

Chapter 7

SEEKING CONTENTMENT

What an irony it is that while we pursue a higher quality of life—taking this class, reading that book, achieving this goal, and obtaining that promotion—it still eludes us. When we arrive at the goal toward which we’ve strived, we still find ourselves dissatisfied. On we go in a cycle of accomplishment, temporary pleasure, and then the nagging sense that something is still lacking. Could it be that what we’re seeking is contentment? The very word conjures up mental images of rest and satisfaction, hardly a state of mind to be obtained through frantic activity. Contentment, rather than being a prize we win or a goal we attain, is another of God’s gifts. The Apostle Paul knew both the secret of contentment and how to receive it.

I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him Who gives me strength (Philippians 4:10-13).

Paul had learned the secret of contentment, of being satisfied with every circumstance in which God placed him. Paul was in prison when he wrote these words. He had been at the point of death several times. If anyone could have said he was in need or want, it was Paul. He had suffered much, yet he said, “*I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.*” Contentment involves learning to love God and trusting His will regardless of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We are content because we are satisfied with whatever God gives us.

Our personal circumstances are different from Paul’s, and our society is different from the one in which Paul lived and worked. The same malady, however, continues through the ages and affects us all. It seems we all, at one time or another, fall victim to discontentment. A major cause of discontentment derives from our growing infatuation with and desire for more things, even though we’re already surrounded by material abundance. There is a correlation between “having more” and “wanting more.” This results in our being a discontented people, never having enough, separated from dependence on and devotion to Christ.

For us to live “life at its best” we need to learn to be content in the circumstances the Lord gives us. Paul learned contentment through realizing and reminding himself that contentment comes from relying on God, trusting that His strength enables us to do “everything.” When we abide in Christ, we are content. He promises, “*My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest*” (Exodus 33:14). Realizing and rejoicing in what we have (the presence of God), rather than lamenting what we lack (nothing, if we have Christ), brings us contentment.

DANGERS OF MATERIALISM

We live in a land of plenty, which promotes its own twist on contentment, which is “buy and possess.” Our culture emphasizes the material far more than the spiritual. Our society tells us that we need and deserve more, and that life is not complete unless we have not just our needs met, but all our wants as well. We seek the finest homes and cars as well as wealth and success. We are led to believe that happiness and contentment are within our reach if we just acquire a few more things. Advertisements are designed to make us feel discontented so that we will buy more things in an effort to make us happy.



Greed will not allow contentment, because it always urges us to acquire more. No matter how hard we try, we cannot satisfy ourselves by worldly things. “The more you gets, the more you wants.” The love of money has the potential to possess our lives like no other emotion can. We can spend our lifetimes chasing prosperity that, when found, often destroys us as illustrated in the following story:

A ship full of men sailed to an island to look for gold. When they arrived, they divided into two groups. One group would dig for gold; the other would plant crops and prepare the food. As time went on, they found gold. More of the men who prepared the food began to dig for gold. As more men came to the island, most of them also dug for gold. Even the ship was torn apart so the wood could be used to support the mineshafts. The story ends when some time later, people visited the island and found skeletons draped over vast treasures. Greed had taken over, and they had completely missed their meaning and purpose in life.

Did the men possess the gold, or did the gold possess the men? Riches can easily consume us. Many people when tested with poverty, stay strong and moral; few people, when tested with prosperity, keep their original values and purposes. It is ironic that, in spite of the prosperity in our country, our drug abuse, spouse and child beatings, divorce rate, and crime are out of control. Clearly, wealth has not provided solutions for the problems afflicting our nation.



Money has been called the “the god of those who have too much, and the goal of those who have too little.” Blessed indeed is the person who avoids these extremes. Martin Luther wrote about the desire for wealth:

Many a person thinks he has God and everything he needs when he has money and property; in them he trusts, and of them he boasts so stubbornly and securely that he cares for no one. Surely such a man also has a god – mammon by name, that is, money and possessions – on which he fixes his whole heart. It is the most common idol on earth. He who has money and property feels secure, happy, fearless, as if he were sitting in the midst of paradise. On the other hand, he who has nothing doubts and despairs as if he never heard of God. Very few there are who are cheerful, who do not fret and complain, if they do not have mammon. This desire for wealth clings and cleaves to our nature all the way to the grave.¹

