

Discontentment Turns a Garden into a Wasteland

Intro to the Intro

*Midway along the journey of our life
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
For I had wandered off from the straight path.*

Here at the beginning of the *Inferno*, Dante is lost in what he calls “a bitter place” and a “wasteland.” He is hopeless to get out of the dark and into the light until a guide approaches him, the Roman poet Virgil. As the story goes, they go down, down through the icy core of hell and up, up out the other side until finally, Dante makes it to Paradise.

Like Dante, in our pursuit of contentment this weekend, we will pass through the wasteland of discontentment before we come out into the garden of contentment. And like Dante, we have not just one, but two guides on our journey – the Apostle Paul and puritan Jeremiah Burroughs.

Jeremiah Burroughs preached a series of sermons to his congregation in Stepney, England, in 1645, which were later collected and published as “The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment.” As far as Christian contentment goes, this is the one book to rule them all. This weekend will talk about the Wasteland of Discontentment, the Garden of Contentment, and the Mystery of Contentment – and we will only be dipping into about 25% of what Burroughs has to say!

And Burroughs, of course, wrote his entire book based on one verse from the Apostle Paul, Phil. 4:11, “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.”

So, in the faithful company of these two guides, Paul and Jeremiah Burroughs, may God be pleased to grow us in Christian contentment!

Let's pray.

Intro

I'd like to start with a short activity, very easy – so don't worry.

All of us, I think, already have some thoughts that come to mind when we think about contentment and discontentment. So...

Activity: Take a minute to write down in your notes one or two words that come to mind when you think of discontentment.

Now do the same thing for contentment.

When the women of our church did this together, these are some of the words we came up with (and I'm guessing you came up with some of the same words):

Words describing discontentment:

- Anxiety, comparison, never satisfied, restless, rebellion, grasping, jealousy, bitterness, regret, struggle, entitled, empty, ungrateful, more!, grumbling, fearful, unhappy

Words describing contentment:

- Peace (10x), satisfied (5x), rest, joy, gratitude, happy, meekness, willingness to accept God's plan

In the OT and NT, the words used for contentment mean: sufficient, enough, satisfied, and well-pleased. The opposite ideas are insufficient, dissatisfied, displeased.

So some questions for us to answer are: What are we well-pleased with or displeased with? What is it that dissatisfies us? And what does it take to be satisfied? What does it mean to have enough?

In her devotional book on *Contentment*, Megan Hill says, "Someone once asked American industrialist and philanthropist John D. Rockefeller, 'How much money is enough?' His reply was, 'Just a little bit more.'"

Listen to the words of Shasta In *The Horse and His Boy*, by C.S. Lewis:

“I do think,” said Shasta, “that I must be the most unfortunate boy that ever lived in the whole world. Everything goes right for everyone except me.” (161)

Rockefeller and Shasta illustrate the two main outward obstacles to our contentment: **our circumstances and our possessions.**

In Philippians 4:11-13, Paul shares with us a secret: contentment doesn't come from our circumstances or our possessions.

Will you turn there and read those verses with me?

Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Paul says that contentment is something he learned. It wasn't something he was born with, like photographic memory or double jointed thumbs. It was a skill that he learned. What did he learn? What skill did he gain?-- “in whatever situation I am to be content.”

That means just what it says: he was content in every situation. And just in case we're doubtful that he really meant it, he goes on to explain it in detail: I know how to be brought low. I know how to abound. Plenty. Hunger. Abundance. Need. His circumstances and possessions didn't matter at all; he was content. Even when he is in need, he says he is not really in need.

And the reason, the secret, he tells us, is that he has Jesus. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” And this really shouldn't surprise us, because all the way back in chapter 1 verse 21, he told us, “For me, to live is Christ.” He already, always has everything that he will ever need.

Activity: Are there any circumstances or possessions in your life right now that you are struggling to be content with? With God's help, will you surrender them to him this weekend?

