

Message: Cultivating Contentment
(Message taken from Adam Hamilton’s *Enough*)¹

Watch the video clip: What Would You Take?

Are you content? What does it mean to be satisfied?

These are two good questions. We don’t usually reflect on how satisfied we are with life when we’re at home, work or out and about. In fact, we’re more likely to be occupied with things that cause us to be *dis*-content or *dis*-satisfied. Paradoxically, we may spend more time complaining than we do trying to figure out why we’re discontent and how to be satisfied.

Years ago, a sculptor carved an amazing statue of a lion from a block of marble. When asked how he did it, the sculptor replied, “I just carved away everything that didn’t look like a lion.” That’s a nice story, but contentment and satisfaction aren’t found by avoiding unhappiness or being anxious and discontent. We’re fulfilled when we’re intentional about how we live; when our behavior reflects our attitude.

“In recent years we’ve witnessed a number of devastating natural disasters, including hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, and wildfires. Natural disasters remind us that everything in this world is temporary. We can lose all our possessions in an instant. This is why we can say with Jesus, “*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).

Yet culture is shouting that it’s not true. The result is a wrestling in our hearts. Even when we say we believe Jesus’ words, we find ourselves devoting a great deal of our time, talents and resources to acquiring more stuff. We say our lives don’t consist in the abundance of our possessions, but we live as if they do.

We all struggle with discontent in some way. 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, or soul. Its primary symptom is discontent. We find we’re never satisfied with anything. The moment we acquire

¹ Adam Hamilton, *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity program workbook*, Abingdon Press, 2009

something, we scarcely take time to enjoy it before we want something else. We are perennially discontent. It's like perpetually being a child on Christmas morning. We're more interested in opening the packages to see how much we got, rather than enjoying the gifts for what they are, the thought behind them and what they mean.

In one sense, discontentment is a virtue. There is a certain discontent that God intended us to have. God actually wired our hearts so that they would be discontent with certain things, causing us to seek the only One who can fully satisfy us. We're meant to yearn to know God more, to cultivate a deeper prayer life, to pursue justice and holiness with increasing fervor, to love others more, and to grow in grace and character and wisdom with each passing day.

Unfortunately, being discontent usually destroys us. The problem is that 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 church, our children, and our spouse. God must look down on us and feel the way we feel when we give someone we really care for 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've given me, God; and I want to trade it in and get something better than what you gave me.” That's a sign of restless heart syndrome for sure.

The Apostle Paul is an excellent example of contentment. In his letter to the Philippians, he wrote of the “secret” to his contentment: “...*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. I can do all things through him who strengthens me*” (Philippians 4:11-12). Like Paul, we can learn to be content in whatever circumstances we may find ourselves. There are four key ways to cultivate contentment, which includes the “secret” Paul referred to in his letter.

First, repeat these four words after me: “It could be worse.”

John Ortberg, pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, tells us to use these words whenever we find ourselves discontented with something or someone: “It could be worse.” Essentially, this is the practice of looking

on the bright side or finding the silver lining. It's 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. This doesn't mean being falsely cheerful or optimistic, but adopting a realistic, yet positive attitude when things aren't going well.

Second, ask yourself: "How long will this make me happy?"

Often we buy something, thinking it will make us happy, only to find that the happiness lasts about as long as it takes to open the box. There's a moment of satisfaction when we make the purchase, but the item doesn't continue to bring satisfaction over a period of time. Many of the things we buy simply aren't worth the expense. That's why it's a good idea to try before you buy.

Third, develop a grateful heart. Gratitude is essential if we are to be content. The Apostle Paul said we are to "*give thanks in all circumstances*" (1 Thessalonians 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 thinking about what's missing or wrong in our lives.

The fourth way to cultivate contentment is to reflect on a second question: "Where does your soul find true satisfaction?"

The world answers this question by telling us that we find satisfaction in ease and luxury and comfort and money. The Bible, however, answers the question very differently. From Genesis to Revelation, it tells us that we find our satisfaction in God alone. For example, Saint Augustine said, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."

The words of the author of Psalm 63 tell us about our days and nights: "*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 63:1,6).

Solomon, the man who literally had everything, gives us a warning: "*Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure. . . . 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” (Ecclesiastes 2:10-11).

Jesus said the two most important things we must do are to “*love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,*” and to “*love your neighbor as yourself*” (Matthew 22:37, 39). If we keep our focus on these two things, we’ll find satisfaction for our souls and lasting contentment.