For many, gaining wealth is so elusive that it becomes not only a preoccupation but also an obsession. We can become slaves to wealth. Our investment worries replace our hearts of love and generosity. Our own security can take center stage and replace our trust that God will provide. 1 Timothy 6:9-10 warns,

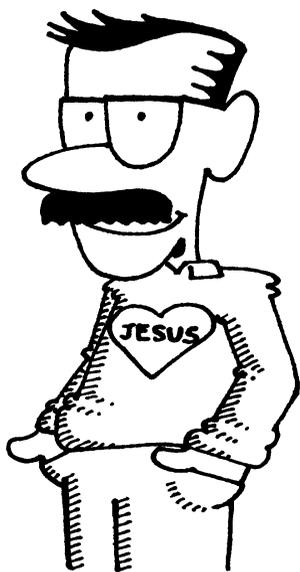


People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

With money as our security, pride, self-centeredness, and self-sufficiency can take over. We can be like the Rich Fool, who gave himself all the credit for his success. Deluding ourselves into thinking, as the Rich Fool did, that we need no one and nothing, we push God out of our lives. Recognizing little or no need for God, we ignore our spiritual selves, and live a life of self-indulgence. The state of spiritual coldness can be verified by an examination of how we handle our finances. Our checking account statements will indicate where our treasures lie.

Jesus spoke to the issue of greed in Matthew 16:26 when He asked, *“What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?”* The things we possess will contribute only to fleeting happiness, not an enduring peace and contentment. *“But man, despite his riches, does not endure; he is like the beasts that perish”* (Psalm 49:12).

Our focus on things can blind us to the emptiness of our faith. The one who is blessed materially is not necessarily discontent, but those who depend on their wealth to bring them contentment will be disappointed. Thus, the deciding factor seems to be the relationship between a person and his wealth. Consider Abraham,



one of the richest people in the Bible. Abraham had amassed much wealth, but he knew that all he had belonged to God. He had everything, but he possessed nothing. When God asked him to leave his home, he went without question, leaving behind all he possessed, trusting that God would continue to provide. In God, he had everything. His possessions were expendable.

When we allow things to possess us, our focus shifts from God to our material wealth, and our spiritual growth is impeded. *“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”* (Matthew 6:21). How distressing it is to find the things that we earnestly pursued and attained turned out to be the cause for a growing emptiness! Richard Baxter said, *“When men prosper in the world, their minds are lifted up with estates, and they can hardly believe that they are so ill, while they feel themselves so well.”*² In other words, those who prosper financially can be so preoccupied with their business ventures and so flushed with their successes that they don’t even notice the deprivation of their spirits.

Only God’s presence in our lives can give us true contentment. Discontentment is a spiritual problem. It affects the rich and the poor and all those in between. Psalm 116:7 commands us, *“Be at rest once more, O my soul,”* and then it tells us why we can rest, *“for the Lord has been good to you.”*

IF ONLY

Most discontented people believe they can correct their problems through some external changes. They focus on what they don't have and what they believe needs to be changed rather than acknowledging and appreciating the blessings they do have.

Contentment or discontentment is a state of mind. Even though contentment has little to do with outward circumstances, we still focus on "if only things would change." The "what ifs" or "if onlys" are not going to make a meaningful difference, but people believe that changing circumstances will change everything.

Do we find ourselves complaining if only . . .

- we owned a nicer home?
- we had more money?
- we lived in a different neighborhood?
- we had married someone else?
- we had more friends?
- we had a different career?
- we belonged to a different church?



The list of "if onlys" can be endless. Until we find our rest in Christ, we are going to continue our search for contentment in the wrong places.³ The theologian Augustine said, "Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee."⁴ People or things will never fill us; only God's presence and its accompanying contentment will allow us to live "life at its best."

An old tale called the "The Fisherman and His Wife," retold by Clifton Johnson, speaks to the issue of never being satisfied, reminding us that having more does not automatically make a person more content. The tale addresses the fact that too much of anything, even a good thing, may prove to be our undoing.

The story begins when the fisherman catches a large, magical, talking fish that will grant the fisherman anything he wants if he allows the fish to go back in the water to live. The fisherman lets the fish go, not because he wants any wishes, but because he doesn't want



anything to do with a talking fish. His wife hears about the fish and begs her husband to go to the sea and ask the fish to replace their dark little hut with a comfortable house. He goes to the sea and asks the fish for the house, and the fish grants the wish.

