

## FINDING CONTENTMENT IN AN AGE OF DISCONTENT

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Phil. 4:12-13 *"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 want.  
I can do everything through him who gives me strength."*

### INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, Polly and I had a real eye-opening experience. We did what was called a vacation exchange with a pastor and family in England. We traded homes, cars, pets, and churches for a month— though our church duties were simply preaching a couple of Sundays since *we were on vacation*. Now, England is a nation we'd always thought of as having a similar standard of living as we have in America. We were in for a shock. Their home was situated in a newer part of Middlesbrough, I'd guess built in the late 1960's or 70's and looked typical of the other houses in the development. The kitchen was the first shocker. The refrigerator was like the kind kids get for their college dorms, like the little one we have in the church office. There were hardly any cupboards. Then, as we hauled our suitcases upstairs to the bedrooms, the next shock. There were no closets in the bedrooms. Each had a free-standing wooden wardrobe about three feet in width. The master bedroom had two of these wardrobes. I believe the house had about 900 square feet which included the pastor's study. The washer and dryer were out in the single-car garage which was detached from the house, about twenty feet away. There was no way their small car could fit in the garage. All their dishes were mismatched, many of the cups cracked. We noticed there were four new bath towels for us (Kris and Denise joined us for half the time we were there). The rest of the towels were what we'd consider rags. It was obvious they'd bought new towels for us.

Now our house was modest by American standards, a 1400 square foot ranch with absolutely nothing fancy about it. But we had real closets, all stuffed with clothes and other things, a spacious kitchen in comparison, and a full sized refrigerator as well as a big freezer. We had two vehicles, they had one. And on and on the comparisons could go. We had far more luxury in our lives than we'd imagined. Living there that month helped us appreciate how easy our lives are here, how blessed we are. The couple we exchanged with both worked— he a full-time pastor and she a teacher in their schools, and they had a teenaged son.

Of course, as we had opportunity to get in the homes of others in the church, we'd look around a bit to see if the home we were in was typical, and it was. It was rare to find a regular sized refrigerator! We even had dinner at the home of a psychiatrist. While the furniture and decor was a step up, the house was still quite small and not that much nicer than where we were staying. A man who taught in the secondary schools expressed amazement that we had parking problems at our high schools with so many of the teens driving their cars to school. He didn't even own a car himself.

We came back with a new consciousness of how blessed we *really are* in terms of what we have. In fact, we felt embarrassed at all our stuff. Polly wasn't sure she could ever buy anything again beyond the necessities. (That hasn't held, but our perspective *is* different). It did cause us to realize how unaware we were of how much we are blessed with. And certainly the people in England we saw were not living poorly. They had enough.

That is an illustration of our current American situation. We live in a consumer oriented culture constantly telling us what we need more of. We compare ourselves to one another, and we are all on the same merry-go-round. Our consuming has lost touch with reality. We forget how to savor and enjoy what we have. Our constant wanting of more dissipates all contentment and gratitude.

This morning, for this season of thanksgiving, I want us to pause and reflect on our blessings. It is interesting Thanksgiving Day more-or-less marks the starting line for the greatest shopping, consumerism weeks of the year climaxing in Christmas. While the mantra of capitalism is that in the getting this or that we will find happiness, it is all an illusion. It leaves us bored, depressed, and yearning for something more.

First, I want us to take an objective look at how having more does not bring happiness and contentment. Then, we'll look at practical steps in how we can find the contentment our texts speak of.

