

BLESSED ARE THE UNSATISFIED

Romans 8:18-25

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See if this is the picture of the Christian life prevailing in most churches today: You repent and accept Jesus Christ as your Savior and through God's grace and forgiveness you are reconciled with God. You immediately enjoy a sense of peace and happiness that is always with you. You read the Bible, go to church, and pray as much as possible. Over time Christ will painlessly transform you into a person like him. You grow in knowledge, faith and joy. You are not supposed to be derailed by emotions that debilitate you or by faulty thinking or paranoid delusions. You don't suffer deeply, in ways that can completely change the rest of your life. If you do suffer, you're supposed to do so quietly, to quickly find meaning in your suffering and experience God's healing and move on. You're supposed to be deeply and joyfully satisfied. You're supposed to be completely fulfilled by a relationship with God, because God wants to give you a satisfied life, an abundance of joy and happiness. Jesus will give you the living water so that you will never thirst again. The Christian life becomes an ongoing celebration of the goodness and grace of a generous and loving God.

For Joel Osteen, pastor of the largest church in the United States, finding spiritual, emotional, and even material satisfaction in a relationship with God is at the core of what it means to be a Christian. "God wants you to live a satisfied life," he writes. "He wants you to have a life filled with an abundance of joy, an abundance of happiness. God doesn't want you to simply survive that marriage. God wants to turn it around and restore you with a strong, healthy, rewarding relationship. God doesn't want your business to merely make it through murky economic waters. He wants your business to sail and excel! When God restores, He always brings you out better, improved, increased, and multiplied. He has a vision of total victory for your life!"

Is that realistic? Is that the kind of Christian life you've experienced? Has your spiritual hunger been totally satisfied by the bread of life, or are you still hungry for more spiritual fulfillment? Has your thirst for the living water been totally quenched, or are you still thirsty for more?

I don't think that view of the Christian life is at all realistic. I'm sure you have met with disappointment and loss in your Christian life. You have longed for a life without emptiness, weariness, insecurity, discord and the occasional feeling that God is far away. You may have heard many times that real Christians don't have such longings. But I think they do. You would be hard pressed to find any character in the Bible who led that kind of satisfied life. They all had their issues.

Even the Apostle Paul, probably the greatest Christian who ever lived was not satisfied with his Christian life. He wrote to the Philippians, "I want to know

Christ.” Didn’t he already know him? “I want to know Christ—yes to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so somehow attaining the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

Obviously, Paul was not completely satisfied by his Christian life and his relationship with Christ. He still wanted to know more of Christ. He hadn’t arrived. “Brothers and sisters,” he wrote, “I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it.” There was still more to the Christian life and he longed for it.

In our text this morning, Paul wrote to the church at Rome, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved.” Yes, we were saved in this hope, but we long for more. We have this relationship with Christ, we have the first fruits of the Spirit, but we aren’t satisfied. We groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship. We haven’t arrived. We long for more. We have this hope. Paul writes, “But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.”

So that’s the title of my sermon this morning, “Blessed Are the Unsatisfied” and it is taken from the title of a new book, *Blessed Are the Unsatisfied: Finding Spiritual Freedom in an Imperfect World* by Amy Simpson. Not dissatisfied. We are not dissatisfied with our Christian life or our relationship with Christ. We are unsatisfied. There is still more to come, and we long for it. Our thirst is not yet quenched and we long for more living water.

Back before Easter, when Shari proposed this series on difficult issues in the Christian life called Knots of Faith, it looked like I was going to get the topic, “Why Isn’t My Christian Life More Dynamic?” I’ll confess my initial response was not positive. I really didn’t know how I would approach that topic, and I couldn’t think of a relevant scripture passage. Then I read an intriguing article in the January/February issue of *Christianity Today*, entitled “All the Satisfaction We Can’t Find: Why Filling that ‘God-Shaped Hole’ May Not Be God’s Plan for your Life” by Amy Simpson. I thought, this isn’t exactly Shari’s topic, “Why Isn’t My Christian Life More Dynamic?” but it is related, and maybe that will give me some help. So, I ordered her book and that’s the basis of my sermon this morning.