In a few days the wife becomes dissatisfied with the house and tells her husband to ask the fish for a larger stone castle. Reluctantly, he asks, and the wife receives a castle. After one night's sleep in the castle, she wants them to be king and queen of all the land. The fisherman is saddened by his wife's desires, but he agrees to ask the magical fish for her to be queen. The fisherman thinks that now, since his wife is the queen, she will be forever content, but she quickly tires of being the queen and wants to be the pope, so her husband returns to the sea to ask for that wish. His wife is now sitting on a throne with a crown on her head, surrounded by the pomp and power of the church.

The fisherman tells his wife, "You must now be content, for you can be nothing greater," but she is already feeling some discontent. That night she is unable to sleep, because all night long she tries to think what she could be next. Because the sun disturbs her with its bright light, she begins to desire a way to prevent the sun from rising.

Angrily, she says to her husband, "Go to the fish and tell the fish I want to be lord of the sun and moon." Very disappointed, he goes to the stormy water. In a scared and trembling voice, he calls for the fish and asks for his wife to be the lord of the sun and moon. The fisherman returns home to find the palace gone. In its place, he finds the dark little hut that had formerly been his dwelling, and he and his wife live in that little hut to this very day.⁵

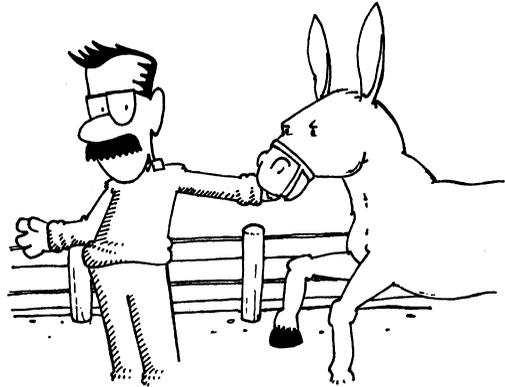
This tale shows how the fisherman's wife was never content. She had to have more and more and felt "if only" she had something more, she would be satisfied. She wanted it all, aspiring even to become God with power to control the sun and moon. God, represented by the fish, put her and her husband back in their hut, where they could live the lives God had planned for them. Her wishes were fulfilled, yet contentment eluded her because she ignored God's plan for her life. Contentment comes from the inner peace of knowing that God loves us and provides for us regardless of our circumstances. God's love for sinners is lavish, limitless, generous, and bountiful. It is unconditional. All we need to be content is to depend on Him.

When we depend on the Lord and place our trust in Him, we can be content in all circumstances. We won't need to dwell on "if only." God's grace gives us the ability to persevere in life's toughest situations. In the book *The Hiding Place*, Corrie Ten Boom relates that she and her sister Betsy were sent to Nazi concentration camps, which were filled with filth, disease, and pestilence. Their particular barracks was infested with fleas, but through God's grace, they were even able to see the blessings, even in fleas. Because of the fleas, the German

guards chose not to enter the barrack which allowed Corrie and Betsy to gather the other ladies in Bible study and prayer.⁶ God's word sustained them in their time of need. *"Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus"* (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

There was a picture in a newspaper that appeared some time ago showing two fields divided by a fence. The fields were nearly identical in size and in lushness of grass. In each field there was a mule which had his head stretching through the fence eating grass from the other mule's field. On the picture one word was written: DISCONTENT.

Many of us live lives similar to these mules. We have plenty, but we are rarely satisfied with and appreciative of what we have. Do we wish "if only" we had what others have? What others have in their "fields" may seem better than what we have in ours, but God's Word directs us to ". . . *be content with what you have* . . ."



(Hebrews 13:5). God does not say that we can't make an effort to acquire more, but we are to be content and thankful to Him for what He has given us. God gives us the ability to see how green the grass is in our "fields."

FOUR TRUTHS ABOUT CONTENTMENT

1. Contentment is determined by what is inside of us, not the circumstances around us. We are happy when our lives are pleasant and free from problems. We soon discover that this happiness is superficial and fleeting. As soon as the conditions change, the shallow contentment that we enjoyed will disappear. Even in the midst of good times, we will often experience a nagging hunger, an emptiness that demands to be filled. The philosopher Pascal wrote, "There is within every man a God-shaped emptiness that only He can fill."

