

## Cultivating Contentment

### Matthew 6: 25 – 33

Just over a year ago, while four of us from this congregation were in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, we had a chance to meet and visit with the children whom we sponsor through Compassion International. For me, it was an opportunity to meet Samuel, the boy I sponsor, his sister, mother, and grandmother. We were to go to their home – however, it wasn't as easy as it might seem. Just days before our visit, their home slid down the side of the mountain, and they lost almost everything they had. They were living in this small 8' x 8' temporary shelter in the middle of the street near where their home used to be. Like the video we just saw about the wildfires in California, it happened in the middle of the night, and they had little time to get what little they had out of the house before it started to break apart. What struck me, though, was that Samuel's mother said to me, "I know that as bad as this is, God has something even greater in mind for us." That was a statement of faith that I have echoed in my heart and mind for these past twelve months.

Why is it that one who lost almost everything she had could express such confidence? It wasn't shock – that had already set in. What I heard, rather, was one who knew what was most important – the safety of her children and mother, a roof (even though temporary) over her head, and neighbors and friends who were reaching out to offer their support and care. And above all, she knew that God had not abandoned her. I wonder why it is that it often takes these kinds of tragic circumstances to make us look at what's most important in life – and why, when life goes back to normal, do we tend to forget so quickly?

The seeds of discontent seem to be sown so deeply in the human soul, even among persons of faith. We affirm with Jesus that our lives do not consist of an abundance of possessions, yet we still wrestle with discontent and our hearts grow restless. Now understand, discontent can be constructive if we are dealing with feeling a need to grow more fully in our knowledge and love of God, in working for justice among all people, in improving our ability to serve God and neighbor. It is a healthy discontent if our desire is to move to a new place of faithfulness.

But there is also a destructive discontent when we feel that we deserve more money, more things, a bigger house or car, more prestige or power. There is a destructive discontent when we go through life believing that we are always getting the short end of the stick. This is discontent that is fueled by anger, envy, and jealousy. Discontent that emerges from these kinds of feelings leads us further away from God's intention for us as people, to our living in a constant state of dissatisfaction and unhappiness. This is the discontent that is, in essence, saying, "I don't like what you've given to me God; I want to trade it in for something better – something that I see as better."

There are two small words that loom large in our sense of discontent – **if only**. How often have people we have known said, "I would be content if only I had a little more money, if only I had a little bit bigger home, or a little more power, or a little more respect, or a *little more time*." The problem is, how is "a little more" defined? It is a constant cycle of gaining more only to want more. Contentment, however, will never be realized as long as we choose to live with a sense of want – whether that be a want for property, money, friends – things tangible and

intangible. For this kind of want breeds worry, and worry breeds fear. The scripture we just heard from Jesus spoke directly to this:

*Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear . . . But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

Jesus understood that the fear we live with can be paralyzing, freezing us in a place of discontent. We worry about life to the point where we are unable to see God's hand in our midst. When we seek God's kingdom and God's way, all else will fall into place. But we have to choose. We have to choose to live with confidence in God, facing down the fears of poverty, fears of being lost and lonely, fears of being unpopular or forgotten. This equips us to cultivate contentment in our lives, and there are steps that we can take that move us closer to this goal:

1. Keep reminding yourself: if could be worse. When we feel particularly vulnerable to life's circumstances, we can always find persons who are in even greater need, in greater pain, in harsher circumstances.
2. Develop a grateful heart – this is kind of the polar opposite to the first step, because it reminds us that all we have is a gift from God, and even in the midst of tragedy and pain, God is still blessing us to be a blessing for others. Gratitude is a choice. I have known many who have been richly blessed but have no gratitude because they see themselves as the center of the universe – they deserve something better.
3. Know where true satisfaction comes from: we find this from the scriptural record –
  - a. Psalm 63: 1, 6: **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.
  - b. Ecclesiastes 2: 10-11: 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 chasing after wind.
  - c. Matthew 22: 37, 39: **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind . . . and love your neighbor as yourself.”**

The apostle Paul, writing to the church at Philippi, understood contentment. Writing from prison in Rome where he is awaiting a verdict on whether he will live or die, he writes:

*“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.”*

Philippians 4: 11b-13

Imagine, being content when you may be facing execution – but Paul knew that contentment did not lie in the things of this world. Contentment was to be found in Jesus Christ – a simple, yet profound, answer. It is in simplicity that we are able to come closer to a goal of contentment.

Five steps that we could put in place ourselves – immediately would be these:

1. Set a goal of reducing “consumption” and live below your means. This could be in financial matters, but it could also be applied to management of time, reducing your utility usage – use your imagination. In simple terms, look at where you are at right now in your use of all your resources and set goals for living with less.
2. Ask yourself – “Do I really need this?” and “Why do I want this?” - Again, while this is easier to do with purchases of new items, we can ask ourselves the same questions about taking on activities and using our time as well. One of the real issues facing almost everyone I know is that time is more valuable than just about any commodity. We need to remember that we have the same 24 hours as everyone else – and priorities are essential for a simplified lifestyle.
3. Use something up before buying something new – sometimes this isn’t possible, but stockpiling only increases clutter and confusion
4. Plan low-cost entertainment that enriches your life. When our kids were young, one of the things they liked doing best was going to a local playground. We can do things with others that cost us nothing or next to nothing, but puts us in relationship with one another – we don’t always have to go out or spend money to enjoy life.
5. Ask yourself – are there major changes that would simplify my life? We sometimes think that we are stuck where we are, no matter what the burden. We come to idolize homes, cars, jobs – you name it. Yet, I have met people who have found their lives simplified because they decided that it was time to move jobs out of the city – even if it meant a little less money – because of the wear and tear on their lives and their relationships. I give these persons great credit for taking such courageous moves – something that isn’t always possible. I have met others who found great joy in deciding that trying to keep up the home they were currently in was too much, especially when their family circumstances had changed. It isn’t always possible to make such changes – but it is beneficial to ask the question.

At the heart of all of these steps is self control – we need to realize that God has given us the gift of a brain. We are resourceful, we are able to say no when it is beneficial. If that’s difficult to do yourself, we need to find people to journey with us and ask these kinds of questions of us: What are the long term consequences of this decision? Is there a higher purpose or better outcome if I used this resource in a different way? Does this honor God?

With questions such as these, we will be on the journey to finding contentment in life – an essential step if we are to find joy through simplicity and generosity. So where will you live your life - what tent will you dwell in? Contentment or Discontent – it is a choice that we actually can make – and the decision we make will make all the difference in the world. For by choosing contentment – we are looking to God as our Source of all that we have, and live with thanksgiving for all that we have.

Prayer:

Lord, we pray that you would heal of us the Restless Heart Syndrome. We are truly sorry for the times that we have received your gifts but have been dissatisfied – dissatisfied with the person you have entrusted into our care, dissatisfied with our children or our parents, dissatisfied with our homes, our healthcare or our jobs. Forgive us when we have offended you by our discontent, being content with things as they are when you have called us to something greater. Help us to have a hunger within us and a deep longing to pursue righteousness and holiness and justice and love, to long for you and for your will for our lives. Help us to simplify our lives, to get off the treadmill, and to find in you our peace. We ask these things in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.