### **INCREDIBLY BLESSED**

I recently read a book by Gregg Easterbrook called, THE PROGRESS PARADOX: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse. As the title suggests, the better things become for us, the less happiness people enjoy. Most Americans enjoy a higher standard of living than 99.4% of the 80 billion human beings who've ever lived. Yet, we're not content. Our lives are characterized by "excess at every turn." We are surrounded by so much food that obesity has become a national crisis. Consider just a few facts Easterbrook cites:

- § At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the average American life-span was 41 and now it is 77. In 1928, a government study forecast that the natural life-span would ultimately rise to 65. When the Social Security system was enacted in 1935, that is the estimate used in setting the federal retirement age at 65. Most people would die before collecting benefits, or within a year or two of retirement. No wonder Social Security is in trouble!
- § Fully 13% of American home purchases were of second homes in 2000. A century ago, it was only the minuscule super-elite who could contemplate a vacation home.
- § Inflation-adjusted per-capita American income has more than doubled since 1960.
- § Today, a third of American families own three cars or more. We are just shy of one automobile per licensed driver and are on track to soon having more cars than licensed drivers.
- § Since 1950, the square footage of our homes has more than doubled. Prior to World War II, the average home had one room for every two people; today there are two rooms per person.
- § 78% of our homes have air conditioning verses virtually 0% for our grandparents.

§ Today, the typical American eats four restaurant meals per week. For our parent's generation, one restaurant meal per month was norm, if that. In 1955, 25% of our food dollars were spent outside the home; today, 46% are spent in restaurants.

With all the new alarms about our environment being polluted, we can lose perspective that things are getting better there as well.

§ In the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, city air in the U.S. was thick with choking smoke from unrestricted coal burning.

§ In large cities like New York and Philadelphia, pigs roamed the streets eating garbage that was simply chucked out the windows onto the streets.

§ There were three million horses drawing carts within our large American cities. Each horse produces about 25# of manure a day. Do the math, and it isn't pretty. I believe I've read elsewhere that there were about 800,000 of those horses in New York City. That's 20 million pounds of manure daily deposited on the streets!

§ And, did you realize that any make or model of new car emits less than 2% as much pollution per mile as a 1970 model?

By almost any measure, living conditions are vastly improving. But Easterbrook's point is, we don't recognize it. In a 1996 poll, 52% Americans felt we were worse off than when their parents were growing up. The percentage of Americans who characterize themselves as "happy" hasn't changed since the 1950's. And the percentage describing themselves as "very happy" is down and continues to decline. Meanwhile, the number of Americans experiencing debilitating depression continues to rise.

Of course, as Christians, we realize happiness and contentment are not tied to circumstances or to our prosperity. But we are immersed in a society characterized by discontent, and driven to getting the next thing with the idea that it will contribute to our contentment. Fostering discontent is one of the driving mechanisms of our consumerism. Our advertising is constantly holding up for us what more we could have— something newer, nicer, better. Envy in our human hearts comes into play as we look around and see someone else with more. We have totally lost the distinction between needs and wants. Syndicated newspaper columnist George Will has written, a need "is defined, in contemporary America, as a 48-hour-old-want."

Just how contented are you? Is there anyone here who doesn't think they should be more grateful for our good lives? Let's consider some steps we can take.

## **LEARNING CONTENTMENT**

Listen to Paul's words again in our text:

*"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 want.*

*I can do everything through him who gives me strength." (Phil 4:12-13)*

He's "learned the secret." Remember, Paul is writing from prison. "Learned" is an important word here. It is developed out of a walk with Christ. It denotes a process more than an insight. It involves training, as in learning to drive a car.

Paul affirms this because he is centered in Christ and, *"I can do everything through him who gives me strength (19)."* He belongs to Christ and lives in Christ's strength— whether easy or hard; whether good or bad. He is rooted in a healthy sense of who he is in Christ.

A wise person said: "Until you make peace with who you are, you'll never be content with what you have." Isn't that often what's wrong? One of our major problems is, we tend to define our worth or significance by what we have or how good our circumstances are. There is even that revealing sentence we sometimes use when asking about a person's wealth, "How much is he worth?" Don't we tend to see a wealthy person as more valuable than a homeless family living out of their car? And, then out of our low sense of self-worth, we engage in comparisons with others to bolster ourselves. Don't we often compare possessions, marriages, and how are children are doing? If I'm better off than my neighbors, I feel better. If not, I may be jealous or envious of what they have.