In Christ alone we will find peace, joy, comfort, happiness, and contentment. *"Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light"* (Matthew 11:28-30). Think of the words in this passage: *"Come to Me . . . I will give you rest . . . I am gentle . . . you will find rest . . ."* It seems that Jesus' favorite word was "come." He invites us to come to Him. His invitation to us asks for a response.

Life at its Best

To receive an invitation is to be honored. For that reason, every invitation deserves a kind and thoughtful response. By responding to Jesus' invitation to rest in Him, we will find true contentment. In fact, the most incredible invitations are not found in envelopes; they are found in the Holy Bible. God is an inviting God:

- He invited David to be king. (1 Samuel 16: 11-12)
- He invited Israel to leave bondage. (Exodus 3:8)
- He invited Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem. (Nehemiah 2:1-9)
- He invited Mary to bear His Son. (Luke 1:30-31)
- He invited the disciples to fish for men. (Mark 4:19)
- He invited the adulterous woman to start over. (John 8:11)
- He invited Thomas to touch His wounds. (John 20:27)

God invites us to find contentment in Him.

Psalm 46:1 promises, *“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.”* He carries us through life's heartaches and frustrations, even through circumstances that cause them may not change. Christ sustains us when things go wrong or when we find ourselves in the midst of the most distressing circumstances. Our relationship with Him is not dependent on superficial circumstances. Only our relationship with Christ can make us content regardless of what life may provide.

2. Contentment is need-oriented, not want-oriented. God promises us in His Word that He will provide for our needs. *“And my God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 4:19).

There are more than a few people in the Bible who had their needs supplied by God. Think of the risk takers:

- Rahab, who sheltered the spy.
- The brethren who smuggled Paul.
- Jonathan, who risked his father's wrath to befriend David.

Consider the conquerors:

- David, slinging a stone.
- Samson, swinging a bone.
- Moses, lifting a rod.

Then, there are the caregivers:



- The Good Samaritan, who gave his time and money to help an injured person.
- The anonymous disciple in his boat. He made a bed out of the boat so that Jesus could take a nap.
- The unnamed man who gave his donkey to Jesus to ride into Jerusalem. He was an ordinary person God used as His instrument to carry out His will.

Contentment is impossible if we seek to obtain it only by having our wishes and dreams fulfilled. If we emphasize material things, we will end up frustrated and depressed when we fail to acquire them. Even with the acquisition of “wants,” we end up discontented because greed is never satisfied. *“Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income . . .”* (Ecclesiastes 5:10).

God promises us that He will supply us with shelter, clothes, and food. Most of us will even be given more than our basic “needs,” but God does not promise that He will supply all our “wants.” Hebrews 13:5 encourages, *“Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’”*

3. Contentment is a matter of trust. When we really trust God, we believe that in all situations He is in control and will take care of us. We believe that nothing under God’s control can be out of control. Contentment is trusting God when things around us seem to be in chaos. In Philippians 4, Paul speaks about being content in all circumstances. Whether in plenty or want, he did not worry, because he had learned contentment through faith in God Who provided for him. Having practiced contentment and experienced God’s faithfulness, he could boldly proclaim with authority, *“And my God will meet all your needs according to His riches in Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 4:19). Trust is a prerequisite for contentment.

Psalms 37:4-5 promises, *“Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in Him and He will do this.”* If we trust and obey God, delighting in Him, He will give us contentment.⁷

4. Contentment is responding to God’s call. *“If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs [the donkeys], and he will send them right away”* (Matthew 21:3). Do you think the man who gave his donkey to Jesus was happy to do it? It may at first have been difficult for the man to give up the donkey, but to see Jesus on the back of a donkey that he raised had to have been an incredible feeling. Don’t we sometimes want to keep our earthly possessions, money, investments, and time for ourselves and for our families? When God wants something, we often act as if we don’t know He needs it. We think we won’t be content without it. We forget that He is the owner—our things are not our own.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

