

# “Divine Discontent”

Matthew 6:19-34 <sup>1</sup>

It is a very normal human aspiration to want to improve our lives and the lives of our children and grandchildren. That is, after all, the underlying dynamic in the unrest currently underway in North Africa and the Middle East.

Back during the long bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama that began the Civil Rights Movement (the boycott actually began on my fifth birthday), Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to an old woman who was participating in the boycott: “Mama, why are you walking like this, walking miles and miles to work? You’re not going to benefit much from this new situation yourself.” And she said, “Dr. King, I’m not doing this for myself. I’m doing this for my grandchildren.”<sup>2</sup>

For ourselves, for our children, and for our grandchildren, you and I want better education, better health, better living conditions . . . pretty much a better *everything*. And at the most basic level, such aspirations bring to reality much that is good in our world. At the same time, while discontent with present realities can spur us on to greater good, discontent can also take us in other directions.

As with most things, discontent can be overdone, with unhappy outcomes. We Americans seem to have been the ones who gave the world the somewhat dubious idea of “planned obsolescence,” which appears to have had its birth in a lecture by Mr. Bernard London during our Great Depression. The title of his lecture was “Ending the Depression through Planned Obsolescence,”<sup>3</sup> and we’ve learned how to implement his idea with a vengeance, such that virtually nothing is “built to last” anymore, and many things are cheaper to throw away and replace than they are to repair.

This state of affairs has led to a perpetual discontent that has stolen from many of us the ability to experience the soul-satisfying condition of contentment. The very word, “contentment,” has come to have a certain negative quality about it. And that was, of course, the point of the Veggie Tales story I told to the children earlier.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on March 20, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Vincent Harding, “In the Company of the Faithful: Journeying toward the Promised Land,” *Sojourners*, 14 (May, 1985), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard London, “Ending the Depression through Planned Obsolescence,” 1932. [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/27/London\\_%281932%29\\_Ending\\_the\\_depression\\_through\\_planned\\_obsolescence.pdf](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/27/London_%281932%29_Ending_the_depression_through_planned_obsolescence.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> In Veggie Tales’ *King George and the Ducky*, an adaptation of the story of David and Bathsheba, Larry the Cucumber stars as King George and Bob the Tomato is his faithful servant, Lewis. The privileges of royalty—kingdom expansion, castles, power, and treasures—do not appeal to King George. But King George loves to bathe with his rubber duck. Splishing and splashing, he sings an ode to his rubber duck called—what else?—“I Love My Duck.”

One day while standing on the royal balcony in his purple robe and golden crown, King George peers through binoculars, and his eyes grow wide with desire. He spies something wonderful—a rubber duck. But it belongs to Billy, who happens to be bathing with his rubber duck on his own balcony. Billy’s rubber duck looks exactly like King George’s rubber duck. Nonetheless, the king covets it, exclaiming, “I want it.”

Lewis reminds him that he already has a duck and that the other duck belongs to someone else.

“Are you saying I shouldn’t have whatever I want?” asks the King.

Lewis opens a large wardrobe overflowing with hundreds of identical rubber ducks and says, “If I could just jog your memory, you already have quite a few ducks.”

King George’s rationale is simple. He shoots a condescending look at his unlearned servant and replies, “Those are yesterday’s ducks.” (*King George and the Ducky* [Big Ideas, 2000], not rated, written by Jennifer Combs, directed by Mike Nawrocki).

Our difficulty with contentment, driven as it is by a continuing desire for “more,” has brought spiritual troubles along with it. Mr. London was right. Planned obsolescence does lead to greater consumption, and in some ways to greater prosperity, but it is a monster that, once awakened, must be continually fed. And we begin teaching the principle of “yesterday’s ducks” to our children from the very day of their birth. I read in a *Time* magazine blog that the average American child gets something like seventy new toys every year!<sup>5</sup>

The spiritual result of all this is that we become less and less generous toward others as we focus our resources on ever-accelerating acquisition for ourselves. Frederick Huntington noted that “It is not scientific doubt, not atheism, not pantheism, not agnosticism, that in our day and in this land is likely to quench the light of the gospel. It is a proud, sensuous, selfish, luxurious, church-going, hollow-hearted prosperity.”<sup>6</sup> (And he wrote that in 1890!)

Well, while discontent can certainly have negative spiritual effects, there is a positive spiritual dimension to discontent as well, a positive dimension that is rooted in God’s own heart. That discontent began before God ever spoke the Word of Creation, as God’s love desired more robust expression in personal relationship with us. And so God’s discontent created, after which human discontent fractured that creation nearly from the start (Genesis 1-3).

God’s divine discontent immediately began the process of redeeming the fracture that had come into our relationship with Him (Genesis 3:15), and over the ages, that process continues to work to draw all people back to God (John 12:32).<sup>7</sup> God’s divine discontent with the consequences of our Sin not only resulted in God’s becoming human as we are and defeating both Sin and Death on Calvary’s Cross; that divine discontent also commissions us to follow in Jesus’ steps, preaching good news to the poor, proclaiming freedom for prisoners, and securing release for those who are oppressed (Luke 4:18-19).

