

**Core Seminar**

**Living as a Church**

**Class 7: Discontentment Within the Church**

*A Test of Unity*

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**I. Introduction**

Discontentment is something we all struggle with at one time or another, and discontentment with the church can be particularly difficult. Raise your hand if you’ve ever been part of a perfect church. If you raised your hand, I can guarantee you’re wrong, because that church had *you* in it. It’s those we love the most who can hurt us the most. It’s the group for which we have the highest expectations – the body of Christ! – which can let us down the most.

I wonder if you can recall the last that time you were deeply disappointed by another church member – either in this church or another. Probably. Or think about the last time that you felt a church let you down. Maybe it had been months since you’d joined a church and you still felt like an outsider. Or maybe the congregation was unconcerned about a particular priority that mattered a lot to you. Difficulties like these so easily lead to discontentment. And how we respond to discontentment can be a great enemy of our unity as a church. Or it can be an incredible force for good. In a moment, we’ll going to talk more about *how* discontentment arises. But at the very beginning here, I’d like to hear your thoughts on how discontentment can be so damaging. *What are some ways that our response to discontentment can harm unity in the church?* And another question: *How can a good response to disappointment strengthen the church?*

Like all adversity, we know that God gives us the grace to work through discontentment, and he intends it to serve his glory and our good. So how can we promote unity when we encounter discontentment in the church? This is what we’ll be considering today.

Before we go further let me offer a bit of definitional clarity. Today’s class isn’t going to address how we should respond to clear sin in the church. Lord willing, we’ll consider that topic later this month when we think about church discipline. Nor will today’s class specifically address discontentment that comes from disagreement with leadership. We’ll cover that question next week in our class on leadership.

Instead, think of today’s topic as sort of a mirror image of last week’s class, where we thought about how we can grow in unity together through our love for each other. Today we’ll consider how we respond to aspects of our church that are not necessarily sinful, and yet can be cause of unhappiness, and thus a potential source of disunity and discouragement. And it’s worth pointing out that discontentment isn’t always bad. Maybe you’ve been disappointed in a church because they don’t give much to missions. That could be a godly discontentment. But we can still respond in a way that damages the church.

So I’m going to begin by examining the negative effect that discontentment can have on a church. Then, we’ll think through some ideas of how we should deal with discontentment in a God-honoring way, and then we’ll consider two specific categories of discontentment. Through this, my prayer is that we will all be better equipped to “work for the unity of the spirit and the bond of peace” as we are commanded to do in Ephesians.

So first, in what ways can discontentment affect church unity? That’s roman numeral II.

**II. Bitter Fruit from Poor Response to Discontentment**

We might define discontentment as a longing for something better than the present situation. There can be godly discontentment: we know for a fact that this world is broken by sin and *should* be better; but there can be sinful discontentment where we refuse to trust God’s goodness and extend gratitude for his provision but instead demand more than he has ordained. Also, even if our discontentment is godly, we can still put our hope in circumstances instead of in God to make it better. And discontentment, even when spurred by godly desires, can bear bitter fruit if we respond in the wrong way. So let’s look at three ways in which discontentment, if not properly handled, can harm the witness of the church:

*1. Discontentment can lead to complaining and grumbling*

Paul warns us in the book of Philippians to “*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 shine as lights in the world,”* (2:14-15). Don’t complain or grumble -- in anything, ever -- is what scripture says. Part of the way in which our witness should be compelling to the world around us is that we don’t complain. *(See also James 5:9)*.When we don’t properly address discontentment, and it leads to grumbling, we damage one of the characteristics that makes us distinct as Christians. We harm the church’s witness.

*2. Discontentment can lead to discord*

When we’re unhappy with something we’re tempted to talk about it. We criticize. We rally support, trying to get people to see things from our point of view. And no matter the virtue of our initial concern, this type of behavior can quickly cause factions and dissension within the church—something that Paul lists alongside idolatry, witchcraft, and fits of rage when he writes about the acts of the sinful nature (Gal. 5:20). We must be careful to address discontentment because of the discord it can produce.