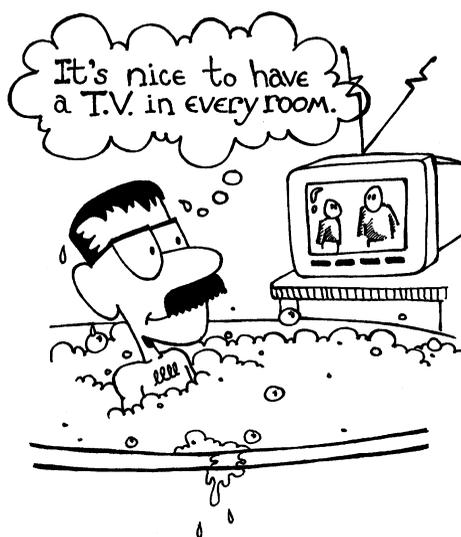
1. One person has little and is satisfied; another has much and is miserable. What causes the difference?
2. What does God promise in Exodus 33:14?
3. What is materialism? How does materialism impede contentment?
4. What does the handling of your finances reveal about your character and values?
5. Why is trusting in God basic to your state of contentment?

HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

A bumper sticker said, “Money isn’t everything, but it’s right up there with air and water.” We live in a money-driven culture that often determines a person’s value by how much he earns and possesses. To be labeled successes, many are driven to possess more and more. To gain wealth is often an obsession. *“Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint”* (Proverbs 23:4). The Apostle Paul warns us, *“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil . . .”* (1 Timothy 6:10).

If we could choose between living our lives in poverty, in moderation, or in wealth, which would we choose? Of the three lifestyles, Scripture shares how wealth may be more of a curse than a blessing. God, speaking through His prophet Hosea, said, *“When I fed them, they were satisfied; when they were satisfied, they became proud; then they forgot Me”* (13:6). Jesus tells us that we can’t serve God and money (Matthew 6:24). Jesus knew that, for many, money had become a god.

The consumer culture in which we live lures us into serving the master of materialism. Money can provide us with short-term comfort and happiness, followed by ultimate despair; it is one of Satan’s most effective tools to drive a wedge between us and Christ. The love we have for God is replaced by the love for money. So many of us work ten or more hours per day, so we can acquire more



wealth or more power. Driven by these desires, we no longer have time or energy to devote to God and spiritual growth.

John Steinbeck said, “A strange species we are. We can stand anything God and nature can throw at us save only plenty. If I wanted to destroy a nation, I would give it too much, and I would have it on its knees, miserable, greedy, sick.”⁸

Jesus looked around and said to His disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” The disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10: 23-25).



These verses in the tenth chapter of Mark are taken from Jesus’ counsel to the rich young ruler, who thought heaven could be bought or earned. It only makes sense: you work hard, you pay your dues, and your account is credited as paid in full in heaven. Jesus says, “No way!” What you want costs far more than what you can pay. You don’t need an accountant; you need a Savior. You don’t need a resume; you need a Redeemer. For what is impossible with men is possible with God (Mark 10:27).

You see *“how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.”*

- It wasn’t the money that hindered the rich man; it was the absorption in it.
- It wasn’t the big bucks; it was his big head.
- It wasn’t the good works; it was his reliance on them.

God does not save us because of what we own or what we’ve done. Only a great God does for His children what they can’t do for themselves. This is the lesson Jesus was teaching the rich man and His own disciples. God delights in impoverished spirits, not the proud.

Our obsession with money will interfere with a growing relationship with Christ. The love of money and possessions is one of the more subtle sins, because it is one that often develops gradually. It is like drinking salt water; the more salt water we drink the thirstier we become. We end up being possessed by our possessions. Our challenge is to keep money in its proper perspective. With contentment, the poor man is rich and without it, the rich man is poor.

Life at its Best

There are two ways we can strive to have enough. We can try to accumulate more, or we can learn to be satisfied with less. If we pursue the first way, accumulating more, we will discover that money won't buy lasting satisfaction, because, as we read earlier in Ecclesiastes 5:10, more is never enough. As hard as it is, we need to curb our desire for more by concentrating on the blessings we do have. Being satisfied with less and using what we have in God-pleasing ways contributes to our contentment. Those who have less and are content are better off than those who have much and always want more. God's wisdom is found in the words of Jesus "*But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well*" (Matthew 6:33).

To live "life at its best" we need to appreciate and recognize God's gifts to us. We may not have all we desire, but we do have all we need. The glass is not half empty, but rather half full. To appreciate what we have and not dwell on what we don't have is a blessing. What the Joneses have or what our culture says we need should not affect our way of thinking.

