

SO MANY RUBBER DUCKS

1Timothy 6:6-11

Laurie and I have a new car. It is a new Honda Accord. This thing has a lot of bells and whistles. There is a part of it that is a little spooky. While driving I can push a button on the steering wheel and say, “Call Jerry Myatt.” The car then calls my brother and the next thing I know his voice is materializing inside the vehicle and I can talk to him. Weird. I don’t have to use a key. I have this fob for the car and as long as it is in my pocket when I walk up to the car, it unlocks itself. I then just push a button and the engine starts. When I put it in reverse a picture pops up on the dashboard showing me what I’m about to back into. When I signal a right turn, a picture pops up showing me what’s to the right of the car. One thing Laurie and I really like is it has seat warmers that we can use on those frigid San Diego nights in the winter.

It doesn’t seem all that long ago that we bought a Buick Century station wagon that I really liked because it had power windows and power door locks. I thought that was so cool. But of course it wasn’t all that cool when a number of years later I saw people with cars that not only had power locks and windows, but they had a remote control device that controlled the locks. Just push a button on the remote and the car unlocked. I wanted that. I finally got it, but now it has gotten even better. I don’t even have to push a button.

I see the latest thing and it looks good so I want it. But it won’t be long before something better comes along, and then I want that. Pretty soon I’m discontented with the thing I thought I wanted. All of us fall prey to this process on a pretty regular basis. There are some commercials that tickle both Laurie and me. They are commercials for Wheat Thins. The commercials portray people going to great lengths to get Wheat Thins. They end with one voice urgently demanding, “Must have!” then another voice in a longing way says, “Wheat Thins.” What is it that you think you “must have”? Today we will consider another downside of life. We will think about discontentment, that thing in us that makes us unhappy with whatever we have right now and says we won’t really be happy until we get something else. For guidance we will look at 1Timothy 6:6-11.

DISCONTENTMENT IS COMMON

In the context of 1 Timothy 6 Paul was specifically addressing the problem of “people who want to get rich” as we see in verse 9. They wanted more money. Another way of looking at these people is that they were not content with what they had financially. They wanted more. Paul raised this issue because there were false teachers in Ephesus where Timothy, Paul’s protégé, was serving as a leader. In fact one of the main reasons Paul wrote this letter to Timothy was that he was having trouble with people who were teaching aberrant doctrine and were giving Timothy fits. He was discouraged because the

false teachers were becoming more and more popular. So Paul opened the letter in 1:3 by saying, “As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer.”

Why would people try to get in the church and teach something different than the gospel of grace that Paul taught? One possibility is that they sincerely believe something different. But that wasn't the core of the issue in Ephesus, and it often is not. Paul explains a big part of the motivation for people who teach false doctrine at the end of 1 Timothy 6:5 when he says they “think that godliness is a means to financial gain.” In other words, they had figured out that the religion business has the potential for being very lucrative. Get a following and you can make a lot of money. But to get a following you can't just repeat the same old things Paul had already taught. You need to come up with something novel to draw people away.

Paul and Jan Crouch, whom you can see on television, have parlayed their “ministry” into a nest egg that has allowed them to buy a \$5 million, 9500 square foot home on an acre in Newport Beach that includes a 6 car garage, tennis court and pool. They also have a ranch in Texas valued at \$10 million and get around in their Canadair Challenger 600 jet that goes for \$13 million. I'm not saying they are false teachers, but they do demonstrate how profitable the religion business can be if that's your goal. Benny Hinn's net worth is \$42 million, T. D. Jakes tops that with a net worth of \$150 million...Wow, what am I doing wrong?

The big picture that we need to see here is that what was motivating these people in Ephesus was that they wanted more. They were not happy with what they had and they saw an opportunity to get more money. They didn't really care about what was true, they cared about improving their net worth.

These people Paul were not content with what God had given them and were driven by the desire for more. But discontentment comes in a lot of forms. It is not always about money. You could be discontented with where you live, with your house or your car, with your marriage, with your job, with your church, with your friends, with your own personality, with your appearance, with your abilities, and more. A recent survey revealed that one out of every three Americans would like to move to a different state. I have known many people who were not happy with where they lived. That's just one example. There are so very many ways that we can be discontented.

