

November 29, 2009

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

A Holy Discontent

Philippians 3:12 – 21

My sole desire this morning is to stir your hearts toward a holy discontent. On the one hand we are called as committed followers of Christ to be content in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. Paul tells Timothy: *Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.* 1 Timothy 6:6-8 The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says *Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for He has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."* Hebrews 13:5 In chapter four, Paul tells the Philippians *Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.* Philippians 4:11 It is clear that contentment is at the heart of the Christian experience, not only contentment with necessary and good things we have but also with bad things that come our way: *For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.* 2 Corinthians 12:10. So why am I encouraging a holy discontent?

I encourage this because as we saw last week, **children of the burning heart are never content with just a little bit of God.** They always want more. They have tasted the goodness of God and are simultaneously left satisfied and wanting more. They are those who proclaim along with the psalmist: *'In Your presence is fullness of joy'* Psalm 16:11 and *'We shall be satisfied with the goodness of Your house'*. Psalm 65:4 And also cry out: *'O God, You are my God, earnestly I seek You; my soul thirsts for You, my body longs for You, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.* Psalm 63:1 – 2

I encourage this because Paul encourages this. *Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own.* Philippians 3:12 The **'this'** that Paul is pressing on toward is the great goal of knowing Christ, gaining Christ and being found in Christ until one day he is with Him in glory. What we are called to be content with is all the stuff of earth that is passing away and only matters while we live here below. Did you notice that all the things we are called to be content with are temporary? All the circumstances of life in Philippians; things like food and clothing in Timothy; being content with what we have in Hebrews ; being content with suffering in 2 Corinthians. The message of contentment is be content with the gifts that God has given you – even suffering. Be satisfied with any and every good thing and bad our Sovereign God has seen fit to bless us with; because these things are specifically designed to help us gain Christ and know Christ and be found in Christ. Be content in your circumstances; in all the temporary things of life – **but never be content with the state of your relationship with Christ.**

I believe that we are called to a holy discontent with any current level of spiritual attainment that leaves us complacent or apathetic about pressing into Christ. The great apostle Paul's own assessment of his life, after years of walking closely with Christ was: *Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own.* In all his situations and circumstances Paul was content. Whether he had money or was penniless, he was content. Whether he was free or imprisoned, he was content. Whether he was beaten or embraced, he was content. But he was never content with any current level of knowing Christ – he always wanted more. He had an insatiable appetite for knowing God and he pressed on to know Him. His humble assessment of his own condition was that he had not yet been perfected. That is, he was not yet finished or complete. **Perfection here means not yet finished or not having reached the end.** Paul did not consider that he had arrived yet. There was more of Christ to gain and Paul was pressing on to make the reality of knowing Christ his own. **There was a kind of holy discontent in his pursuit of Christ that compelled him to run hard after Him.**

Paul says that the reason he pressed on to know Christ was: *because Christ Jesus has made me His own.* The reason we can pursue Christ is because He first pursued us and made us His own. **If He had not we would not.** This is what Paul said in chapter 2: *'Work out your own salvation – because it is God who is at work in you.'* Go hard after God because He is hard at work in you.

The writer to the Hebrews echoes this paradox when he says: '*Strive for...the holiness without which no one will see the Lord*' Hebrews 12:41 for '*...the Lord is working in you what is pleasing in His sight.*' Hebrews 13:21 The Bible makes our salvation dependent upon our pursuing holiness because our pursuit of holiness is dependent upon His sovereign work in our lives. The reason Paul can make our pursuit of Christ dependent upon our striving is because our striving is dependent upon Christ's working first. **The fundamental reason we must pursue Christ is that it is Christ in us moving us to pursue Him.** It is the Holy Spirit within that generates a holy discontent with any plateau we reach as believers and urges us onward and upward. Or as C.S. Lewis so eloquently puts it: '**Farther up and further in**'. **Paul was not content with yesterday's experience of Christ and we should not be either.**

In fact Paul goes on to say: *Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,* Philippians 3:13 To have a holy discontent we need **holy amnesia and holy straining.** Forgetting what lies behind does not mean that we never remember anything of our past. It doesn't mean that past victories or past defeats or all our experiences of Christ are to be forgotten and put out of mind. Indeed the Bible is clear that we remember lots of things – we memorialize those places and times that we have met with God and He has shown Himself strong on our behalf. Some future battles are only won by remembering past victories. **But holy amnesia here I think has to do with forgetting anything in the past that hinders your pursuit of God in the present.** It is a single-minded pursuit of the prize. We are single-minded about our goal – Paul said '*One thing I do*'. The point is not never to look back but rather **only look back for the sake of straining forward.**

We need to forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead. The picture here is of an athlete straining for the tape at the finish line. **We need to not be content with second place.** We need to run the race in such a way that all we can see is the finish line and our neck and body is stretched out to reach it. Paul told the Corinthians: *Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win.* 1 Corinthians 9:24 **The point here is not that there is only one winner, but that we run like there is.** We run the way an athlete runs when the gold is on the line.

We are self-controlled in our lifestyle. *Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.* 1 Corinthians 9:25 There is a crown of life waiting for those who run this race with self-control and with the goal in view. Athletes who train for the Olympics are not satisfied to aim at silver or bronze – they are aiming for gold. We ought not to be satisfied with anything less than all of Christ. *Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.* 1 Corinthians 9:26-27 Having a holy discontent means that we are not content with anything less than the highest prize at the finish line and **we will do what it takes to win it.**

Paul says: *I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.* Philippians 3:14 **Paul's goal and prize, which he laid out in verses 7 – 11, was to gain Christ in every circumstance and every situation – it was to know Him in the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings and to be conformed to Him in His death.** And this is what he pressed in toward – this is what he was leaning in at, stretching out for – to know Christ and experience all His fullness. And because that was not yet the case – he developed this holy discontent which kept him pressing in to God.

Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained. Philippians 3:15-16 This is what it means to be a holy discontented Christian. To live in such a way that we are always pressing on toward the goal. We are always in a state of wanting more of Christ – wanting to know Him in places we have not experienced His grace before. Mature Christians obey the word God gives in their present circumstance – holding that word so to speak – and that gives God the freedom to give them more – that is He reveals more of Himself to those who are faithful with what He has already given them.

Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. Philippians 3:17 **Our holy discontent is helped along and strengthened by consciously imitating worthy individuals in the faith whose lives reflect the highest ambition and hunger for God.** Somehow, when we hear and read of the exploits of those saints whose lives exhibited a sold-out passion for God, our own appetite for Him is sharpened and enlarged. When I ran across the story of Alan Gardiner and his seemingly ill-fated mission to South America and I read his journal left behind as testimonial to the hardship and hunger and suffering he and his men endured, I was stirred and captivated by his single-minded pursuit of God in the midst of horrific circumstances.

Listen to some of his entries: "*Grant O Lord, that we may be instrumental in commencing this great and blessed work, but should Thou see fit in Thy providence to hedge up our way, and that we should even languish and die here, I beseech Thee to raise up others and to send forth labourers into this harvest. Let it be seen, for the manifestation of Thy Glory and Grace that nothing is too hard for Thee...*"

"Lord, at your feet I humbly fall, And I give you all I have, All that your love requires. To lack is best, For all is yours, Take care of me in this hour of test. Do not let me have the thoughts of a Complainer. Make me feel your power which gives life And I will learn to praise you while carrying your cross..."

"Great and marvelous are the loving kindnesses of my gracious God. He has preserved me hitherto, and for four days, although without bodily food, without any feelings of hunger or thirst."

"By God's Grace this blessed group was able to sing praises to Christ for eternity. I am not hungry or thirsty in spite of 5 days without eating; Wonderful Grace and Love to me, a sinner..."

And finally, at the end of his life: *'I am overwhelmed with the goodness of God.'*

To keep our hearts from becoming too satisfied with all that is other than Christ, we need to keep our eyes on those who walk with a single-minded devotion to Christ and count everything else to be loss in view of knowing Him. I am reminded of what Vance Havner wrote: *Jesus is all we have; He is all we need and all we want. We are shipwrecked on God and stranded on omnipotence!*" Vance Havner

The truth is there are many who do not walk this way. For them, Jesus is a self-help program that is supposed to make their lives better. For them, a holy discontent sounds ridiculous. Isn't the Christian life supposed to mean contentment? Aren't we supposed to be satisfied? And the answer is yes, and no. **Yes we should be content in what we have in this world, and no we should not be content with where we are with Christ in this life.** This world and things are so finite but Christ is so infinite. There is an infinite universe of knowing Him yet to come – so how could we be satisfied with just a little bit? But sadly, there are many who think that a one-time confession gains an eternal testimony and live as though Christ is now supposed to shower their heads with temporal gifts. *For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.* Philippians 3:18-19

To walk as an enemy of the cross is to walk toward your own goals, to satisfy yourself first. The cross of Christ is meant to put a decisive end to **our** dreams, desires, hopes, ambitions, aspirations in favor of **His**. To be counted a friend of the cross and not an enemy, we need to live in such a way that we are **denying ourselves not indulging ourselves**. Essentially it means to live like Christ, giving up your rights – your right to do as you please, your right to your opinions, your right to be indignant over injustices toward you, your right to be offended, your right to be hurt or wounded by others, and let the cross put it to death. Enemies of the cross set their minds on earthly things – friends of the cross always set their minds on heavenly things. Enemies of the cross have no holy discontent – they do find themselves discontent, **but it is a discontent fueled by a desire for earthly baubles – not a discontent fueled by their love for Christ.** And the end of earthly discontent is destruction.

Friends of the cross find themselves setting their minds on heaven and longing for their home in the presence of their Savior: *But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,* Philippians 3:20 They are not content with things that do not point them in that direction or help them whet their appetite for His appearing. They are anxiously awaiting Him *who will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself.* Philippians 3:21 It is this sense of holy discontent that causes us to respond to His declaration, 'Behold I am coming quickly' and cry **'Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus'**

Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Philippians 3:13-14

Our gracious God and precious Savior,

Grant that we would be marked by a holy discontent in our pursuit of You. Fill our hearts with the burning ambition to gain You and know You and be found in You. Don't let us be stranded on remembrances of the past that leave us paralyzed to pursue You – but grant us the grace of looking back only in order to strain forward into all the goodness of God. Let us know You in the power of Your resurrection – let us know You in the fellowship of Your sufferings – let us know You in being conformed to Your death. Forgive us for being so content with so little of You. Root out from our hearts all those things we cherish more than You. Be exalted over our possessions – be magnified over our friendships and comforts – be treasured over all our ambitions and desires until You reign supreme in our affections. Let us live as friends and not enemies of the cross – denying and not indulging ourselves so that our appetite for You is never dulled or sated. Grant that our hearts would be fired with the passion to press on toward the goal for the upward call of God in Christ Jesus so that our soul's cry would be 'Come Lord Jesus!' May we be those whose delight in You through Jesus Christ cause us to spread that joy through the gospel to all people for Your name's sake we pray. Amen.