I don't take this lightly. At first glance contentment can seem like a light topic, like, "Oh, I'm going to learn how to be a happier person. Yay!" Contentment isn't light, like a helium balloon. It's weighty, like an anchor that holds us fast through storms and deep waters. It doesn't promise no hard circumstances. It meets us in them and grows through them. Contentment isn't wishful thinking, it is faithful living, no matter what.

I lost a friend to brain cancer last weekend, 35 years old, a wife and mother of three young children. A few weeks ago a friend lost her mom unexpectedly to a heart attack. One sister is in an abusive marriage and 8 months pregnant. Just a few weeks ago, our friends moved to Africa and in the first week, their 18 month old son had an accident that left him fighting for his life. One friend went into preterm labor at 24 weeks. Just two weeks ago, a friend who is an ICU nurse was caring for a 2 month old that was seizing due to acute head trauma because he was shaken by his mother, and the hospital officials told the mother to let the baby die.

When we talk about contentment, we're not talking about picnics and puppies. We're talking about real enemies and spiritual armor.

If contentment comes from finding in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all that we could ever need, then to the degree that we struggle with discontentment, to that degree we do not find God sufficient for us.

And that means discontentment is more evil than we may have realized.

Thomas Watson says, "Oh, this devil of discontentment... whenever it possesses a person, [it] makes his heart a little hell!" (*The Art of Divine Contentment*, vi)

He says this is because when we are discontent, we set ourselves above God. We act as if we were wiser than he, and we dare to tell God what is best for us. And to do that is not a small thing, it is actually a great evil. Instead of saying, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me," discontentment says, "Christ is not sufficient for me. I will always need something else."

That's what makes discontentment a wasteland. It's not going to be pretty, but I want to explore this wasteland a little bit, and here's why.

John Calvin says “We cannot seriously aspire to [God] before we begin to become displeased with ourselves” (*Institutes*, 1.1.1) And we cannot seriously aspire to contentment unless we become displeased with our discontentment. We need to see it for the wasteland that it is.

The Ruined Wasteland of Discontentment

Discontentment makes hard situations harder and makes good situations bad. It turns a blind eye to the good that God has given us. It rejects the circumstances that he has ordained for us. And it sows other sins, like weeds in a garden.

Here’s what I mean:

If Discontent and Content were two gardeners, each given a plot of land to cultivate, Discontent would be always looking at other garden plots and thinking her own wasn’t good enough. And what would happen is that slowly, over time, Discontent’s garden plot would go to ruin. There would be no produce, no fruit. Only weeds, thistles, and thorns. Whatever good was in the garden already would rot on the vine. But Content would be busy working on the plot that she had been given, so that even if she started off with nothing but a briar patch, she would turn it into a garden that was thriving and overflowing with good fruit.

Discontent reminds me of another gardener in another garden. Eve lived in unspoiled paradise – the garden of Eden. The Sabbath rest of God was literally her home. But Satan planted a lie that turned her restful heart to restlessness.

Listening to the empty promise for more, she walked straight into Romans 1 and exchanged the truth of God for a lie. She exchanged her satisfaction for craving. She exchanged life for death. She exchanged God’s blessing for a curse. She exchanged the Garden for a wasteland.

We can see ourselves in this story. In large ways and small ways, we’ve rejected what God has given us, and we’ve gone searching for something else. And like Eve, we’ve returned empty handed.

When we turn away from God as the source of all our good, we cannot be fruitful and multiply.

Contentment is no longer natural to us as daughters of Eve. Instead it's natural for us to say, like Discontent, "The grass is greener on the other side. Take this away. I want what that person has." It's not so easy to say, "Look how green my grass is!"

Since the Fall, discontentment is pervasive in our world because sin is pervasive, like weeds in an unkempt garden.

The Rank Weeds of Discontentment

Instead of bearing fruit, discontentment grows other ugly sins in us, just like weeds spread and take over a garden.

One of the problems with these weeds is that we don't often see them for the evil that they are, so we treat them a little more like milkweed...we let them keep growing. But we need to go at them more like we go at buckthorn, with axes, chainsaws, and goats (? That's a new trend in MN, but maybe not here).

I'm going to highlight 3 pervasive sins that accompany discontentment: Covetousness, Ingratitude, and Grumbling.