It should surprise no one to learn that discontentment is common in human beings. In fact, it would be more accurate to say it is rampant. Researchers now are discovering that discontentment seems to be built in, hardwired into fallen human nature. We see this in

addictions. One problem for addicts is that their need escalates. Whatever their addiction, their body adapts to the thing they are addicted to and then they need more to get the same effect.

The brain, many neurologists now believe, operates the same way. It adapts to whatever our situation is and that becomes the new normal. Then the brain desires something beyond the normal. In his book, *Authentic Faith* (p. 182), Gary Thomas wrote, “Our brain becomes accustomed to a certain standard of living, and once we become accustomed to something, it’s only a matter of time until we become bored with it.” That means we will never be content. We always want something more, something better than what we have.

Advertising makes this even worse, as does exposure to what other people have. Who needed a smart phone until they were around other people who had smart phones? I lived 90% of my life up till now without a smart phone. I don’t recall thinking what I really needed was a phone that I could carry around with me that would allow me to access the Internet, look at email, take pictures and do all the things a smart phone can do. But then I was around people who had smart phones. Soon I begin to see that I should also have a smart phone. Laurie was at the mall yesterday and went by the Apple Store. They actually had lines outside the store of people waiting to get in to buy the new iPhone 6. Clearly an iPhone 5 is no longer sufficient.

It should not be news that discontentment is a part of our nature. The Bible warned us about this a long time ago. Proverbs 27:20 says, “Death and Destruction are never satisfied, and neither are human eyes.” In other words, the day that death stops claiming victims, the day that it says, “All right, enough people have died so no more death,” that will be the day that human beings say, “I am totally content with everything I have.” It won’t happen before that day.

Think about Paul. There was a time in his life when he thought he was pretty hot (religious) stuff. In Philippians 3:6 he said he thought that he was “faultless” when it came to obeying God’s rules. He never did anything wrong, never really sinned. He perfectly kept the law. But then he got tripped up. Do you know what caught him? According to Romans 7 it was one of the Ten Commandments. Exodus 20:17 says the very last of the Big Ten was “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or *anything* that belongs to your neighbor.” Paul said, “neighbor’s house, check. No problem there, I’m happy with where I live. Neighbor’s wife, check... Not interested in her *at all!* Neighbor’s servants and animals: No problem. Don’t covet *anything* my neighbor has. Anything? Uh oh.” I believe it hit Paul that while he wasn’t a very materialistic guy, he coveted the respect that some religious leaders had. He wanted that

too, and he couldn't stop himself. Coveting involves being discontented with what you have and wanting what someone else has. Discontentment goes hand in hand with coveting. Paul got tripped up - by discontentment.

DISCONTENTMENT IS DANGEROUS

All you need to do is look at the words Paul associates with the desire for more money, the particular discontentment he had in mind, in verses 8-10, to get a sense of the grave peril of discontentment. He speaks of temptation, trap, foolish and harmful desires, ruin, destruction, all kinds of evil and many griefs. That is a pretty dismal lineup if you ask me.

We tend to think discontentment isn't really a bad thing. What's so wrong with wanting something better than what I have? That's not a big deal. In fact, isn't it good to not be happy with something less than ideal and want to improve it? I'm discontented with the way I smell after I have exercised so I take a shower. Isn't that a good thing? I am discontented with the kinds of jobs I can get when I get out of high school, so I go to college. Isn't that a good thing? Bill Gates was discontented with the user interface MS-DOS computers had so he tried to copy the Steve Jobs' Apple interface. Isn't that a good thing? Well, at least it got better. Edison was discontented with reading in the dark so he invented light bulbs. Wasn't that a good thing? In fact, isn't all real improvement in life, all human progress, driven by discontentment? The airlines were not content with the amount of money they were making so they started charging to check luggage and crammed seats so close together that if the person in front of you puts his seat back too fast he might break your nose. Uh, maybe that's not a good thing, but generally isn't it a good thing when discontentment provokes improvement in things?

Yes, it is. If you come to our house you will note that some things don't look real good right now. That's because Laurie is in the middle of a project. It all started with her observing that our bannister on the stairs needed some paint. She was discontented with how they looked. Then she began to covet. She saw a bannister in a magazine that looked like ours with one difference. The posts were dark instead of white. She had an inspiration. She wanted that, and even came up with an improvement on it. So she's in the middle of changing that. When it is done it will look better. But it started with discontentment and a little coveting. But Paul insists that discontentment is dangerous, even evil and grievous. So what's the difference between good and bad discontentment? I will come back to that question, but first I need to convince you that discontentment in fact really is dangerous. What's so bad about it?