In chapter 7 of the book of Revelation, we read how a great multitude, that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, is standing before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes and holding palm branches. They are crying out in a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God, who

sits on the throne and to the Lamb.” Then one of the elders tells John, the author, “These are those who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. . . . Never again will they hunger, never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

These followers of Christ arrive hungry and thirsty, to be finally satisfied and led to streams of living water to have their thirst completely fulfilled. This is striking! If a relationship with Jesus were fully satisfying in our lives on earth, why would we need our hunger and thirst satisfied in heaven?

Amy Simpson writes, “Several years ago, my sister ran the Chicago Marathon, and I had the privilege of cheering her on. Early in the race we saw the first finishers cross the line. These were elite runners from all over the world, and their finishing times were awesome. But even these runners, among the greatest in the history of the world, were exhausted when they finished. And like all the runners they were hungry and thirsty.

“Along the route, plenty of water stations gave opportunities to hydrate. Energy bars and gels gave them calories and nutrients. But they were expending far more than they could consume. No matter how much they took in along the way, they would have been in desperate need of replenishment at the end. Only when the race was over could they meet their needs.”

She writes, “This image—of the depleted runner—comes to mind when I think of these saints in Revelation, crossing the ‘finish line’ into eternity. As the writer of Hebrews entreats us to do, they have ‘run with perseverance,’ their eyes locked on Jesus (Heb. 12:1,2). They have hungered and thirsted along the way and they have suffered during the race. They have sustained themselves with Living Water and the Bread of Life. But they are still in desperate need of what only God can give. And now they will be truly, eternally satisfied.”

She writes, “Something is wrong if we feel deeply satisfied, or believe we are satisfied, in this life. Show me those who are completely satisfied in their intimacy with God, who do not long for much more, and I’ll show you people whose knowledge of God barely scratches the surface, who have nearly lost sight of heaven, who have forgotten the first song their soul ever learned to sing, who are much too easily pleased.”

People who try to convince themselves that they are satisfied—face a crisis of faith when they run into a brick wall called the realities of human life. We don’t have to be reminded that this is an imperfect world, and we face pain and suffering, and injustice and unfairness and broken relationships and disappointment and loss. We can grow bitter over perceived injustices from the hand of God, who sometimes doesn’t seem to be holding up his end of the bargain. If we believe that

life in this world, in right relationship with God, is as good as it gets, then we have lost sight of the promises of Scripture and the hope that is set before us.

When we believe God has promised us satisfaction, it is easy to view discomfort and tragedy as signs that God is not good, or not good to us. So, we complain, and complaining fuels discontentment and more dissatisfaction. We focus on our negative feelings, often blaming God for the consequences of our choices, or someone else's choices and we miss the opportunity to live with a God-given sense of purpose.

In some ways our experience of Christ and his church has become a marketplace, with resources and trinkets and churches of all kinds crafting marketing messages to compete for our attention. And for some of us it is easy to move on when we don't like what is said or what they do for us. When we come to Jesus specifically so he can satisfy us, we come in a consumer mindset. We come with the wrong goal: to find satisfaction rather than to worship and be in right relationship with God because he is God. We too easily believe that he exists for us rather than us for him. But Jesus isn't here for our pleasure. He doesn't come to us on our terms. He insists on transforming us and our desires.

When we proclaim the message of satisfaction to others, we set them up to come to Jesus with false expectations, or unrealistic expectations. We do a disservice when we teach, or even suggest, that simply knowing Jesus or following God's ways of living brings total and immediate satisfaction. Our unhealthy appetites don't necessarily go away and even our healthy desires will not be truly and fully met. When Jesus and his people don't deliver on the promise, some people give up on faith, deciding it "doesn't work."

Some people come to the church and to Jesus, in times of crisis, and it becomes a significant turning point in their lives. Gradually Jesus transforms them. For others, as soon as the crisis is resolved or the sorrow passed, they go back to their old ways. When they realized Christ actually wanted to change them, rather than simply fix their problems, they walked away. Jesus is not interested in fixing our problems while ignoring their source. We encourage this kind of shallow approach to Christ when we promise he will cheerfully make our lives what we want them to be, like a fairy godmother.