Covetousness

Discontentment grows in us an insatiable desire for more than we have, often prompted by seeing what other people have. In Eph 5:5 and Col. 3:5, Paul equates covetousness with idolatry, because covetousness goes against the two greatest commandments: love God and love your neighbor. Coveting loves God's gifts more than God himself. And coveting wants our neighbor's things, not our neighbor's good.

In Philippians 4:17, Paul shows how un-covetous he is in his contentment, "Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit." Paul's deepest concern is for the Philippians, not for the gift they sent him. He doesn't care about their money, he cares about their generosity.

Look at Proverbs 21:25-26 with me:

The desire of the sluggard kills him, for his hands refuse to labor. All day long he craves and craves, but the righteous gives and does not hold back.

Discontent makes us a sort of spiritual sluggard. We look around at what others have and we crave and crave, but we don't *labor* to do good with what we have already been given, and in the circumstances we have been given. We don't work in our own garden. We crave more for ourselves, and we end up with nothing to give to others.

We don't always think of ourselves as covetous, but has there ever been a time when "one" wasn't enough for you?

I remember learning about a new jewelry company, and I was super excited to pick out a set of gold necklaces for my mother's day gift. But after I got those two, I kept looking at the website and I wanted another necklace, and another. Those first two weren't enough. In the end, all I had was my own variety pack of gold necklaces to continually remind me of my covetousness.

Ingratitude

When what we have isn't enough, it usually means we're not being thankful for what we have. We grow increasingly ungrateful.

Recently during our family prayer time in the evening, we were going around the room sharing what we were thankful for. One of our kids – I'm just going to call this kid Oscar, so you don't know who it is. Could've been one of the girls, could've been the boy; Oscar the Grouch. Oscar was clearly not in a great spot spiritually that evening, and when it came to Oscar's turn, he said, "I am not thankful for anything." And it wasn't that sort of distracted, I-can't-think-of-anything kind of ingratitude. It was more like looking God straight in the eyes and saying: I have nothing to thank you for.

In the moment, I was really sad for where this child was at. Unthankfulness is ugly, more ugly than we often realize. At the same time, I was really glad that it happened, because it was almost like watching a you tube video of my own heart when I'm unthankful in that wasteland of discontentment.

I think we've all been in this place.

But look at Paul in Philippians chapter 1.

Paul is writing from a Roman prison, and the Philippians had asked how he's doing – You're in prison, Paul! Are you okay? And he answers by telling them what *God* is doing. In 1:12, he says, "I want you to know that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel!" He's excited about what's happening! He's thankful!

And he doesn't grumble.

Grumbling

You could say grumbling is really the verbal expression of our ingratitude.

Jeremiah Burroughs comes down with a hammer on the sin of grumbling and murmuring. He says, "O that we could but convince men and women that a murmuring spirit is a greater evil than any affliction, let the affliction be what it will...a murmuring spirit is the evil of the evil, and the misery of the misery" (165).

He takes grumbling so seriously, because grumbling is the seed of rebellion.

In Numbers 14, when the spies return from Canaan, verse 2 says, "all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron," and in verse 3 it's clear that their grumbling is actually against God, "Why is the Lord bringing us into this land?" By verse 4, the people are looking for another leader to take them back to Egypt. Joshua and Caleb can see this grumbling for what it is and they plead in verse 9: "Only do not rebel against the Lord." But they did, and the grumblers died in the wilderness, because at the heart of their grumbling was rebellion.

Like Israel, when we grumble, we grumble against God, and what he has ordained for us. Israel says "Let's go back to Egypt," and in a similar way, our grumbling is telling God to step aside while we make a new plan for our life.

When we moved back to the States, we decided to send our kids to a school that is about a 30 minute drive from where we live, along highway 62, which it turns out has a ton of traffic. And when I started driving back and forth in that traffic

twice a day, day after day, I started grumbling. I hated that drive and everyone knew it! “How’s your week going, Andrea?” “Highway 62!” Until one day God convicted me that I was resisting his will. If it was his will for my kids to go to this school, then driving highway 62 was how he wanted me to spend my time, as well. He changed my heart and I finally stopped grumbling.