Let's start with the obvious. If you are discontent, you are not joyful. By definition being discontent is being unhappy with where you are or what you have. In other words, being discontent is not a pleasant place to be. You are not happy. Joy, you are convinced,

resides in the future where you get the change that you are sure that you need. So who wants to be discontented, because that's not the happiest place on earth?

Here's a bigger problem with discontentment. When we are not content we are not submitting to God. In fact, we are not really submitting to God at all. The English Standard Version of the Bible says in Psalm 118:24, "this is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it." In other words, where you are today is where God wants you. What you have today is what God wants you to have today. So rejoice in what he has given. When we are discontent we are saying, "I don't rejoice in what you've given because it's not good enough, Lord."

When I was a kid at one point the thing to do for the kids on our street was riding bicycles. I wanted a bicycle for Christmas. Well Santa brought me a bicycle. Unfortunately that was right at the time a new thing arrived on the scene. The new thing was ten-speed bikes. They had the turned-down racing handlebars and the gears with *all those speeds*. The boys across the street from us always got the latest and best of everything. So they got ten-speed bikes. I got a three-speed bike. Let me rephrase that. I got a "dumb-old three-speed bike". Suddenly just a bike wasn't good enough. When we are discontent we are like that little boy I was; what you've given me, God, isn't good enough. In a sense you are rebelling against God, doubting his goodness.

Paul is exactly right when he says being discontented is a temptation and a trap. When you get to that place where you are telling God that what he has given is not good enough, implying that God is not good, what is the next step? We have an example in the Bible. In fact, it is one of the early stories in the Bible. A woman, let's call her Eve, is convinced that God really can't be trusted to be good and had not given her that which is best. She was discontented with what she had and could see something that was obviously good, something that she decided she needed. So she took it. She fell into the trap. When we are discontented we are a hair's breadth from choosing to go our own way and get that which we think we need to be content, regardless of what God thinks about it.

Now it gets really sad. Paul says discontentment leads to foolish desires and causes grief. Would you say that was true in Eve's case? How foolish was her decision? That one broke the meter on the foolish gauge. Would you say it caused any grief? Every pain I have ever experienced, every single thing I fear, every sorrow in my life is a result of that choice. Eve's discontentment produced infinite grief. We're kidding ourselves if we think our discontentment won't do the same thing. It causes grief because it leads us to disobey God and that always ends in sorrow. Let me say that again: ***it always ends in sorrow, without exception.***

Discontentment says to us there is this thing out there that I must have or must change to have real peace and joy. So I pursue that, only to discover that it doesn't deliver the permanent peace and joy that I thought it would. This is a terrible grief. My life becomes like the guy in the desert who pursues one mirage after another until he dies.

Discontentment can cause us to miss real life. There's an old Humphrey Bogart movie called *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* that is a classic. It has one of the most famous movie lines ever, "Badges? We don't got to wear no stinkin' badges." The movie has the theme of the effects of greed and discontentment running through it. In the movie greed eventually destroys friendships and ends in death. But there's one scene that poignantly reveals the problem of discontentment. The three prospectors who are the central characters are joined by a fourth man. Soon thereafter they are set upon by bandits, resulting in a gunfight in which the new man is killed. The bandits leave and one of the three survivors finds the now dead man's wallet. He discovers his name is James Cody and he's from Dallas. There's a letter from his wife, whom they agree is quite attractive from her photo. One of them reads the letter aloud. Her letter says, "Dear Jim, your letter has just arrived. It was such a relief to get word after so many months of silence. I realize that there aren't any mailboxes that you can drop a letter in out there in the wild. But that doesn't keep me from worrying about you. Little Jimmy is fine, but he misses his daddy almost as much as I do. He keeps asking, 'when is daddy coming home?' You say if you do not make a real find this time, you will never go again. I cannot begin to tell you how my heart rejoices at those words. Now I feel free to tell you, I've never thought that any material treasure, no matter how great, is worth the pain of these long separations." She goes on to describe how beautiful the spring is then she concludes, "Of course, I'm hoping that you will at last strike it rich. It is high time for luck to start smiling upon you. But just in case she doesn't, remember, we've already found life's real treasure. Forever yours, Callie."

