

A Kind of Pleasing Pain

Godly Discontentment in the Christian Life

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True Christians should be the most contented people on earth. After all, think of what they have been given: spiritual understanding of the vast treasures in the Word of God, the blessed assurance of forgiveness, the soul-anchoring hope of eternal life, the present delight of knowing Jesus Christ, the comforting presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit, warm fellowship with beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, and the exciting prospect of enjoying the unfathomable riches of heaven.

What more could any person want?

There is, however, one aspect of the Christian life in which every Christian should feel a profound sense of *discontentment*. What I mean is that every Christian should be dissatisfied with his *present* level of practical righteousness—the degree to which he knows and obeys God. In that respect, no Christian should ever be completely satisfied.

You see, if you are a true believer, you have been justified (cf. Romans 5:1, 9). In that sense you are completely and perfectly saved. One could never be any more justified than the moment he becomes a true believer in Christ. But everyone who has been justified is also being sanctified. While we *have been* saved (justified), we are also *being* saved (sanctified; cf. 1 Thess. 5:23-24). We are being progressively perfected in actual practice. Our sins have been forgiven *totally*, but the sinful deeds of our bodies are being put to death *gradually*. And this is often a painful process.

This is where godly discontentment comes in. No one will try to acquire something better if he is satisfied with what he has. This is what Jesus meant when He spoke of “those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matthew 5:6). One who has plenty of water does not thirst, and one who has plenty of food does not hunger. To thirst is to recognize and feel an unpleasant *lack* of water. And to hunger is to recognize and feel an unpleasant *lack* of food. The point is, there is *pain* involved.

So it is with the person who hungers and thirsts for righteousness. He does not have enough of what he desires most. And what every true believer desires most is God and His righteousness. David Brainerd, the eighteenth-century missionary to the native Americans, described this feeling in his journal:

Of late, God has been pleased to keep my soul hungry almost continually, so that I have been filled with a kind of pleasing pain. When I really enjoy God, I feel my desires of Him the more insatiable, and my thirstings after holiness the more unquenchable. And the Lord will not allow me to feel as though I were fully supplied and satisfied, but keeps me still reaching forward. . . . I feel barren and empty as though I could not live without more of God . . . Oh, for holiness! Oh, for more of God in my soul! Oh, this pleasing pain! It makes my soul press after God; the language of it is, “I shall be satisfied, when I awake with Thy likeness” (Ps. 17:15); but never, never before. Consequently I am engaged to “press toward the mark,” day by day.¹

Brainerd not only recognized his lack, he worked to fill it. He was “engaged to ‘press toward the mark,’ day by day.” He was diligent, busy, earnest, persistent, zealous in pursuing God and His righteousness. He worked hard to satisfy his longing. And this is perfectly normal and rational. After all, when you are thirsty, do you not seek water? When you are hungry, do you not seek food? The fact is, God makes those who are *destined* for heaven *fit* for heaven by using *them* to transform *themselves*. As Paul told Timothy, “discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” (1 Tim. 4:8).

No one will become perfectly godly in this life, no matter how disciplined he or she is. But if you are a true believer, God will give you, in some measure, what David Brainerd described as “a kind of pleasing pain.” You will feel an uncomfortable yet godly discontentment related to your ever-growing-yet-never-complete knowledge of God, and your ever-improving-yet-never-perfect practice of righteousness.

Those who are born of the Spirit are never again comfortable living with the remnants of the flesh.

Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

1 John 3:2-3

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¹ Jonathan Edwards, Ed., *The Life and Diary of David Brainerd* (Grand Rapids; Baker Book House, 1989), 103-104.