

The Price of Godly Contentment

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But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content. But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.? {1Ti 6:6-10}

How I would love to tell you that I have mastered godly contentment! Truth is that, like many of you, I often struggle with discontentment. I like to pacify myself that my discontentment is more honorable than that of others, but this passage will not let me off the hook so easily. I long for sufficient fiscal security to walk away from secular work and devote my remaining energy and time to my ministry. I long to see the church that I serve more engaged and committed to its worship and godly evangelism. I long for improvement in my personal discipleship. I long to preach more consistently with power that truly impacts my hearers so as to change their lives, to evoke repentance, faith, and a steady course of good works in the spirit of glorifying God. All of these things and others often interrupt my contentment.

Paul hardly encourages passive resignation to life, regardless of the circumstances, in this lesson. His life doesn't mirror that philosophy. He has just completed a disturbing lesson on servants accepting their role and using it to honor God rather than gain personal improvement, a point that confronts each of us in our secure, private worlds. How easily we can regret and "wish" our lives away for what isn't, all the while ignoring many blessings that steadily come our way. Paul rebukes me; frankly I hope he also rebukes you in this lesson. Only when we come to terms with his teaching will we confront the issues in our lives, and in our reactions to life, that disturb godly contentment and promote deeper faith in God.

I have frequently observed sincere believers who had few major problems with godliness, but they have major problems with contentment. Do we realize how contradictory our witness is when we demonstrate discontented godliness? How many people will we gain to the faith by such a glaring contradiction in our own life?

We occasionally chuckle at the bumper sticker-typically pasted to the rear bumper of a travel trailer or motor home-"We are spending our children's inheritance." Paul joins Solomon in Ecclesiastes, reminding us that life is full of contradictions, but that it is also full of blessings that God has sent our way for our joy and contentment. For years I viewed Ecclesiastes as the frustrated musings of a tired old man who forsook his faith and reflected on a life lived far below the wisdom that God granted him for others. I have recently had to revise my thinking about this disturbing, probing Old Testament letter. Solomon may well reflect the perspective of a realist in Ecclesiastes, but he certainly does not reflect the attitude of a cynic. Yes, life is futile ("Vain" or "vanity" is the word that repeatedly occurs in our KJV), life is full of frustrations. However, life is also full of blessings that come from God, all intended by their Giver to give us joy in this life. God is sovereign. He alone holds the keys to life, and He has not surrendered them to anyone, not even to you or me. Despite the futility and frustration of life, there is one thing that transcends all others. This alone gives meaning to the futility and frustrations that we experience in life. God is both sovereign and good, two attributes that He will not compromise. Given this truth about God's character, we have one over-arching obligation, to "fear God and keep his commandments."

Paul joins Solomon in our passage. We came into this world without a stitch of clothing on our backs or a penny in the bank. The moment our heart beats its last we shall be in precisely that same position

again as we exit this life. Therefore, both Paul and Solomon urge us to focus our present life on present blessings that incorporate eternity and God, and with that focus to be content.

A thought strikes me about Paul's comment in this lesson. We typically view contentment as controlled by other people and by life's circumstances-by events. If all the right events come our way, and if all the people who are important in our life do what we want, we will be content. We make contentment a matter of sentiment, of emotion, and put its power under the control of other people and circumstances that we-in the main-cannot control. Paul contradicts our thinking on both counts. For Paul-and the Holy Spirit directed these words-contentment is a decision of our will. We choose to be content. We decide to be content, but we do not rely on other people or circumstances to give us contentment. As long as we rely on events and people to give us contentment, we reveal that we refuse to accept contentment with food and clothing. We want more. When we accept God's goodness in our lives and make a conscious decision to be content with God and with life, we will gain that elusive goal.

Paul reflects supernatural insight into our fallen humanity with the notation that an inordinate focus on money-whether you have it and don't use it wisely, or you don't have it and envy those who do-"But they that will be rich..." His point confronts our wills, not our balance sheet. What are we "willing" to pursue above all else? Many years ago I worked with a young man who was attending a local church school/seminary, preparing for the ministry. One day during our coffee break, the question came up regarding what anyone of us would be willing to do for enough money. You can imagine the various issues that came up in this dialogue. How much money would motivate you to do something that you know to be wrong? Eventually the question of murder and other crimes became the talking point. This young man surprised us all with his comment that for enough money he'd consider murder. I raised the question that he was a seminary student, preparing for ministry. Didn't he understand the contradiction between his profession and his comment? He was almost cavalier in his response. For him money was more important than moral or ethical decisions. I seriously doubt, if he ever graduated and became a pastor, that any of us who participated in that conversation would have been especially interested in attending his church and hearing him preach. Is it any wonder?

I have seen a few wealthy people who did not have the self-control or good judgment to know how to use their wealth. It was not difficult to see how they "pierced themselves through with many sorrows." Divorce, lost friendships-less life stability than the churning waves of the ocean that beat constantly on the shoreline. I find it somewhat disconcerting that I have seen far more people who did not possess surplus money, but tried to make people think they did, falling hopelessly into deep debt and financial ruin. Or others with this faulty emphasis on money barely controlled their envy toward others who appeared to have more than they. Can we understand that the person who does not have money, but who puts too much emphasis on it, is no less in danger of piercing themselves through with sorrows than the wealthy person who cannot control his appetite? This term that Paul uses, piercing themselves through with many sorrows, almost sounds like a self-inflicted torture chamber, doesn't it? Perhaps that is his point. The grief of such people is self-inflicted, and it inevitably will lead them to self-torture.

We should not need to underscore that it is not money, but the inordinate emphasis on or "love" of money that creates the problem for the believer. The word translated "love" here means friendship with money. Without consciously intending to do so, these people, be they rich or poor, who love money as their dear friend, look to money for the security that they can only find in God. If you were to ask them if they trust money instead of God, you'd no doubt get a highly emotional, offended denial.

This lesson disrupts our lives and nudges us to revolutionary changes in the way we live. We cannot maintain our comfortable "status quo" and live up to Paul's exhortation. If God were to examine our checkbook at the end of any particular month, do you suppose that He might make recommendations for change in the way we use our resources? He would require us to live within our means, not plunge headlong into debt. He would no doubt nudge us to invest far more than we do in spiritual activities.

Do we understand that He is omniscient, all-knowing? He knows every line in our checkbook. He has already audited our records and given us His report. We find it in Scripture. Does our checkbook reflect our words and our claims of faith? What changes must we make to bring our faith and our checkbook into harmony? What might such a change do to our contentment?

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