Epicurus, a Greek philosopher in the third century B.C., said, "If you want to make a man happy, add not to his riches but take away from his desires."⁹ When we desire less, we are more content with what we do have. To covet more is a state of discontentment and a violation of one of God's commandments. With an insatiable appetite for more, contentment is impossible. Those who are content focus on what they have and enjoy what they've got rather than complain about what they don't have. We don't need more to be thankful for; we just need to be more thankful.

The apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 6:6 says, "*But godliness with contentment is great gain.*" Charles R Swindoll explains it this way:

Godliness	+	Contentment	=	Great Gain
(A meaningful relationship with God)	+	(An attitude of satisfaction and peace within, regardless of circumstances)	=	That which constitutes great wealth ¹⁰

Our happiness is not dependent on what we have or own. Asaph, the Psalmist, had an intimate relationship with God Who enabled him to be content with what He had provided. We would do well to meditate on his words, "*Whom have I in heaven but You? And earth has nothing I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever*" (Psalm 73:25-26).

STRIVING FOR SUCCESS

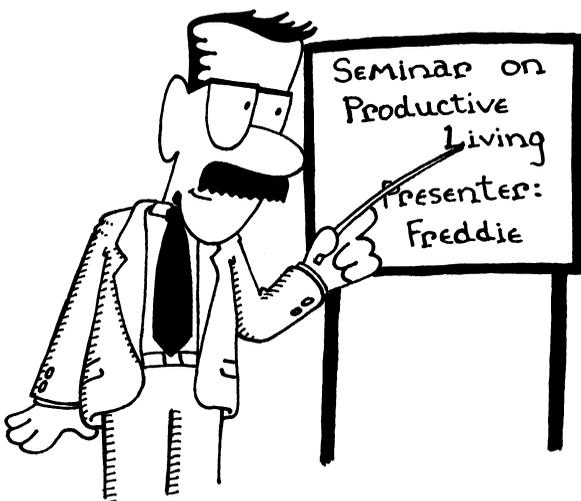
We value success so highly that we become willing to put an inordinate amount of effort into being successful. To achieve success, some of us may do almost anything, including trampling on competitors who get in our way. Could our desire to get ahead of the pack allow us to scheme, deceive, backbite, intimidate, or do whatever works? Unfortunately, some of us measure success only by . . .

- what we own.
- the authority we command.
- the power we wield.

Instead of loving people and using money, we love money and use people.

With all this pressure to become successful, our lives often begin to lose balance. There is an enormous challenge to juggle our time among work, family, community, church, friends, and relaxation. In order to move up the corporate ladder and make more money, families and time for God may be ignored. The end result of success without God is loneliness and despair.

Many have climbed the ladder of success to find only money and sorrow at the top. Looking down the ladder, they see destroyed marriages, broken homes, and unhappiness.



benefit.

Webster's New World Dictionary defines success as "A favorable result; the gaining of wealth, fame, etc.; a successful person." Scripture does not give a precise definition, but we know that it is God Who grants success. "As long as he sought the Lord, God gave him success" (2 Chronicles 26:5b). We can climb the ladder of success, but we are to climb it God's way. As God's people, our success in life begins . . .

- when we acknowledge that God created us for His

Life at its Best

- when we understand that He loves us beyond our comprehension.
- when we accept His love.
- when we abide with Him in reverence and obedience.
- when we faithfully serve Him and others.

For life to be at its best, our most important goal has to be intimacy with the Almighty. The Apostle Paul's major pursuit was to develop a closer relationship with Christ. To Paul, success and contentment did not mean a big home, more livestock, or more gold and silver; instead, he sought a deep and intimate fellowship with the Lord. *"I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead"* (Philippians 3:10). Could any form of worldly success be more important than a loving relationship with Jesus? Intimacy with the Lord is a life-long connection that leads us to contentment. This intimacy with Christ grows when we spend ample time in prayer, meditation, reading God's Word, and participating in the Sacraments.