This problem of unrealistic expectation can be a problem in marriage. When people believe their spouse will satisfy all their emotional needs, they are in for a disappointment. And by the way, this is my number one concern about calling a new pastor: unrealistic expectations. It has been less than two years, but it seems like years that we have been focused on calling a new pastor. And I'm sure there are a lot of different visions on what this new pastor is going to be able to do for us as a church, bring in lots of new people, especially young families, get us back to 2 morning services again with full pews, build up the Sunday School, increase our giving, get us more involved in outreach, preach wonderful Biblical sermons, and on and on. I'm sure the Pastor Nominating Committee is going to present us with

an excellent candidate, but I can assure you he or she won't be perfect and he or she won't solve all of our problems. I'm sure the new pastor will have wonderful skills, but he or she won't be the Apostle Paul or Billy Graham. The new pastor will be very human, and we cannot place a burden of unrealistic expectations on our new pastor. I know. I've been there. I hope and pray that we as a congregation can give our new pastor the support and the grace to experiment, to make changes, to make mistakes, to have weaknesses, to be stronger in some areas than others, to be human. Let's not have unrealistic expectations of our new pastor. But I digress.

Remember we are not talking about dissatisfaction. We are not dissatisfied with Christ or his relationship with us. For dissatisfied people, no amount is enough. Nothing is adequate. No person is acceptable. Everything falls short because dissatisfied people either expect too much or simply refuse to be pleased. It breeds discontentment, contempt, and a feeling of emptiness. And it is miserable. Unsatisfaction is different. It is more like acceptance combined with anticipation. It is desire that can live with deferral. It is a healthy hunger that is content to wait for the feast.

Our culture is unaccustomed to being okay with unsatisfaction. When we feel desires, we demand that they be satisfied. When we feel needs, we take for granted that something is available to either meet the need or temporarily numb the feeling. Accepting unsatisfaction simply does not come naturally to us because we were made for a world with no disruption between our good desires and their good fulfillment. But we don't live in that kind of a world. There is a gap between our current reality and our ultimate desires.

Dissatisfaction expects someone or something to close that gap, then complains and grows frustrated when it doesn't happen. Unsatisfaction knows how to live with the gap, aware that nothing within our grasp will close it. Unsatisfaction keeps the gap in view, allowing it to produce a healthy sense of longing and a motivation. Paul wrote to the Philippians, "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." God is not finished with us yet. God's work in us continues. We are not called to be dissatisfied, but we are called to be unsatisfied.

In this life, in this sinful world, we will never have the truly safe, completely comfortable, consistently happy life we want. Even if we achieve the very best life we could possibly enjoy on this earth, we would still have so much less than what God offers us. Our longings are not meant to drive us toward satisfaction in this life. They're meant to create longing for Christ and what he offers and to drive us to him.

When we feel satisfied, or we believe we are supposed to, it is easy to convince ourselves that life as we know it—or what we can make of it—is good enough. When we are complacent we invest our best in the things that will be taken from us, either in death or in an earlier moment of grief. We store up treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and thieves break in and steal.

On the other hand, when we acknowledge we are unsatisfied in a world where evil reigns and death is certain, we are far more likely to seek true answers in the realm we cannot see. We are far more likely to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consume and where thieves do not break in and steal. We can view this world through the lens of God's bigger perspective. We can see just a glimpse of our world as God sees it—and feel a bit of his longing for us.

Amy Simpson wrote, “While we can find deep fulfillment in a relationship with Christ, it is normal and healthy to feel unsatisfied by the relationship we can achieve with him now. Perhaps this is even what God wants for us. As we are more intimate with God, he does not want us to decide we've had enough; instead, he wants us to desire more. He does not want to merely satisfy our desires; he wants to transform them.

“Rather than simply redirect our appetites and consumerism toward Christ, let's question whether satisfaction is a legitimate goal for our lives. We can, instead, learn to accept and even embrace our lack of satisfaction and lead intentionally unsatisfied lives. And when we let go of our pursuit of satisfaction, we open ourselves to all the other things Christ intends to do in and through us.

“Christ will not disappoint us; we don't need to lower our expectations of him. Instead we do well to raise them and live in anticipation of the satisfaction to come. We can embrace the unsatisfied life now precisely because we live in hope that our longings will be met.

“When we desire what God desires, we can be sure we will receive what we long for. As Jesus said, ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.’”