They stand there for a few moments, then Fred, the Humphrey Bogart character, says, "Well, I guess we better dig a hole for him." Jim missed it. Then the three prospectors missed it. Callie was right, Jim already had life's real treasure, and his discontentment caused him to miss it and lose his life chasing after a mirage and the three of them were doing the same thing.

APPLICATION

How do we become more content and thus avoid the grief and the trap of discontentment?

GO TO SCHOOL

In Philippians 4:11-12 Paul wrote, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.” Notice that Paul had to *learn* to be content. He wasn’t naturally content in every situation.

We’re going to have learn that too because our natural state is to go from one discontentment to another. Part of the process of learning that secret for Paul is going through both being in need and having plenty. He discovered that while having plenty is easier, it doesn’t necessarily bring the life we want. We can have plenty and still want more. In fact, that’s what we’ll do. Similarly we can be in times of need and be joyful. The point here is the Lord is no better when we have a lot than when we have a little, and he is the source of the life we want. Francis Chan says he has met many, many more poor people who are happy than rich people who are happy.

Most of you can relate to this. I recalled recently Laurie’s and my first year as a married couple. We lived in a small two-bedroom apartment in Solana Beach. We lived on about \$10,000 that year, 40% of which went to rent and another 15-20% went to taxes. That didn’t leave a lot for everything else. We had furniture that Goodwill didn’t want. Our vacation was to go to Bakersfield. We have more money now. Our furniture is better, though a lot of it is still hand me down. We had a much better vacation. It is much easier. In one sense we are happier because we love each other more now than we did then. But were we at peace and joyful in the Lord back then? Yes we were. We were content.

My point here is that right this moment you are in God’s graduate school. You are working on your master’s degree in contentment. See the process for what it is and learn the lessons. We need to refocus how we think and remind ourselves that what we are doing is trying to learn to be content, not merely trying to satisfy the itch for more. If you are in school pursuing a degree you always remember that’s the end goal. You are pursuing becoming a master of contentment, of being satisfied today with whatever God has given you today. Like gaining any new skill, it will require some effort and some practice. If you want to learn how to surf, stand up paddle, ice skate, or any skill, you will have to practice it. We need to practice contentment!

GET THE PICTURE

Remember that in a sense there is a good discontentment and a bad discontentment. At one point a few years ago we had the original carpet in our house. It was 15 years old. It was worn out, dirty and verging on disgusting. Our sofa was one we had inherited from my parents. It had been a great sofa, one of the best ever, but it was 30 years old. At that

point it was closer to a hammock than a sofa. Sitting in it was almost a life sentence because it sagged so badly it was almost impossible to get out of it. We were not content with the state of our décor in the house. We said “it’s time for a change.” So we got new carpet, a newer sofa (a hand me down from friends), new paint, and new tile around the fireplace in the living room. It was a huge improvement. So our discontentment with the shoddy shape of the stuff in our house was a good thing because it led to a big improvement.

But it could have been the negative kind of discontentment. That would have happened if we had said, “We can never be happy with what we have now. Life can never be good with things the way they are. If we cannot change them then we will be miserable. We must change them. There is no other option.” It’s when you get to that place that you make mistakes. You violate God’s priorities for your life. You make bad financial decisions. You pursue mirages that will only disappoint.

One of the most important things we can ever learn is that those things that we are discontent that we don’t have, the things that we think will finally make us content, are actually a mirage. Just ask yourself, has there ever been a time when there was something you absolutely had to have, something that made you totally restless until you could get it, you finally got it and from that point on you have been content? The answer is no, in case you wonder. You might have been briefly content and happy, but soon you were discontented about many other things. In his book, *Authentic Faith*, Gary Thomas wrote, “a discontented person won’t find contentment though any outward change.”

If you are not content, joyful and at peace today with whatever you have wherever you are, you will not be content, joyful and peaceful when you get the thing you have identified as the key to being joyful. You will just be discontented about something else. And you likely will become discontent with the thing you thought you had to have and finally got.