Pursuing intimacy with the Lord does not preclude pursuits of successful careers and other interests. It doesn't mean that we should stop improving ourselves or finding ways to make positive changes in ourselves or our circumstances. God does not want His people to be sluggards (Proverbs 21:25), but to be ambitious and resourceful. *"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. . ."* (Ecclesiastes 9:10). God promises to reward us for our efforts, whether or not our peers recognize them. *"Serve whole-heartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free"* (Ephesians 6:7-8).

The message is clear that success will not happen if we lead idle and unproductive lives. As Christians, we are not to be loafers. Jesus was a carpenter, the Apostle Paul was a tent maker, Matthew was a tax collector, and four of the disciples were fisherman. All had an intimacy with God and found life worthwhile in their labor.

Another component of success is using our God-given gifts and talents as fully as we can. We have the responsibility to develop our talents. Joe Kapp, former NFL football player, defines success this way: "Success is living up to your potential. That's all. Wake up with a smile and go after life.



Don't just show up at the game—or at the office. Live it, enjoy it, taste it, smell it, feel it.”

To develop our God-given talents involves self-discipline and the willingness to control our time, daily schedules, other interests, and side pursuits. Our talents are fully developed when we use them in Godly ways. God gives us opportunities; our growth and success, as well as the welfare of the Body of Christ, depend on how we use them. When we choose to use the talents God gives us for His purposes, God will bless the careers and activities that we pursue.

If we want to be teachers, we can't slide by in our academic and training experiences and still expect to succeed in the classroom. Could we be accomplished musicians without committing countless hours to practice? To achieve excellence involves discipline, focus, desire, and tenacity of purpose. Success often comes at a high price. Likewise, we need to invest time and energy in our relationship with Christ and in our chosen careers. What we achieve depends on our preparation and personal development. There is no secret to success other than a great amount of hard work, perspiration, preparation, and the ability to learn from past mistakes.

On the other hand we can do our best and not receive an “A,” or appreciation, or a raise, and still experience great contentment in knowing that we have done our best for the Lord with the gifts He's given us. One is called to sacrifice his life (Acts 7:59; 12:2), another to offer a “*cup of cold water*” (Matthew 10:42).

The successes we enjoy can come and go, but the attitudes we develop during times of success and failure will stay with us forever. A truly successful life should not be measured by our wealth, power, or fame; but rather by what we are becoming by God's grace. The character, attitude, and spirit we develop in our life-long journeys are more important than money or recognition because these earthly trappings will not last. Character is put to a test when money, business, or career is lost. What we do during adversity and how we respond to it are the real tests of character. How we take life as it comes to us will probably be more significant than what we do in life.



Any success we achieve without God is no success at all. We can be content with our success if we put God first, give our best effort, and love our families and friends. Many are burdened and tormented as they strive toward their fruitless goals. “*Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give*

you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Jesus invites all who are weary and worn out from the frantic chasing after success to rest in Him.

FINDING REST IN THE LORD

Discontentment with ourselves is also a hindrance to our relationship with God. It actually arises from the sin of pride, whereby our self-love keeps us looking inward, comparing ourselves with others, and results in both striving to be better than another and being bitter or resentful that we aren't. Humility teaches us that, in God's sight, we are of utmost importance. Then we can find contentment in being who we are without the drain of attempting to be richer, smarter, and more powerful than our neighbors. By placing importance on what God thinks of us rather than how we impress others, the burden of hypocrisy is lifted as we realize that God accepts us as we are. *“But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:8).



We must follow the example of Paul, who constantly thirsted after God. “. . . I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for Whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ. . .” (Philippians 3:8). David poured out his heart in Psalm 42:1-2: *“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. . .”* A.W. Tozer, wrote, “Complacency is a deadly foe of all spiritual growth . . . I want deliberately to encourage this mighty longing after God.” David, in Psalm 63, spoke of seeking God: *“O God, You are my God, earnestly I seek You; my soul thirsts for You, my body longs for You, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”* Verse 5 proclaims the joy and contentment he found only in God: *“My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise You.”*

ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS

LIFE-ENRICHING

Is content

Has inner peace

LIFE-DESTROYING

Is discontent, restless

Has outward satisfaction

Accepts circumstances	Wants to change circumstances and asks “what if?”
Desires less	Desires more
Looks out for others	Looks out for self
Seeks God	Seeks things
Trusts God	Trusts himself
Has cup half full	Has cup half empty
Develops talents	Squanders abilities
Is disciplined	Meanders
Has long-range focus	Lives for the moment

WRAPPING UP

In the “have it now and enjoy life” society in which we live, we want contentment, but we often settle for self-gratification. Many seem to believe that contentment can be bought in department stores or through travel agencies. Society at large is seeking “things” that provide temporary happiness rather than peace. Pleasure is more important than contentment. If all we care about is ourselves, we will never be satisfied, and we will keep telling ourselves we need and deserve more.

