

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11; Philippians 4:10-13  
 “Cultivating Contentment”

**Introduction:** One of the great conflicts in marriage is how we spend our money and how we save our money. It’s also a great conflict for the family of God! Last week we learned six financial planning principles that allow us to budget our money, to save in ways that are important to our family, and use our resources to serve the Kingdom of God.

Today we’re going to hear how we can cultivate contentment in our interior life.

**Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for God has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” So we can say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.”** (Hebrews 13:5-6)

**Jesus 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)

Nearly every year the country witnesses a number of devastating natural disasters, not unlike the three killer hurricanes in the southern states and wild fires in California. There are times when victims have such little time to leave their home. Because of shifting winds, a threatening fire is suddenly surrounding a neighborhood and people have just minutes to grab a few items. What would you grab to take? What possessions are most important?

Most everyone grabs their wallets and purses! Then there are computers and I-pads, old photo albums and jewelry. Sentimental items for the kids: like a blankie or a pillow. And the pets! Some of you guys are going to get your golf clubs or a family heirloom.

Natural disasters remind us that everything in this world is temporary. That’s why we can say with Jesus, “Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15).

Yet the culture shouts something different: It’s the things that you buy, the things that you purchase that bring you happiness! The result creates a conflict. Despite the fact that we say we believe Jesus’ words, we still find ourselves devoting a lot of time and a lot of effort acquiring more stuff. We *say* that our lives do not consist in the abundance of our possessions, but we may *live* as if our possessions mean everything.

## **I. Restless Heart Syndrome – Struggling With Discontent**

Maybe you’ve heard of restless leg syndrome (RLS), a condition in which one has twitches and contractions in the legs. Restless Heart Syndrome (RHS) works in a similar way. Its primary symptom is *discontent*. We find that we can be agitated, never satisfied with what we’ve collected. The moment we acquire something, we may scarcely take time to enjoy it before we want something else.

And so we try to fill that blurred sense of discontentment with so much other stuff – when the real need inside can only be satisfied by that for which it cries! St Augustine said, “Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee!”

### **A. When 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. Remember, you are created in the image of God! You are meant to yearn for God, to cultivate a deeper prayer life, to pursue justice and holiness with increasing passion, to love others more, and to grow in grace and character and wisdom with each passing day.

### **B. When Discontentment Destroys**

The problem is that those things we believe will bring contentment are the very things that cause discontent! For example, we find ourselves dissatisfied with “stuff,” with our jobs, or with relationships.

We try to replace that God-given desire for Him with something or someone else!

Researchers are finding that we have a system built into the fabric of our DNA that explains the longing every one of us has for meaning and purpose outside of ourselves – a longing that often comes alive in times of crisis.

New research described in the neurobiological and psychological journals is now suggesting that we have a “seeking system” that is experienced as restlessness, a longing, or a “thirsting for God,” and is both a conscious and an unconscious process that has roots in early development, leading to a relationship with a Transcendent One.<sup>1</sup>

## **II. Four Keys to Cultivating Contentment**

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

### Philippians 4:10-13

<sup>10</sup>How I praise the Lord that you are concerned about me again. I know you have always been concerned for me, but you didn't have the chance to help me. <sup>11</sup>Not that I was ever in need, for I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. <sup>12</sup>I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. <sup>13</sup>For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.

Like Paul, we can learn to be content in whatever circumstances we may find ourselves. So let's look at four keys to cultivating contentment:

### **A. Repeating These Four Words: “It Could Be Worse”**

John Ortberg, pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in California, says there are four words we should say whenever we find ourselves discontent with something or someone: “It could be worse.” This is basically the practice of looking on the bright side or finding the silver lining. I've heard many of our friends in the hospital say “It could be worse” with their own tragic circumstances, but they knew someone else who was in worse condition.

“It could be worse” recognizes that no matter what we might not like about someone or some circumstance in our life, we can always find something good to focus on if we will choose to do so.

### **B. The second principle for contentment: Ask This One Question: “For How Long Will This Make Me Happy?”**

So 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 is a moment of satisfaction, the pride of

ownership when we make the purchase, but the item may not bring satisfaction over the long-haul. Many of the things we buy are simply not worth the expense. **How Long Will This Make Me Happy?**

**C. The third principle: Develop a Grateful Heart**

Gratitude is a fundamental practice if we are to be content. The Apostle Paul said that we are to “give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

Has the pace of life robbed you from enjoying the goodness of God? Are the pressures of your daily grind stealing His eternal power from your soul? Has pain left you feeling that His divine nature could never fill your hurting heart?