*3. Discontentment Distracts from What Really Matters*

As individuals and as a church, our charge is to “make the most of every opportunity” (Eph 5:16). But discontentment consumes our time and attention. It saps our energy. It monopolizes the time and attention of our brothers and sisters, our elders and staff. It can distract from what really matters.

This is some of the bitter fruit that discontentment can bear in our life together as a church. But remember that discontentment can strengthen the body as well. When we respond in a way that is godly, when we submit to each other for the sake of Christ and do the hard work of love, we can bring great glory to God. We show that our unity doesn’t rest on perfect agreement, or compatible personalities—but on shared hope and satisfaction in Christ. To see that in action, let’s think about ways we can address discontentment in a God-glorifying manner. Roman numeral III on your handout.

**III. Addressing Discontentment in General**

How should we address discontentment? I’m going to offer four suggestions, but these aren’t a to-do list or a formula. As with any other area of the Christian life, what we need ultimately isn’t a list of action steps, but to understand how the gospel of God’s grace transforms the way we respond to discontentment. We want to be able to say with Paul, “I have *learned* in whatever situation I am to be content” (Phil 4:11). These are four ways, then, of applying the good news of God’s patience to us so that we by his Spirit and strength might be patient with one another.

**A. Pray for God’s Mercy.**

First and foremost, the gospel tells us that we are unable to do anything of value in our own strength -- and that includes responding to discontentment. Remember Psalm 121: “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” So our first guideline is to pray and cry out for God’s mercy. It’s foolish to think that we’re mature enough to address discontentment under our own power. When something about the church or someone in the church rubs you the wrong way, you’re about to enter a spiritual battle. Satan wants to destroy us with bitterness, pride, and revenge. We can justify giving into temptation when we feel that we’re in the right.

So when you encounter discontentment, pray. You need to pray. You are waging a war that you can’t win on your own. Pray that God would give you discernment and wisdom through his word. Pray that God would identify any sinful desires in your own heart and replace them. Pray that he would fuel your heart with the love of Christ. We would honor God far more if we tried to fix things ourselves less often and spent more time in desperation pleading for God to fix us.

**B. Examine Your Desires; Confess and Repent of those that are sinful**

Second, examine your own heart to understand the desires at the root of our discontentment. Where is there sin that we must confess? Where are there desires that should be satisfied in Christ, but that we’re wrongly seeking to satisfy in comfort or in the respect of others? James writes in chapter 4, “*What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel*.” (4:1-2a). James gets right to the connection between discontentment and circumstances. We often feel discontent because we’ve put our hope in our circumstances rather than in God. But circumstances change. And God doesn’t change. He is the same: yesterday, today and forever. So is there a fight or quarrel? Then there are ungodly desires in your heart to deal with.

For example, maybe you’re unhappy because some people are better friends with a particular member than you are. Well, what’s at the root of that discontentment? Is it because you feel that such friendship conveys a special status that you covet? Is it because you’re jealous of a friendship that seems so close? Ask God to identify sin in your life—and confess it as sin. Think hard about the root problem – what are the desires behind the emotions of discontentment.

* Are you putting your hope in people’s approval rather than in Christ’s provision for you? The gospel declares that God’s approval of you in Christ is sufficient.
* Are you frustrated that seemingly no one in the church understands your struggles and you desire to be heard? The gospel declares that God sees you, knows you, forgives you, and guides you.
* Are you discontent because you feel you deserve better treatment than you’ve received? Remember the gospel’s call to lay down your life—and your rights—for the sake of Christ.

That’s guideline number 2 – examine your desires; and repent.

**C. See Other Believers the Way God Does**

Third, we should strive to see the church and everyone in it the way God does. That means we should view others through lenses of love, not disappointment or suspicion.

Again, the gospel is crucial here. It reminds us that in Christ, God has lavished His riches of forgiveness on us in spite of our sin. As we grow in the understanding of the depth of His grace and our hearts are filled with gratitude, we can begin to see others the way he sees them – as treasured saints whom he has washed, cleansed, and renewed. They’re not our enemies, but our dear brothers and sisters. Yes, they may misunderstand us, let us down, frustrate us, and disappoint us. But because of Christ’s sacrifice, God doesn’t give up on them or withdraw from them, and neither should we.