The spiritual season of Lent, of which this is the second Sunday, frequently includes the practice of fasting, and there is both value and virtue in that practice; but God has also told us, “*Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?*” (Isaiah 58:6). Practicing such divine discontent certainly has to do with carrying out the **Great Commission**—telling the Good News of reconciliation with God through the redeeming work of Jesus—but it also has to do with living out the **Great Commandment**—loving our neighbors as we love ourselves.

This morning’s text in the Sermon on the Mount addresses both sides of our discontent. On the one hand, it warns us of the dangers of trying to “get all we can, can all we get, and sit on the can,” which is a way of describing the dangers of planned obsolescence and the insatiable desire for “more.” On the other hand, it commends to us the divine discontent that never rests until the Kingdom of God has fully come on earth as it is in heaven. God’s promise in our text is that if we make God’s Kingdom our primary concern, then God will take responsibility for meeting our other, more mundane needs (Matthew 6:19-34).

The Kingdom of God was actually the primary focus of all of Jesus’ teaching,<sup>8</sup> and a central dimension of that Kingdom has to do with care for those who are poor—the economically poor, not just those who are “poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3). Indeed, care for the economically poor is a frequent and consistent subject of divine discontent in the Bible.<sup>9</sup> And if, as we’ve seen,

<sup>5</sup> <http://money.blogs.time.com/2009/07/09/baby-hand-me-downs-are-suddenly-trendy/>

<sup>6</sup> Frederick D. Huntington, *Forum* magazine, **1890**; cited in Chan, p. 65.

<sup>7</sup> Cp. Numbers 24:17; Isaiah 7:14, 53:10-11, 61:1-2; Luke 4:18-19; Romans 8:18-22; Hebrews 12:2; Revelation 5:8-14.

<sup>8</sup> Fifty-two of the sixty-six occurrences of the term come from Jesus.

<sup>9</sup> See Exodus 23:6; Leviticus 19:10-15; Psalm 41:1, 72:12, 82:3; Proverbs 14:31, 17:5, 19:17, 28:8, 17; Isaiah 1:17, 58:6-7, 61:1; Amos 2:6, 4:1, 5:7-12, 8:4-6; Matthew 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 3:11, 4:18-19, 12:29-34, 14:13, 18:22; James 2:2-6, 14-17; 1 John 3:16-18.

the fasting God desires from us is that we “*loose the chains of injustice*” (Isaiah 58:6), this has some fairly specific ramifications for how we go about our lives as followers of Jesus.

Just this week, we had a fellow in the office here at church who was asking for help with his rent. About forty years old, and with apparent mental challenges, this man had been employed as a dishwasher in a restaurant at exit 7. He lives in a studio apartment in public housing downtown, and he has an old car that he uses to get to work. Overtaken by an illness, and told by his doctor not to work for several weeks, the man lost his job. Trying to pay for his rent, he went to a loan shark to get a title loan against his old car, but of course that only put him farther in debt.

He sat in our hallway in tears, not knowing what to do. Fortunately, he had a friend who was helping him think through things, and we were able to pay about a quarter of his bill through our benevolent ministry. This was a fellow with limited abilities who was doing all the appropriate things, yet he still found himself in a desperate situation.

With respect to desperate situations, I understand that we’ve had a number of television ads recently from the Western Sky Financial Company. If you go to their website, which I did, you’ll see that this company charges interest rates of from 139 to 195 percent on the kind of small loans for which our guest’s desperation would be tempted to apply.

Few people could survive such an interest rate, especially the clientele on whom such companies prey. That such companies are allowed to exist is a blot on our collective conscience, and no doubt contributes significantly to the level of homelessness among our working poor. Can you sense the divine discontent?

Francis Chan, whose book on discipleship some of our classes have been studying for several months, pointed out that Jesus’ command “to love your neighbor as you love yourself” means that we are “to love as you would want to be loved if it were your child who was blind from drinking contaminated water; to love the way you would want to be loved if you were the homeless woman sitting outside the café; to love as though it were your family living in the shack slapped together from cardboard and scrap metal.”<sup>10</sup> A mission team from Bristol saw just such things as these things in central Mexico last month. Can you sense the divine discontent?

Do you know that thirty people starve to death in our world every single minute, and that 85% of those people are children?<sup>11</sup> This means that before you and I walk out of this service, more people who are alive at this moment will have starved to death than the number of people who are in this room. Can you feel the divine discontent?

The question, of course, is how we might respond to this discontent and to the responsibility that this knowledge brings with it. There are, of course, many things we can do. Francis Chan sold his house and moved his family into a house half the size, giving the rest of the proceeds to the poor.<sup>12</sup> Terry and Samantha Stinson quit their jobs, sold their house, and moved to the mission field in Belize. Tom and Jolene Boeve quit their jobs, sold their house, and moved to the mission field in Kenya.

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<sup>10</sup> Francis Chan, *Crazy Love: Overwhelmed by a Relentless God* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008), p. 140. See also Marva Dawn, *Unfettered Hope: A Call to Faithful Living in an Affluent Society* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2003); and David Platt, *Radical: Taking Your Faith Back from the American Dream* (Multnomah, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> [www.starvation.net](http://www.starvation.net)

<sup>12</sup> Chan, p. 136.

