

**FAITH, FINANCES, AND PEACE OF MIND
(4) LIVING A CONTENTED LIFE**

Hebrews 13:5-6; Luke 12:15; Ecclesiastes 2:10-11

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PROLOGUE

"Contentment makes poor men rich, but discontentment makes rich men poor." -
Benjamin Franklin

SCRIPTURE

Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." {6} So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" (Hebrews 13:5-6 NRSV).

And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15 NRSV).

Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. {11} Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun (Ecclesiastes 2:10-11 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

In recent years we have witnessed a number of devastating natural disasters, including hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, and wildfires. Natural disasters remind us that everything in this world is temporary. This is why we can say with Jesus, "[My] life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15). Yet the culture is shouting that this is not true. The result is a wrestling in our hearts.

1. STRUGGLING WITH DISCONTENT

Perhaps you've heard of restless legs syndrome (RLS), a condition in which one has twitches and contractions in the legs. Restless Heart Syndrome (RHS) works in a similar way, but in the heart (soul). Its primary symptom is discontent. We find that we are never satisfied with anything. The moment we acquire something, we scarcely take time to

enjoy it before we want something else. We are perennially discontent.

Even those things we should be content with are the very things we find ourselves hopelessly discontented with. For example, we find ourselves discontented with our stuff, our jobs, our churches, our children, and our spouses. God must look down on us and feel the way we feel when we give someone a special gift and he or she asks for the gift receipt. It's as if we're saying to God, "I don't like what you have given me, God; and I want to trade it in and get something better."

Now sometimes there are good reasons for discontent. Poverty, injustice and oppression are things that *should* bother us. Knowing that someone is struggling to make ends meet, or worse, lacks the basic necessities of life, *should* make us uncomfortable and should motivate us to take positive action.

There are also personal things that should bring discontent. James Mackintosh, the great Scottish philosopher, said, "It is right to be contented with what we have, but never with what we are." In other words, it is a positive motivator to be discontent with our moral character, our spiritual life, and our ability to love. These are areas in which we should continue to grow and improve, for we are meant to become more than we are today. We are meant to yearn to know God more, to love others more, and to grow in grace and character and wisdom with each passing day.

2. FINDING SATISFACTION FOR THE SOUL

Behind the issue of contentment is the question, "Where does your soul find satisfaction?" The world answers this question by telling us that we find satisfaction in ease, luxury, and selfish gain. The Bible, however, answers the question very differently. From Genesis to Revelation, it tells us that we find our satisfaction in God alone. The psalmist declares:

"O God, you are my God, I seek you, / my soul thirsts for you. . . . / My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, / and my mouth praises you with joyful lips / when I think of you on my bed, / and meditate on you in the watches of the night" (Psalm 63:1,5,6).

The great teacher and philosopher Augustine of Hippo offered this prayer:

"Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee."

The Apostle Paul is an excellent example of contentment. In his letter to the Philippians, he wrote of the "secret" to his contentment:

Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need (Philippians 4:11-12).

Like Paul, we can learn to be content in whatever circumstances we may find ourselves. Contentment does not mean fatalistically accepting your circumstances even when they are bad. If your circumstances are bad try to change them or ask for help to try to change them. Contentment means finding satisfaction in God regardless of your circumstances.

3. PRACTICING EVERYDAY CONTENTMENT

Contentment is something that needs to be practiced on a daily basis. In order to practice contentment we need to simplify our lives. This is not the same as being simplistic or being a simpleton. Simplicity is the opposite of duplicity. Simplicity refers to a single purpose or focus. There is no attempt to deceive. It is straightforward and honest. Duplicity refers to double-dealing – trying to please two contradictory parties at the same time. We want people to have a high opinion of us but we also want to indulge our selfish desires.

When we practice duplicity we reveal that we do not have a center focus around which our lives are oriented. Lack of a center focus creates insecurity. The primary way we try to gain security is through material possessions.

Simplicity, on the other hand, brings freedom and security. It is to know and love one God - the God who made us and who, in Jesus Christ, has mercifully redeemed us. It is to recognize that all that we have and all that we are comes from God. Our lives and property are on loan to us. And we are responsible for what we do with what has been given us.

Simplicity as a lifestyle has been practiced by such diverse groups as the Franciscans, the Amish, and the Society of Friends – also known as Quakers. Franciscans take a vow of poverty, that is, they give up the notion of private ownership. The Amish try to live as though it is still 1850. Quakers practice what they call “the testimony of simplicity.” This is the simplifying of one’s life in order to focus on what is most important.

But if you are not a Franciscan, not Amish, and not a Quaker, what do you do? Let me suggest three key principles for cultivating contentment:

1. Four Words to Repeat: "It Could Be Worse"

John Ortberg, Senior Pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in California, says

there are four words we should say whenever we find ourselves discontented with something or someone: "It could be worse." This is essentially the practice of looking on the bright side or finding the silver lining. It is recognizing that no matter what we may not like about a thing or person or circumstance, we can always find something good to focus on if only we will choose to do so.

2. Develop a Grateful Heart

Gratitude is essential if we are to be content. The Apostle Paul said that we are to "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess 5:18). A grateful heart recognizes that all of life is a gift. Contentment comes when we spend more time giving thanks for what we have than stewing about what's missing or wrong in our lives.

3. The Daily Give Away

An excellent practical introduction to simplicity is called "the daily give-away." This is where you get rid of at least one item every day. The catch is it cannot be something you were going to get rid of anyway, like the kitchen garbage. The item may be big or small. It may still have value, in which case you can donate it some charitable organization. It may have no value but you have been reluctant to toss it. In any case, by giving or tossing the item away you have taken a step toward simplifying your life. The daily give-away helps you to reduce clutter, minimize your attachment to material things, and focus on what is most important in life.

CONCLUSION

Did you know that everybody lives in a tent? Do you live in discon-TENT or con-TENT-ment? You and you alone determine which "tent" is yours. You choose it by deciding what life is about. Choosing contentment means we look to God as our Source, giving thanks for what we have; we ask God to give us the right perspective on money and possessions and to change our hearts each day; we decide to live simpler lives, wasting less and conserving more; and we choose to give more generously. The result is we experience great joy and peace of mind.

I would like to invite you, for the final time in this series, to put your hands on your lap, palms up, in preparation for prayer. And I would invite you to say this prayer with me, just quietly under your breath, and then we will close with the Disciples' Prayer:

Gracious Lord, Help me to be grateful for what I have, to remember that I don't need most of what I want, and that joy is found in simplicity and generosity.

Through Jesus who taught us to pray:

Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil; for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.