

DISCONTENT OR DISCOVERY, *Pastor Phil Strong*

Text: Ephesians 2:1-3; James 4:1-10

June 12, 2016



Growth Questions

“How does your level of stress and anxiety demonstrate either a trust in God (his ways, values) or commitment to ‘living the dream’? In what pursuit in your life is God ‘absent’? How might that be causing you undue worry?”

“Why do you do what you do for a living? Do you desire a financial future which will allow you to hoard resources or which will permit you to fund generosity and blessing to others? Do you have enough? How do you know?”

“How would you finish this sentence from Psalm 42:1: As the deer pants for water, so my soul longs after _____”? What answer is your calendar, your budget, your relationships, your values, your vision for life providing?”

Teaching Notes

This journey with God seems to be provoked by one of two postures: either **“discontent”** or **“discovery”**.

- **Discontent:** once God saw how determined we were to seek like apart from him, he engineered the whole world for frustration. We now have all of these desires--- meant to be fulfilled in God--- which we are attaching to other things which ultimately frustrate us.
- **Discovery,** on the other hand, is always associated with our desire for the *“more than”*. It’s a restlessness that’s not caused by our need to compensate for some void, but a courage which is fostered by hearing God “call to us”; a *“leaving”* which takes us outside of ourselves and we become *“famous for blessing”* others (Gen.12). Such a life can never be accommodated by those who are simply disgruntled or bored or need some new challenge. Such motivations cannot sustain them.

At some point in our lives, our hearts will require a vision of something so beautiful, so glorious and so fulfilling that it compels us, not simply to say “no”, but to say “yes”.

The spiritual, **“Just say no!”** campaign hasn’t proven effective. Attempting to experience transformation in ways that are prohibitive (‘don’t’) has not produced within us a desire which is compelling enough to allow us to say “yes” to something else. The *‘larva’* is always being given permission to become: the *“pupa”*... the butterfly.

We have to see ourselves as “**chosen**” before we find ourselves consistently and willingly “choosing” the God-life made available to us in Jesus.

Jesus and others offer the three great opponents of living into this new life: “**the world**”, “**the flesh**” and “**the devil**”.

The world... (the struggle around us)

“Don’t love the world’s ways. Don’t love the world’s goods. Love of the world squeezes out love of the Father. Practically everything that goes on in the world--- wanting your own way, wanting everything for yourself, wanting to appear important--- has nothing to do with the Father. It just isolates you from him” (1 John 2:15-17)

“For God so loved the world...” (John 3:16) [Back the Bible truck up!] “How do we reconcile that?”

It would be easier to reconcile these verses if they were different Greek words, but they are the same two words: “*love*” and “*world*”: *agape* and *cosmos*.

The NT uses “**world**” to speak about the entire created order, which God called “good”, but which is currently ‘tagged with sin-graffiti’. “**World**” can also be used to speak of deeply imbedded ways of conducting and organizing ourselves which are in conflict with God’s desires. Context helps us interpret most appropriately.

“The world” is what happens when we organize our dysfunctionality! Sin in collaboration (sin by committee).

It’s what happens when a collection of broken people pool their energy and resources and self-gratifying motivations. Sometimes we find ourselves so conditioned by those systems that we don’t notice (they create the water in which we are swimming without knowing we are wet) and, sometimes we refuse to address them because they are protecting our own self-interests (Pharisee’s).

When what is forming and informing us is not God, we become a “knock-off” version of ourselves; a cheap imitation of who we were meant to be.

The world provides cheap substitutes for shalom: *shopping*, for fulfillment; *food* for comfort; *sex* for relationship; *entertainment* for meaning, *notoriety* for character; *status/position* for meaningful contribution; an ‘*arrangement*’ for love.

It involves participating undiscerningly with the current cultural assumptions, instead of setting them alongside God’s values (e.g. we live in a world whose entire economy is based on *manufactured desire*: “covetousness”). The world creates the dissatisfaction, then attempts to sell it back to you as the solution.

It is a celebrated virtue in our culture to seek to increase your financial position (nothing inherently evil in it), but it’s almost impossible, at times, to see how such a desire is actually contributing to the chaos in our lives.

“The world” is willing to overlook the method if it produces favorable results, which creates moral dilemmas, on every front (e.g. I overlook the exploitation of child laborers in

under-developed countries because it reduces costs and allows me to be a better 'steward' of my money. I tweak the genome a bit to ensure the baby's health) ***"How can it be evil if it has done so much good?"***

The flesh... (the struggle within us)

Paul's use of the word "flesh" most often identifies our propensity to revert back to old patterns and systems of thought which we learned independent of God. It's what St. Augustine called *"incurvature of the soul"*: ***the soul turned in on itself.***

Know that the flesh will always gladly accommodate our misdirected desires.

Know that the world will always give us permission to put ourselves "first". Know that your willpower alone is no match for your "flesh". Your willpower alone will always lose out to the ruling passions of your life. That's why the answer to the deceitful heart of Jeremiah 17 is the "new heart" (desires, impulses) of Jeremiah 32.

Flesh is the only one that really has any power over you. Yes, the devil and the world attempt to impose themselves on us, but their effectiveness is determined by the condition of our hearts.

Imagine what happens when unsatisfied hearts meet insatiable desire? The reality of the ***ruined nature***, in cooperation with the ***'grasping instinct'***, produces disastrous results:

The devil... (the struggle beyond us)

The narrative suggests that there is something wrong with the world that is far greater than social media, political posturing and corporate money-laundering.

However we imagine the *"powers"* (as they are referred to), it becomes apparent in the story that there are personal/disembodied forces which oppose God and his good creation and which influence individuals and cultures in ways which are both deceptive and destructive. The difference between our culture and that of the ancients is that they recognized the powers as evil and were willing to name them.

"... our struggle is not against flesh and blood...but against spiritual forces of evil..." (Ephesians 6:12).

Flesh and bone enemies are the easiest to spot.

Jesus used the language of cosmic conflict (battle) to describe his mission.

1 John 3:8 *"The reason that the son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil..."*

We seem to be self-destructing at an alarming rate but, in some distorted way, our own self-destruction appears to be the one thing we still have control over in our lives!

“Of the three great struggles—the world, the flesh, and the devil— which one keeps you up at night? I am, personally, less concerned about the devil and cultural pressures than I am my own propensity for twisting truth to accommodate my own misdirected desires.

Never underestimate...

... the power of your desires. *You’ll always find what you seek because you will always seek what you desire.* You’ll never know the true strength of your attachments until you are either deprived of them or you try to resist them.

... the deceptive potential of your reasoning abilities. Your reasoning will always reach a conclusion that is consistent with your desires. I’m amazed at the things that we are able to justify if our hearts really desire it. Romans 1 refers to it as *“exchanging the truth of God for a lie.”*

... or the life-transforming power of love. To know that we are loved so stubbornly and relentlessly gives us the courage to reject others ways of attempting to discover who we are apart from God. The answer is not more rigid discipline or asceticism, but to “know” love.

Mark 4 depicts what I call *“life in the weeds”*.

“... all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life, the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things...” (19)