If so – slow down! Soak in the goodness of God for a few moments. Enjoy His handiwork. A grateful heart recognizes that there are gifts of grace and love all around you. And a grateful heart actually helps to change your brain in a positive way!

**D. Our fourth principle answers the question: Where Does Your Soul Find True Satisfaction?**

The world answers this question by telling us that we find satisfaction when life is easy, with luxury, comfort, and money. The Bible, however, answers the question quite differently. From Genesis to Revelation, it tells us that we find our satisfaction through a relationship with God alone.

- From Psalm 42: “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God!”
- We heard earlier from Solomon: “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)

**III. In addition to cultivating contentment in our lives, we need to cultivate simplicity. Contentment and simplicity go hand in hand. Let’s look at the Five Steps for Simplifying Our Lives**

**A. Set a Goal for 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 top-of-the-line product. When buying a car, aim to improve fuel economy over your existing car by at least 10 percent. Think about reducing your utilities by 10 percent by setting the thermostat back a couple of degrees when you’re away during the day and asleep at night. You will find other ways to reduce your consumption and live below your income. (Get the most in your grocery shopping through couponing.) Do some research and share ideas with others.

**B. Before Making a Purchase, Ask Yourself, *Do I Really Need This?* or, *Why Do I Want This?* When will I use it?**

These questions will help you figure out the true motivation of your purchase. Is it a need, is it a self-esteem issue, or something else? You may find yourself questioning your motive and decide that your reason for purchasing something isn’t that good! Simplify your life!

**C. Use Something Up Before Buying Something New.**

Take good care of the things you buy and use them until they are 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.

It used to be a family preference to trade in the car once you had 35,000 or 60,000 miles on it. When it comes to purchasing a car, buy the car you want and drive it until the wheels fall off! Pay it off in a reasonable time, and then save the money, the same amount you paid monthly, for the down payment on your next car. You'll save money!

**D. Plan Low-cost Entertainment That Enriches.**

When it comes to choosing entertainment for your family or friends, plan things that are simple and cheap. You'll be amazed at how much pleasure you get from a picnic at the park!

**E. Ask Yourself, *Are There Major Changes I Can Make That Would Allow Me to Simplify My Life?***

Consider selling a car and buying one that's used that you can pay for in full, or 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 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, it may be time to simplify your lives in some major ways.

[Story from Sharon Ramsey, wife of finance guru, Dave Ramsey] "We all love stuff – men, women, and children, but probably women more so! Let's face it: women love to shop.

"We had a garage sale last year, and I thought to myself, why do we have so much stuff? Do we really need all of this? If so, then why am I trying to sell it all? Well, I believe the answer to those questions is because at one time we thought we needed it.

"I have to admit it was very hard for me to be content with what I had. Fifty more times I would say, "If I could only have..." And Dave's answer would always be, "Then you'd want more." It's always a cycle – I want, I want, I want. I hear it every time we go to a store with the children, and I'm sure you have too.

"Do you recognize discontent in your life? I am realizing now that collecting more isn't really one of our values. I have so much compared to so many others. Each day I look at my husband, two daughters, and a son. I know that I am blessed. I'm thankful for the house I have, the car I drive, and the food I eat. At the end of each day I realize again that I'm content and blessed."

**IV. The Power of Self-Control**

Adam Hamilton, one of our United Methodist ministers in Kansas City, has something to say to us about the power of self-control. Self-control is like the fortress around the heart that protects you from yourself, from 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 – or choosing not to act upon the impulse for instant gratification ...because of the higher goal and greater gratification later. Self-control is about forgoing instant gratification by stopping to think about the answers to three questions:

- "What are the long-term consequences of this purchase, 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?"

**V. Conclusion: In Which Tent Will You Live?**

Will you live in *discon-tent* or *con-tent-ment*?

Only you determine which “tent” will be yours. You choose, in large part, by deciding what life is about. If you confirm that “life does not consist in the abundance of your possessions,” (Luke 12:15) then you are choosing contentment. Choosing contentment means we trust in God as our Provider and Savior, as One who has a greater place for us in heaven, giving thanks for what we have; choosing faith.

PRAYER: Lord, we pray that You might cure us of our restlessness with a right perspective on money and possessions – and change our hearts each day so that we find ways to live simpler lives. Forgive us for the times we’ve offended You by our discontent. Forgive us for being content with the things in which we were not supposed to be content. Help us have a hunger and a deep longing to pursue righteousness and holiness, justice and love, to long for You and for Your will for our lives. Help us in this, that we might find in You our peace. We ask these mercies in Your holy name; amen.

1. “*God Attachment*” by Dr. Tim Clinton and Dr. Joshua Straub; Howard Books; 2010; pg. 43