In one *Veggie Tales* film called King George and the Duck, Larry the Cucumber is King George and Bob the Tomato is a servant named Lewis. King George has all the trappings of power, but what he really loves is his rubber duck. He loves playing with it in the bath tub as he sings a song titled “I Love My Duck.” But one day from his balcony he sees something that rivets his attention. It is another rubber duck. It belongs to a boy named Billy but the king says, “I want it.” Lewis reminds him he already has a duck and that duck he thinks he wants belongs to someone else. King George replies, “Are you saying I shouldn’t have whatever I want?” Lewis opens a large wardrobe to reveal hundreds of rubber ducks and says, “If I could just jog your memory, you already have quite a few ducks.” With disdain the king says, “Those are yesterday’s ducks.”

The point is glaringly obvious. Is one more duck going to make the king content? He already has hundreds. One more will satisfy him perhaps for one day, but then he will want something else. And that is always the case with us. We need to see the lie behind our discontentment. If there is something we can improve as we seek the Lord, that's great. But if not we must learn to be content with what God has given today.

GO AFTER RIGHTEOUSNESS

Paul knows that just saying, "don't be discontented" isn't very effective. When you have a deeply ingrained habit, which is what discontentment is for all of us, if you want to change it you need to replace it with something else. Paul does that in verse 11. Instead of being focused on all the things we want to change around us hoping we'll be happier, Paul says pursue "righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness." When you find yourself growing discontent inside because you want to have something more or different than what you've got, refocus. Start thinking about how you can follow God more closely, how you can love.

Pursuing righteousness begins with valuing what we have when we are counted righteous by God. It begins by rejoicing in what God has done for us through his Son, Jesus Christ. I am accepted by God, loved by him through Jesus, and that is the most valuable, precious thing I could ever have. Knowing this what I should focus on most is cultivating and deepening my walk with God.

GIVE

We can see a specific way we can pursue godliness in 1 Timothy 6:18. Paul says, "Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds." The way to gain in this life is to give!

The holidays will soon be upon us culminating in the big one, Christmas. When I was a kid Christmas was so exciting because of one thing—we were going to get presents! That was the best thing ever. I've grown up, and Christmas is as exciting for me as it was when I was a kid. But a curious reversal has taken place. I enjoy the presents I receive. It is fun to get presents. At least I think so. But what gets me really excited is giving presents. Jesus said it is better to give than to receive and he was right. What a blast it is to give a gift that lights up the eyes of someone you love. There is a message there. If you want joy, if you want contentment and peace, put your focus on giving, serving others.

There is an important point we need to remember about discontentment. It is a self oriented thing. It is about me and what I want. There is a lesson we all must learn over and over for it is contrary to our nature. It is that joy and peace do not come from getting

things for ourselves. Pursuing selfish interest is a fool's errand. It never ends, it never satisfies and it eats away our soul. The way we find life is by serving others, giving up self to love them. Give love, give grace, give of yourself to serve others. The more you give the more you will gain.

GROW GRATEFUL

Last week we saw the image of the river of life. Life flows from God. The life of peace, joy, hope, love does not come from having any particular circumstance, any status, position, money, possession or human relationship. It comes from knowing God. Jesus said knowing God is eternal life. It is the life of joy and peace we desire. So if we know God through our Lord Jesus Christ we need to set our minds on how precious this is, not on something that can never give us that life we need.

Pastor and author Tim Keller has a good way of thinking about this. He says imagine that you are a billionaire and that one day you have three ten dollar bills in your wallet. You take a cab ride and the cabbie tells you the fare is eight dollars. You give him one of the bills to cover the fare and a tip. Later you look in your wallet and discover that you have only one bill in it. You realize that either you dropped one of those bills somewhere or you gave the taxi driver two of the bills. What are you going to do? Will you get upset? Will you insist on searching for that cab driver to track down that other bill? No, you just shrug. You're a billionaire. You just lost ten dollars. So what? You have too much money to be concerned about such a miniscule loss.

When you become discontented, think about the fact that in Christ you are a spiritual billionaire and you're wringing your hands over a measly ten dollars. Think about the fact that today is the only day that you can be sure of. This day is a gift from God. Give thanks for what God has given you today. Through Jesus Christ he has given you every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms. He has given you life today. Just give thanks for that.

In his commentary on 1 Timothy, Philip Towner wrote, "Real contentment and material prosperity have nothing to do with one another." David Steindl-Rast wrote in his book, *Gratefulness: The Heart of Prayer*, "the root of joy is gratefulness...It is not joy that makes us grateful. It is gratitude that makes us joyful."