to disagree with me. He admitted that it was the latter!

At this point, some of you are diagnosing Oppositional Defiance Disorder, but I don't think he was there, he is generally compliant. My friend pointed out that he had been compliant all day and now just needed to do something different. I was his safe space, although a tired and grumpy one! He was exhibiting behaviour that was challenging to understand, he didn't know why he did and neither did we. He was breaking the rules of calm behaviour, but really didn't want to. He was too young at the time to cry with Paul 'I do what I don't want to do', but he was showing the behaviour Paul talks about.

In his 'Sacred Diaries', Adrian Plass had characters who talked about doing things 'in the natural'. These members of his local church used a shorthand for talking about things which hadn't yet been changed by the power of the Holy Spirit. They recognised that we bring things into our Christian life which are natural – possibly inherited, which need to change. And recognising this is the first step on the journey.

Paul complains about the law because he now knows what he should and should not be doing. When he wasn't aware of the law, he didn't realise that he was behaving wrongly. Now he is aware of the law, he recognises that he needs to change, and feels frustrated and guilty about it. And he tries to do right, but he fails. Here is a man for whom right behaviour was important, and he is struggling.

I understand his pain. Growing up, doing what was right meant praise. It meant Gold stars, house-points, badges. I wanted to do things right. When I started in the workplace, that was expected. You repeated the task until you had every dot in the right place. But when I moved on

to tasks that were open to more interpretation, I got frustrated because when I asked for feedback, my line manager would give me some, I'd redo the task, and then he'd tell me other things that were wrong. I was so angry – I didn't want to do the task 3 or 4 times, twice was bad enough. However, Paul recognises that changing our lives as Christians is something that happens incrementally.

God helps us to discover what needs to change a bit at a time. As we are ready to change. Each time we become aware of an issue, we experience pain, but it also gives us the opportunity to experience joy. I thank God for dealing with different things in my life in 'bits' – I now have lots of stories of what he has done, rather than just one. I've got to experience the buzz of realising that change has taken place on many occasions.

However, when I recognise that prompting of the Spirit that something needs to change, it doesn't stop me going 'I don't want to go through this again!' But it does help me to quickly regroup and to affirm with Paul that Jesus has set me free. To know that now we have the presence of the Holy Spirit as a foretaste, eventually we will have 'full rights as God's children'. As my two favourite encouragements say, firstly, 'God loves me as I am, but too much to let me stay that way' and secondly, 'God's gift to me is who I am, my gift to God is who I become'.

As Christians we are all disciples, all on a learning journey, all needing to change. It's our responsibility to learn the laws, to discover what it is that we are supposed to be and do, to listen to the teacher, to receive the discipline and prompting. To take on the character of God.

Character is not personality, it's not a role we play, but it's the essential core of our being. Our values. As one colleague put it, it's who you are when no one is looking. When you are having a bad day, the way you act, the things that come out of your mouth betray your character. These things that Paul did wrong, they were his character flaws.

But how do we change our character? Simply by spending time absorbing God's character.

If we spend all our time watching Eastenders (insert your favourite programme!) or reading rubbish, we will begin to act like one or many of the characters portrayed. We will accept that the things they do are good. And some of them will be, others of them won't be.

We need to focus our time on absorbing God's character, and on becoming like him. Whilst effort alone won't do it, we need to put the work in. We know that Jesus has set us free, but we need to walk into that freedom, to work in partnership with the Holy Spirit. And to walk alongside others on the journey.

This week, I challenge you to ask God to show you what he wants to change in your character, and what he needs you to do to partner with him to make that change. Spend time in prayer, in reading the word, in absorbing what he has already done for you, listen to him and follow. And I'd encourage you to do it with another person – some else who is journeying – you can help them and they help you.

This week, may your words change from 'I don't want to' to 'Father lead me on'.