

Walking in Contentment

1 Corinthians 10:23-30

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Real Audio (3 MB)

For a long time religion has had the agenda of stifling human desire because we just don't trust it. Over the years we in the churches and temples have tried to regulate the desire and passion out of life in an effort to focus people on their moral responsibilities. This agenda drove the Apostle Paul crazy. In his day, some leaders of the church in Corinth were teaching that meat offered as a sacrifice before pagan idols must be avoided. Since it was hard to know what meat had been placed before idols, the Corinthian leaders were essentially telling the people not to eat meat at all.

Apparently, the apostle was not a vegetarian. He didn't care about the religious history of a piece of beef, but he thought it could be born again as long as you ate it in thankfulness. "Why should my liberty be subject to the judgment of someone else's conscience," he asked. "Eat whatever is sold in the meat markets without raising any question on conscience, for the earth and its fullness are the Lord's." In other words, everything you desire is created by God and that makes it wonderful.

In fact, desire itself was created by God. We are born crying out in desire for the breath of life, and we spend our days on this earth desiring more. That is part of our created pattern. We are hungry of body and hungry of soul. That is not a bad thing. Nothing of human greatness has ever been achieved apart from desire. No wonderful piece of music was written, no beautiful painting created, no sonnet penned, and no couple ever fell in love apart from desire.

But the problem with desire is that it's a hard thing to satisfy. In his book *The Awakened Heart*, Gerald May wrote, "There is a desire within each of us, in the deep center of ourselves that we call the heart. We are born with it, it is never completely satisfied, and it never dies. We are often unaware of it, but it is always awake." Even when we sleep the desire turns into dreams. May claims that you can run from this desire for years or even decades, but it is never domesticated by your ordinary and comfortable routines with life. The deep desires of the heart return, touching us in unguarded moments, reminding us that we still haven't found what we're looking for.

If we pay attention to this deep desire of the heart, then we are always living with some discontent. No matter how wonderful a relationship, job, or experience may be, there will always be something about it that is not what we desire. Every created blessing we desire is marred by a blemish. It may be a small one, and it may only create a 1 percent discontent factor, but that is enough to remind you that you still desire more than you have.

That's not a bad thing. G.K. Chesterton even called it a divine discontent, which reminds us at the end of every achievement "that we have come to the wrong star." (Orthodoxy) At the bottom of all desire is a longing for your true home, which is someplace else. So don't be surprised by the discontent that always accompanies desire. It was placed there to draw your attention to the God whose desire is for you.

When I was a child in Sunday school, we were taught to sing a little song that went, "I'm inright, outright, upright, downright happy all the time." What a lot of rubbish! What were they thinking back then? The spiritual life is not one in which you are happy all the time. It's a life in which your discontent is turned into prayer to the God for whom we yearn. That's why we teach our children to sing the song they used to begin our worship service today: "Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart. Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart. Lord, I want to give you glory in my heart." These kids are going to grow up in a society that will peddle so many things to help them find relief for the desire of their hearts. Many of those things will hurt our children. So we want them to know, early on, how to live with their discontent, and how to use it

to turn to God.

Blaise Pascal claimed that an infinite void has been created in our souls, and it is out of this void that all desire rises. No matter what you pour into the infinite void, it will never be filled by anything, or anyone, other than the infinite. This is why we come to worship. To get clear, again and again, that our desire is for God. So we bring into this sanctuary our lives that have known both great success and devastating hurt, and we confess that both things have made us long for the God who is greater than achievement or loss.

If you have ever been to the symphony, you know that before the performance begins, all of the instrumentalists are doing their own thing tuning up. Together the sound is just a strange cacophony of chaos. Then the concertmaster stands up and plays a note called "Concert A." He or she plays the note long and slowly, until all the other instruments orient themselves around it. Now they are focused and ready to make music.

That is what we do in worship -- playing the long slow note that orients you around your chief end, which is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. You don't want to spend all of life tuning up. You want the notes of life to contribute to something wonderful. Artistic. That can happen, but first you have got to get your desire focused. As you return to the A note, as you tune your desire to God, then all the other notes about work, relationships, and health can come together in a symphony of praise.

Here is the real kicker, though. You will never satisfy even the desire for God. He is God, and cannot be exhausted by you. Who among us has satisfied our yearning for God? Who believes that they fully grasp participating in the Triune Fellowship of Father, Son, and Spirit? None of us do because we are not home yet. So not only were we created to desire, and not only were we created to be discontent with the desire for anything but God, but even the thirst for God is insatiable.

In a wonderful book, entitled *The Journey of Desire*, John Eldredge claims there are only three choices in life: to be alive and thirsty or to be dead or to be addicted. There are no other choices. Most of the world has chosen addiction as a way of coping with discontent and unfulfilled desire. Most of the church, Eldredge claims, has chosen to be dead, stifling the deep desire for God with legalisms. This is why Paul was so hard on the fundamentalists in Corinth. You can be a liberal fundamentalist or a conservative one, but both try to codify the yearning for God into right behavior. And it all misses the point of helping us to know God.

If you worship, however, not only on Sundays but daily, you will discover that your life has become a longing for God. Strangely that is what makes you content.

It is similar to the contentment that lovers have when they fall head over heels in love. They wouldn't say that they have satisfied their desire for each other, but they would say they are content. In time they will realize that they desire someone more sacred, but their tender love for each other is still illustrative of how we find contentment in desiring God. Contentment comes from knowing whom it is that you love. No longer will you settle for the addictions to money, power, or the substances that numb your longing. No longer will you settle for religion that distracts your yearning for God with a lot of busyness and fear about judgment. Now that you are clear about whom it is that you desire, you will dive into the yearning, looking for the traces of God in your life. Again, it is like lovers who do all they can to keep the traces of their beloved around them. They place photos on their desks, they keep love notes in their pockets, they try to call each other in the course of the day. Because in attending to their beloved, they find the beauty and joy of their lives.

This is why Chesterton wrote, "Poets do not go mad, but chess players do." (Orthodoxy) If you reduce life to nothing more than strategizing your next move, you'll go nuts. And you'll drive those around you nuts as well. "The madman," Chesterton wrote, "is not the man who has lost his reason. He is the man who has lost everything except his reason." To live sanely in this life, you have to listen for Concert A. You have to attend to the poetry that rises from the soul. You have to focus your desire upon the God who desires you.

We are living in a world that keeps running into the ditch because it does not know what to do with desire. In such a place, perhaps the most prophetic thing you can do is to live as a contented person.

Oh God, give us the courage to dive deep into our desire until we reach the bottom where we discover that we are restless for you alone. Then bring us up to a new life in which we are free to make your love known to a world that is so far from contentment. Amen.