How do we grow in viewing others not from a selfish, discontented perspective but from God’s vantage point? A couple simple ideas:

1. **First**, pray for others and love them in concrete ways. When you’re unhappy with someone in the church, pray for that person. Pray that God would prosper their desire for him. Pray that God would help you understand the worth that they bear as His children.

And express that concern in other forms of service. Send them an encouraging e-mail or provide for a physical need. Choosing to love someone at an extremely practical level can be one of the best ways to soften our hearts in the midst of discontentedness.

Now, you might be thinking: but if my heart is saying negative things inside while I say encouraging things outside, isn’t that hypocrisy? I don’t think so. Disciplining yourself to work toward the good of another, even when your feelings incline elsewhere, is part of what it means to persevere in love as we thought about last week – and God can use that action then to warm our hearts; to gain that affection that is lacking.

1. **Second**: consider how much other people value to God. In Philippians, Paul says, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves” (2:3). Why you should consider another church member as “more significant” than yourself? Is it because they are more capable or more godly? No. It’s because they are Christ’s possession; He has bought them with His blood. They are precious in God’s sight. Much selfish discontentment begins because we’ve elevated our worth and importance over those around us.

So, for example, let’s say I’m impatient with someone because they never volunteer for anything at church. And my attitude is: how dare they consider their time more valuable than mine! Don’t they realize how busy I am, yet I still serve? I would do well to refocus my concern away from the value of my time and toward the value of those Christians. Christ gave his life for them. That’s how I’ll turn my thoughts from contempt to love. I may still talk with them about how serving in the church is a good thing, for their own sake and for the sake of the body, and yet, Lord willing, my motivation will be love.

Fourth, **D. Speak . . . In Love.**

How you choose to share the specifics of your discontentment with others affects whether that discontentment spreads or subsides. So what should you talk about and how should you talk about it? Let me give you a few suggestions.

1. It’s a good practice to work through these things we’ve talked about so far (prayer, examining our desires, seeing others as God sees them, etc.), before you speak with someone about your area of unhappiness. Are you wanting to either confess sin or collaborate to encourage the church? If your conversation doesn’t fall into one of those two categories, then it could be in danger of complaining and grumbling.

2. When you think it’s good to talk with someone, talk constructively about how you two can better serve the church. Simply using a conversation to let off steam or to seek affirmation of your discontentment will likely spread that discontentment. The temptation to sin in anger can be quite strong—and something against which we should guard ourselves.

3. Recognize your responsibility as a church member. We’ll talk about this more in two weeks (Lord willing), but suffice it to say that Jesus in Matthew 18 lays out very clear steps for dealing with sin in the church -- and the first step is to confront the individual you suspect of sin. With very few exceptions, if you’re talking with anyone *else* about that sin, then you are acting as a gossip and a slanderer. Sometimes people come to me with a concern about what someone else is doing and expect me as a member of staff to fix the problem. With very few exceptions, my counsel is for the complaining person to talk with the offending person directly. That’s how things should work in a church.

4. Be careful how you speak about the issue publicly. Some things in the church are unclear and unimportant; others are important but unclear, that’s where you need elders; If something is both important and clear – the divinity of Christ, the authority of scripture – then speaking publicly—say in a members’ meeting—even against the elders—is potentially a good thing. Of course, you want to get counsel on this ahead of time, both from the elders and from leaders you respect outside this church. But if it’s not in that category of both serious and clear from Scripture, you should n’t speak publicly against the leadership of the elders—instead you should register your thoughts with the elders privately.

So again, four guidelines for addressing discontentment: Pray. Understand your desires and repent of what is sin. See others as God sees them. And speak in love.

[questions]

**IV. Specific Areas of Discontent**

In our remaining time together, I’d like to get even more practical in discussing how we should address three common situations in the church that cause discontentment.

1. *The church isn’t meeting my needs*

One specific area of discontentment we can often feel is that the church isn’t meeting my needs. However common this might be, we need to recognize it for what it is: a selfish demand that the church serve me. But we’ve talked extensively in this course about the reason for church. It’s not ultimately to surround us with social relationships in which we find fulfillment; its ultimate purpose is to glorify God by showing off his power in a diverse community of united, loving believers. So to fight this form of discontentment, we need to learn that we’re not the most important thing. God is.