Accumulating more will never be enough, because money and things cannot buy contentment. Being satisfied with less and using what we have in a God-pleasing way make us more content. We can’t become truly contented by acquiring more possessions. Unfortunately, for many of us, the focus tends to be on our present state, while Jesus is concerned about our eternal state.

Of all the gifts God gives us, contentment may be one of the most important, yet least understood and most elusive. To find the source of contentment, we may need to experience discontent in the places many of us search for it. It is contrary to our thinking that less of something, material goods, power or fame, actually results in having more of what we really crave: peace, reliance on God, and being known by Him.

Our relationships with Christ make it possible for us to be content in all circumstances. Without Christ, we will never be satisfied. We are, by nature, people who have insatiable appetites for more things, success, and power. A relationship with Christ quenches our worldly appetites and brings about a redirection of interests to eternal things. We become willing to accept God’s design for our lives and learn to be satisfied with what God gives us. We are

Life at its Best

thankful for what we have rather than dwelling on what we don't have. Without contentment, we can't have "life at its best."

God has made us as we are and has placed us where we are so we can best serve Him. We need to stop looking at the other side of the fence. To live "life at its best" means we don't dwell on what we are not but enjoy the opportunities and advantages open to us.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. How do you define contentment? What made Paul content (Philippians 4:10-13)?
2. What warning is found in 1 Timothy 6:9? With what should you be content (1 Timothy 6:8)?
3. God warns you about money becoming overly important and your tendency to use it to provide for your contentment. What do the following verses tell you?
Hebrews 13:5 Ecclesiastes 5:10
Luke 12:15 Matthew 16:26
Mark 10:23-25 Matthew 6:24
1 Timothy 6:10
4. To make a person happy, do not give him more possessions, but take away his _____. Discontentment is a _____ problem. Contentment is a _____ behavior.
5. What are some possible treasures alluded to in Matthew 6:21?
6. What will God do when you seek an intimate relationship with Him (Psalm 37:4, Matthew 6:33)?
7. What is the meaning of the statement "95 percent of those who have been tested with poverty pass the test, but 95 percent of those who have been tested with prosperity fail"? Is there a correlation between "having more" and "wanting more"?
8. Do any "if onlys" exist in your life that prevent you from being content?
9. What does Scripture say about your ability to produce wealth (Deuteronomy 8:17-18)?
10. Is your thankfulness to God determined by the number of things you possess?
11. Is there anything about which you should not be content?
12. How do you distinguish between needs and wants?
13. Did Solomon find contentment with his riches (Ecclesiastes 2:8-11)?

14. What does Solomon say about those who love money (Ecclesiastes 5:10-11)?
15. How do advertisements try to make you discontent?
16. What is the difference between comfort and contentment?

Notes

¹ Martin Luther, *Book of Concord*, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Fortress Press, 1959) 365.

² Glenn Van Ekeren, *Speaker's Sourcebook II*, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1994) 66.

³ Charles R. Swindoll, *Living Beyond the Daily Grind*, (Dallas, Texas, Word Publishing, 1988) 222-224.

⁴ A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, (Wheaton, Illinois, Tyndale House Publishers) 33.

⁵ William J Bennett, *The Book of Virtues*, (New York, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1993)

⁶ Corrie Ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*, (Old Tappan, New Jersey, Fleming H Revel Company, 1974) 195-200.

⁷ Charles Stanley, *The Glorious Journey* (Nashville, Tennessee, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996) 280-283.

⁸ Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity* (Wheaton, Illinois, Tyndale House Publishers Inc., 1989) 68- 70.

⁹ Woodrow Kroll, *Proverbs, God's Guide for Life's Choices*, (Lincoln, Nebraska, Back to the Bible, 1996) 54.

¹⁰ Charles R. Swindoll, *Strengthening Your Grip* (Waco, Texas, Word Books , 1982) 74.