It sounds strange to people who haven’t heard of Jesus or don’t know what it means to be Christian or who are struggling with what it means to live a Christian lifestyle. They hear “help others and you’ll be content” from the Bible while the culture says, “help yourself, it’s for the taking.” To be filled up and made content, we first have to be willing to empty ourselves. The best way to do that is by helping others. When we give away what we have – our time, money, abilities, love and the hope we have in God, we empty ourselves into others only to find the Holy Spirit filling us up with even more hope, love and faith than we had before. That’s the way to true satisfaction and contentment.

We need to simplify our lives. In addition to cultivating contentment in our lives, we need to cultivate simplicity. Contentment and simplicity go hand in hand. There are five practical steps we can take:

First, set a goal of reducing your consumption, and live below your means. Set a tangible goal to reduce your own personal consumption and the production of waste in your life. For example, use canvas bags when you go grocery shopping and refuse any extra packaging.

Whenever you are making purchases, look at the mid-grade instead of the top-of-the-line product. When buying a new car, aim to improve fuel economy over your existing car by at least 10%. Reduce your utilities by 10% by setting the thermostat back a couple of degrees when you’re away during the day and asleep at night. Find other ways to reduce your consumption and live below your means. Do some research, share ideas with others, or have a brainstorming session with your family.

Second, before making a purchase, ask yourself: “Do I really need this?” and “Why do I want this?” These questions will help you to determine the true motivation of your desired purchase. Is it a need, a

self-esteem issue, or something else? You may find yourself wrestling with your true motive and decide that your reason for purchasing the item isn't a good one.

Third, use something up before buying something new. Take good care of the things you buy and use them until they're empty, broken, or worn out. Buy things that are made to last; and, when buying things that have a short lifespan, spend your money wisely.

Fourth, plan low-cost entertainment that enriches. Plan simple and cost-effective things when it comes to choosing entertainment for your family or friends. You'll be amazed at how much more pleasure you derive from low-cost, simple activities. Quality time doesn't have anything to do with expense, but with what we're willing to give from the heart. If you are in a committed relationship, this is very important.

Fifth, ask yourself: “Are there major changes that would allow me to simplify my life?” Consider selling a car and buying one you can pay for in full, downsizing your home, or getting rid of a club membership you don't use. Ask yourself questions related to your home, possessions, job and activities to identify some significant changes that will simplify your life. Remember, if you can't do all the things God is calling you to do and you're unable to find joy in your life, perhaps it's time to simplify in some major ways.

The power of self-control. Simplifying your life requires the practice of self-control. Solomon wrote, “*Like a city whose walls are broken down / is a [person] who lacks self-control*” (Proverbs 25:28, NIV). When a city's walls are broken through, the enemy can go right in and destroy it. There's no longer any protection. In the same way, self-control is a wall around your heart and life, protecting you from yourself, temptation and sins that are deadly and, ultimately, can destroy you. Self-control comes down to making a choice between satisfying an impulse to gain instant gratification and choosing not to act for some higher cause or greater gratification later. Self-control is saying “no” to instant gratification.

When you're faced with an impulse, stop and answer three questions:

“What are the long-term consequences of this action?”

“Is there a higher good or a better outcome if I used this resource of time, money or energy in another way?”

“Will this action honor God?”

We can learn when to say ‘no’ and when to say ‘yes’ wisely. When you do, that’s a sign of spiritual maturity and growth. You’re on the path to true satisfaction and contentment, to becoming more like Christ.

Which tent will you live in? Will you live in discon-*tent* or con-*tent*-ment? (*Please forgive the pun.*) You and you alone determine which “tent” will be yours. You choose it in large part by deciding what life is about. If you decide that “*life does not consist in the abundance of your possessions*” (Luke 12:15), then you’re choosing contentment. Choosing contentment means looking to God as the Source of our contentment and 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.”²

Let us pray...

Lord, help me to be the person you want me to be today. Take away the desires that shouldn’t be there, and help me be single-minded in my focus and my pursuit of you. Help me to follow you and be transformed by your love so I may serve others with that same love. Lord, you are the source of true satisfaction and contentment. Guide us and help us to make wise decisions as we live our lives for you. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

² Adam Hamilton, *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity program workbook*, Abingdon Press, 2009

Proverbs 27:23-24 (NRSV)

Know well the condition of your flocks,
and give attention to your herds;
for riches do not last forever,
nor a crown for all generations.

Philippians 4:11-13 (NRSV)

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. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Matthew 6:19-21 (NRSV)

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”