So, the **first secret** of contentment is to **know who we are in Christ**. Our worth is so great, He died for us and he has a wonderful eternity planned for us and promises to care for us each day of our lives. If he accepts you and loves you, the rest is just fluff. Circumstances are not what define us. We can be content because we are Christ's. We can skip all one-upmanship and competitiveness, knowing His strength is sufficient. Heb. 13:4-5 summarizes it well:

*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."*

When we have that promise of God's presence, what else can we need to be content?

Then, the **second** thing we must learn is to **train ourselves** in gratitude and thanksgiving. Paul's letter to the Philippians is filled with rejoicing. 15% of the verses use "joy" or "rejoice." And he's just launched this finale to this letter with *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, rejoice!* (4). This is in the imperative, a command. God never commands us to do what we can't do. So, we can choose our attitude and that attitude can be gratitude to God in all things at all times.

Psychology has verified again and again, that people who approach life with a grateful attitude, counting their blessings rather than inventorying their complaints tend to be healthier and happier than others. In one experiment with college students, one group kept a "gratitude journal," a weekly record of things they were grateful for. These students were significantly happier than the control group who kept no journal. Maybe a "gratitude journal" would be a good idea for all of us. Even the Roman orator, Cicero observed, "Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others." And, Immanuel Kant described ingratitude as "the essence of vileness."

Gratitude is really putting our faith in God into practice. We're affirming His ability to take care of us. We're accepting what He brings our way whether plenty or little as what He sees is best for us. It is a wonderful corrective to our grasping after the next thing or the consumer messages designed to breed discontent in our hearts. Instead, we can stand firm, thanking God for your current car and affirming, I will get a new car (or another car) when it fits with God's will for me. We march to a different drummer.

Dr. Craig Barnes, a Presbyterian pastor, writes in his book, Sacred Thirst, "I have decided that gratitude is about the best measure of spirituality." When I first read that, I highlighted it, thinking, that's good and filed it under my notes on gratitude. But, as I worked on this sermon and began pondering that sentence, thinking maybe he's overstating it a bit. Is gratitude the best measure of our spiritual lives? How would you like your Christian walk evaluated on the basis of how much gratitude you reflect? Yet, the more I think about it, I believe Craig is onto something. Here's a bit more of what he says about it, setting the quote in more of a context.

*I have decided that gratitude is about the best measure of spirituality. It is not possible to have truly heard God's Word proclaiming that we are new creations, or to have communed with God as beloved sons and daughters, and not be overwhelmed with gratitude.*

*This doesn't erase the hurts accumulated in life, but it does prevent us from allowing those hurts to take over our identity. That's because the closer we draw to a gracious God, the less interest we have in staying hurt....*

*The only way to make it to grateful living is to realize that it's just not about you. That isn't meant to demean you, but to free you. It frees you from allowing life's disappointments and hurts to determine your identity. Best of all, it frees you to receive the creativity of God's grace that can be found even in the hurt.*

*It isn't about you.*

*It is always about God.*

Yes, I think in gratitude we have a measure of how well the Gospel has penetrated our living. It's where the rubber meets the road. Thanksgiving is how we affirm God is in control and we're trusting Him. Isn't that what Paul is proclaiming as he writes from prison, not complaining but rejoicing in the Lord? When we complain, aren't we saying life should suit us? Isn't it totally self-centered- "I don't like this or that?"

## **CONCLUSION**

Immersed in our culture, Thanksgiving Day is a crucial reminder to take our eyes off our consuming, quit our whining and complaining, and train our hearts to be truly grateful in all things at all times because God is in control and He loves us. Remember, it is something to be learned. I think we will always need to keep working at it in our materialistic times.

Of course, Thanksgiving Day is not sufficient. Every week as we gather to worship it is training

in gratitude. Daily begin your day with praise and worship. I try to always begin with a Psalm, as countless believers through the centuries have, to put my soul in tune for the day.