More than thirty years ago, Gene and Jane Eller quit their jobs, sold their house, and moved to the mission field in Jordan. And it is quite likely that God has the same sort of adventure in mind for some of us who are in this room. There is work to do!

David and Laurel Cheromei, whom some of you know, were married in this very room a couple of years ago. They are young professionals, just starting a family, but even so, they have—just the two of them—started an orphanage in David’s home country of Kenya, and they are making a real difference in the lives of a few of the millions of AIDS orphans in sub-Saharan Africa through that ministry.<sup>13</sup>

Another fascinating way to participate in divine discontent is through what has come to be known as Christian microfinance. By giving even \$50 through such agencies as the CBF Foundation or Hope International, we make it possible for them to create small loans for impoverished families in the two-thirds world that allow them to become economically self-sufficient and spiritually whole.<sup>14</sup>

We are currently receiving our spring offering for both CBF Global Missions and SBC North American Missions. Every one of us is able to give to these offerings, and those gifts will make a difference both in telling the Good News through preaching and in showing the Good News through Christian social ministries.

If you’re physically able to go, you can participate in divine discontent by going on our church-wide mission trip to eastern Kentucky in July. This will be an inter-generational trip, and you can go for the whole week or just for the weekend to help with Habitat-like projects through our CBF missionaries “on the ground” in that area. If you can’t go yourself, you can help to underwrite the cost of the trip for others who are able, but can’t afford to go.

Another major effort related to divine discontent continues to be the Ministry Mall project across the street. There are a number of encouraging developments in that area, and we hope to see tangible changes before too long. That project will provide opportunities for financial contributions as well as working as volunteers.

All of us can participate in divine discontent by praying for the missionaries who represent us around the world, and by praying for Christians around our world who live in danger because of their faith—not least of which are those living in the countries now experiencing unrest and revolution.

All of us can gather facts about and become advocates for the powerless and the exploited, both here in Bristol and around the world. We can support Christian relief agencies financially and through volunteering.<sup>15</sup> We can become involved in political action and public debate to redress social injustices. We can pray earnestly for God’s Spirit to demolish strongholds of wickedness that exist in the powers of this world.<sup>16</sup>

All of us can participate in divine discontent by growing in our personal stewardship toward and beyond the biblical standard of tithing. Our current budget provides only \$7,050 for relief for the poor, and we’re giving only five percent of our larger budget to missions this year. If all of us made the changes necessary in order to tithe our incomes, our collective ability to care for the poor through our budgeted ministries would be greatly increased.

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<sup>13</sup> You may participate in this ministry at [www.graceofgodchildren.org](http://www.graceofgodchildren.org).

<sup>14</sup> [Http://cbff.org/microfinance](http://cbff.org/microfinance); [www.hopeinternational.org](http://www.hopeinternational.org).

<sup>15</sup> [www.vbmb.org/Apps/Donate/Disaster-Relief.cfm#CTA](http://www.vbmb.org/Apps/Donate/Disaster-Relief.cfm#CTA)

<sup>16</sup> Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (HarperOne, 2001), “The Social Justice Tradition: Discovering the Compassionate Life.”

Let me close by returning to our texts in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus warned us about the dangers of the typical objects of our worry and discontent, which include such things as grades, rejection, losing, loneliness, finances, career, bills, relationships, children, grandchildren, health, falling, parents, friends, thieves, crime, drugs, terrorism, fire, and disease, among many others.

The thrust of our thought this morning has been to redirect our discontent toward those things that resonate with the divine discontent we see in Jesus, in the Kingdom of God, and in the Bible as a whole. This divine discontent focuses on the fact that countless thousands do not know the saving significance of Calvary's Love; that the essential resources for human life are badly distributed in the world, with the worst allotments falling to the weakest among us; that hunger and thirst and disease continue virtually unabated in many parts of our world; that thousands are persecuted for their faith; that the poor continue to be the prey of the unscrupulous; and the list goes on . . . .

The bottom line in all this is that God does not give you and me as Americans the ability to generate wealth just so that we can keep it for ourselves and pass it on to our descendants. To do some of this is prudent—Jesus told us to prepare for the future—but God gives us the ability to generate wealth primarily so that we can experience the joy of giving it away. As the old hymn puts it:

Because I have been given much, I too must give;  
Because of thy great bounty, Lord, each day I live,  
I shall divide my gifts from thee  
With ev'ry brother that I see who has the need of help from me.

Because I have been sheltered, fed, by thy good care,  
I cannot see another's lack and I not share  
My glowing fire, my loaf of bread, my roof's safe shelter overhead,  
That he too may be comforted.

Because love has been lavished so upon me, Lord,  
A wealth I know that was not meant for me to hoard,  
I shall give love to those in need, shall show that love by word and deed:  
Thus shall my thanks be thanks indeed.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Grace Noll Crowell, *Light of the Years* (Harper & Row, 1936, 1964).