It is no coincidence that Paul, the contented Apostle, tells us in Phil. 2:14, “Do all things without grumbling or disputing that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world.” Grumbling is like soot on lighthouse glass. It blocks the light. But we were meant to shine.

We need to take these weeds seriously. And we take weeds seriously by pulling them up by the roots.

The Rotten Roots of Discontentment:

So what is at the root of our discontentment? What makes it grow in us?

Discontentment takes root when we say to God, “It’s not enough,” or “It’s not good enough” or “It’s not fair” or “It’s too hard for me.” Why do we do this? I think what happens is that lies start to creep into our hearts, and we start to see everything through a false lens and we think we’re seeing reality. Like wearing sunglasses in the house – everything looks darker than it really is.

This is a true story. It doesn’t matter why, but Jon and I inherited some old gold jewelry settings that needed to be sold. So I walked into a jewelry shop to sell them, and what I didn’t realize was that I kept my sunglasses on! I don’t know why I didn’t notice. Can you imagine? Here I am trying to sell my gold to this sweet old woman and I have sunglasses on! She probably thought I was a criminal! While she went back to price the necklace, I’m looking at the other jewelry and finally notice, “Wow, it’s strangely dark in here.” And I realize I’ve had my sunglasses on the whole time. I was so embarrassed.

That’s what happens when lies take over our perception of reality. Everything is strangely dark. We don’t perceive reality rightly.

Four lies at the root of our discontentment are:

- Wrong thoughts
- Wrong Comparisons
- Wrong Expectations
- Wrong Desires

Wrong Thoughts

Nancy Wilson says that indulging in wrong thoughts is like dumpster diving, filling our mind with a lot of rotten produce and garbage. Just like a meal that came from the dumpster would leave our bellies discontent, thoughts that come from 'the dumpster' leave our hearts discontent.

At the root of discontentment we often believe wrong thoughts about God and wrong thoughts about our circumstances.

Just like with Eve, the first thing that Satan wants us to think wrongly about is God himself. Satan wants us discontent with God. In fact, Satan often uses our circumstances to get us to think wrongly about God. This is how it works: when something bad happens, we let our circumstances interpret what we think is true about God, instead of letting what is true about God interpret our circumstances.

When we take our circumstances as the starting point, (bad circumstances, bad God) more and more we think things like this:

- God isn't good
- God is against me
- God is out to get me
- God is punishing me
- God doesn't love me
- God hasn't done well by me
- God isn't able to do anything about my situation
- God's will is not good

My mom used to say, "that's a lie from the pit of hell," and that's exactly where these lies come from.

Psalm 73 is an amazing example of turning from wrong thoughts to the truth, and finding ultimate contentment. In verses 1-15, the psalmist is wrestling with

thoughts about himself, about the wicked, and about God that just aren't true. He says, "The wicked prosper, the righteous suffer, and everything is pointless (vain)." But he has this gracious moment in verse 15.

'If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed the generation of your children.'" He recognizes that he's wrong. His perspective is wrong. His thoughts are wrong.

Look at verse 16. "But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task." He's just like us. He's stuck in a bad place in his heart, and he knows it, but he doesn't know how to get out.

Then in verse 17, we get the turn. "Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end." When he turns to God, he is reoriented. And once God is interpreting the world instead of him, he finally sees the truth:

Verse 23-24: Nevertheless [no matter what my circumstances are], I am continually with you. You hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory."

What is true about God? He's with us. We're held, guided, received.

Then glorious verse 25.

Whom have I in heaven but you? And besides you I desire nothing on earth.

(I actually remember the first time I read all the way through the Bible, I think I was 17 years old, and I got to this verse, and I was like, "How long has this been going on? Why didn't anyone ever tell me about this verse? This is like, this changes everything! Psalm 23, that's pretty good and all, but Psalm 73 is like a mic drop!")