And we need to learn where true joy comes from. Unlike how the world thinks, joy in the Christian life doesn’t come from being a consumer of blessing but being a giver of blessing. The point of the church isn’t to have our needs met. The church is a living organism where we invest ourselves to meet the needs of others and build them up in Christ. Will we receive blessing from others who love and serve and teach us? Yes. Will there be times when we’re so weak we simply can’t serve anyone else, and we’re dependent on the love of others? Yes. But our normal posture toward the body is to seek ultimate joy by laying down my life for the joy of others.

1. *The church has disappointed my expectations for fellowship and growth*

Second, though, we might desire to serve the church selflessly, but still feel a lingering disappointment with the ways are in the church: a lack of fellowship or feeling like you don’t belong; or a lack of growth. Maybe you’ve been a member of the church for several months and you’re finding it difficult to make good friends. Maybe you want to serve but no one seems to recognize it, or you can’t serve in the way you feel most gifted. Maybe you’re frustrated with the dating culture in the church. How do we deal with this kind of discontentment?

Well, following the pattern we established earlier, we should approach situations like this with prayer. We should search our hearts and determine whether these feelings stem from selfish and ungodly desires. We should ask the hard questions: are there things I need to do differently to experience better fellowship in the church or to take advantage of the opportunities to grow? We should ask that of ourselves and of others that we know and trust, to receive their counsel and input. And then we should pursue appropriate action steps. That might involve talking to a pastor to get his thoughts on what you should do. If you’re struggling to make relationships, I can say that there are likely many other people feeling the same way, so I’d encourage you to take the initiative to reach out to them; be a friend to them. God can satisfy your good desires but he sometimes does so in a way different than we had planned. Be ready for God to answer your prayers in surprising ways.

Let me add one other thing on this subject. Much of what this battle entails is training our minds to understand the many benefits and blessings that God has, in His kindness, given us in the church. Mark made this point a few years ago when he gave this striking example of how we receive one blessing after another, and then take it for granted, tossing it aside and looking for more. And all the while, as we are crying out for something else, there is this growing pile of blessings rising up over us that we ignore. Pray that God would train us to see all of the blessings he has given us in the church; and that will affect our heart and attitude in areas of discontentment.

That said, there may come a time when you find that a particular church—despite its grounding in God’s Word—isn’t a place where you’re growing spiritually. What should you do? Talk to others around you after you have prayed and confessed any sin. Let the elders know; seek wisdom and counsel. The last thing you should do is to decide on your own that you need a different church, only to discover the same root issues coming up in your new church home. When you do talk to someone, remember to be careful with how you discuss your discontentment—don’t let it become a cause for discord within the larger body of Christ.

1. *Dislike of church members*

Another cause for discontentment is simply dislike of other church members. Maybe it’s an issue of envy or rivalry: you resent the blessings that God has lavished on someone else. Or maybe it’s a basic feeling of discomfort: someone behaves in a way that is radically different from what you’re accustomed to. Or someone works for an organization or a political party that you loathe. How do you work through discontentment in areas like this?

Again, let’s follow the pattern we’ve established. Pray that God would change your heart. Confess any sin to God and seek his forgiveness. Recognize that a desire to not love someone is sin—it’s not something we can brush aside as mere incompatibility. Learn to pray for people whom you dislike, that God would bless and mature them. Consider that these individuals, though broken and imperfect today, are being transformed into Christ’s likeness with ever-increasing glory. Loving those whom we find uncomfortable isn’t easy, but as members of a church, it is hugely important -- because it is through those types of relationships that God is most glorified.

**V. Conclusion**

At the root of discontentment is the idea that things would be better if some person or situation would simply change. But that is precisely why we must put our hope in God and not in our circumstances. So praise God that we don’t have to cling to the weak and temporary hopes of this world. He has given us himself as our anchor. He is sovereign over our circumstances. He was sovereign when Noah was being mocked, when Joseph was in the pit, when Israel was in slavery, when David was being hunted, when Christ was on the cross. His goodness always prevails. And him we can find the joy of true contentment.