The psalmist goes from total discontentment – "Everything goes right for the wicked and they're rich, too!" But where does he end up? "Actually, none of that stuff matters. I just need you, God."

His thoughts are back in line. His heart is back in order.

In his essay "The Weight of Glory," C.S. Lewis says, "He who has God and everything else has no more than he who has God alone."

Do we believe that? To know godly contentment, we need to get out of the dumpster and get close to God. Do we know God as he truly is?

What is one attribute of God or promise of God, that if you believed it "all the way down," you would be more content?

Wrong Comparisons

When Jesus hints at what is coming for Peter in the future, Peter asks, "What about this man?" He starts comparing his lot to John's. (John 21)

Wrong comparison is when we use other people as the measure of our own worth, our own success, our own failure, our own contentment. And we women do this all the time. We compare our hair, our weight, our home, our car, our kids, our decorations, our cooking skills, even our perceived godliness. You name it, we can compare it.

Comparing ourselves to others rarely leads to contentment. Usually it leads us to pride or jealousy. Comparison doesn't love others, it competes with them. All their successes become a threat to us and all their failures lead us to gloat. Have you ever done this? I've done this.

Contentment comes when we get our eyes off of others, and back on to Jesus, when we heed his words, "As for you, you follow me." Jesus's death frees us from sinful comparison and frees us to love others, as he has loved us.

Wrong Expectations

Our culture is always trying to teach us what to expect from life, and it isn't what God teaches us to expect. When we expect wrong things, our expectations aren't met, and we end up discontent when we never had a reason to be. If I expect a colander to hold water for me, I'm going to be really discontent with that colander, but the problem isn't with the colander. It's with me and my expectations.

There are a lot of wrong things we can expect, but I'm only going to mention two. In our cultural moment, we really expect stuff to make us happy and life to be comfortable and easy.

Stuff will make me happy:

In order for a consumer culture to work, people need to keep buying things. And in order for people to keep buying things, they need to be discontent with what they already have, and believe that something new will make them happy. That's what advertisement is all about – making us want things we never wanted before. It's a discontentment industry. And it works!

But if stuff could talk, this is what it would say, according to Burroughs: "All the creatures of this world say, 'Contentment is not in us'; riches says, 'Contentment is not in me'; pleasure says, 'Contentment is not in me.' If you look for contentment in the creature you will fail. No, contentment is higher..."(100).

I know a woman who was a hoarder and her thing was antiques. She hoarded so much, she filled an entire room in her basement, and rather than deal with the heart issue, she closed the door and wall papered over it. She couldn't let go of her stuff, and it was there when she died. Stuff cannot make us ultimately happy.

Comfortable and Easy: I think a major cause of our discontentment is that we don't expect life to be hard. We expect it to be comfortable and easy, so we get thrown off, not just by big things, but by really small things. Like spilled milk. Or long lines. Or vomiting children. Or car repairs. Or housework. And if we can't handle small things, what happens when heavier trials hit?

Jeremiah Burroughs says, "How unseemly is it that you should be a slave to every cross, that every affliction shall be able to say to your soul, 'bow down to us.'

The story of redemption doesn't give us any reason to expect life to be comfortable and easy.

The world is broken so we should expect brokenness. And the Redeemer has come, so we should expect His redemption to get the final word. We shouldn't

expect life to be **comfortable** and **easy**, but we should expect God to be at work, *especially* when things are most difficult.

1 Peter 4:12 says, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.”

Peter is teaching these early Christians what to expect and how to respond. We need this same lesson. We expect to share Christ’s sufferings, just like we expect to share his glory.

Wrong Desires

Discontent in our desires shows up in our hearts in two ways: **Not wanting what we do have and wanting what we don’t have**. Like toddlers, “I don’t want the red cup, I want the blue cup.” Or like Eve. “I don’t want all this fruit, I want *that* fruit.” The grass is greener over there.

This can be related to our circumstances and our possessions.

We don’t want what we have. Here are just some examples:

- Trials
- Sickness
- Financial crisis
- Relational breakdowns
- Body
- Things: House, car, couch, you name it
- Neighborhood
- Job
- Spouse
- Parents
- Limitations
- Weaknesses
- Back story

We want what we don’t have:

- Health

- Higher income
- Friendships
- Full night of sleep
- Attention
- Body
- Things: House, car, couch
- Husband, children, grandchildren
- What someone else has: history/upbringing/family/talents/beauty/wealth

Our desires get out of control and become like tyrants over us, blinding us to the goodness of God in what we have already been given. So we reject what we have and call it a wasteland.

We don't have to learn how to do this. It comes naturally to us. Just think of a child that has 10 toys in front of it but the only toy it wants is the one someone else has. And those 10 toys don't get played with at all. What are the good things in our life that we are neglecting or rejecting, because our desires are on the prowl?

Our desires need to be rightly ordered under Jesus. It is our wrong desires most of all that lead us to the revealing reality of discontentment.

The Revealing Reality of Discontentment:

We Don't Want to Be Content

And this is it: often, in reality, deep down, if we can get honest with ourselves, we don't want to be content. There is a certain type of loss that lurks behind contentment, and so we're afraid of what it will mean to be content.

Here's what I mean. If that child is content with his 10 toys, that means he won't get that other toy. That feels like a loss, doesn't it? What the child doesn't realize is that if he's content, he won't even want that other toy anymore!

But we can do the same thing. It's hard to be content in hard circumstances. And if we're honest with ourselves, we don't want to be content with them, we just want them to change! And if I'm content, doesn't that mean the circumstances

might not go away? Or what about our possessions? If I'm content with the five dresses in my closet, doesn't that mean I won't get the new dress I really want?

My aunt used to have a saying, "Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without."

We can be afraid for God to work true contentment deep in our heart, because of what we might have to "do without." We might not get what we want. And if we won't let go of what we want in order to receive what God wants, then we are resisting his sovereignty.

We Resist God's Sovereignty

Earlier we asked the question, what is it that dissatisfies us or displeases us when we are discontent? No matter what excuses we try to make for ourselves, the truth is, in our discontentment, we are dissatisfied with God's will for us. And if we are displeased with his will, it means that we are resisting his sovereignty. The theological center of discontentment is always our self-rule in competition with God's rule in our life. We want our will to be done, not God's.

We will never find contentment while we're fiercely clinging to our own will. We need to lay it down and say like Jesus, "Not my will, but yours be done."

Contentment says, "God, you are king! You are king of the small stuff and the big stuff in my life! Let your kingdom come, right here, today. In this moment, in these circumstances, let me do your will on earth, as it is done in heaven."

The work of contentment is picking up all our thoughts, expectations and desires in our hands and lifting them to God and saying: You guide me, God. Teach me what is true. Teach me what I should expect. Teach me what I should desire. Get rid of my ungodly cravings. I want what you want, God.

Are there any conditions, any circumstances that truly *prevent* us from doing that? No! Are there any circumstances that *prevent* us from doing God's will? No!

God has placed us where we are for a reason! – to give us more of himself as we extend his garden in a wasteland world.

Our circumstances – hard or easy – are the material we’re given for obedience. They’re our canvas to display God’s glory and goodness. They’re the plot of land we’ve been given to bear fruit.

If our discontentment makes us like Eve, godly contentment makes us like Mary, the mother of Jesus.

How did she respond to Gabriel’s announcement to her, in Luke 1:38?

“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

She doesn’t need different circumstances. She doesn’t need more stuff. She just needs to know who she is and who God is. She is God’s servant and God is her loving King. He is all she needs.

This is the kind of contentment that can turn a wasteland into a garden.

And that is what we’re going to focus on tomorrow.

Let’s pray.

Discussion questions:

- What changes to your circumstances or possessions have you wrongly believed would bring you abundant life? What was the ultimate impact of those changes?
- What are some habits that foster discontentment in your heart? What are some habits that foster contentment?

- What wrong thoughts, wrong expectations, or wrong desires have led you to be discontent?
- What is one attribute or promise of God that, if you believed it “all the way down,” would grow your contentment?
- What are some ways that discontentment may have made you less fruitful as a Christian?