

1 Sermon, October 9, 2011

Texts: Hebrews 13:5-6, Philippians 4:10-13, Luke 12:15

Title: "Enough: Cultivating Contentment"

Have you ever thought much about what it means to be content?

My Grandpa knew me contentment. He lived life at a patient pace. When he and my grandma were out driving, she would get frustrated if they were stuck on a side street at a stop sign. He simply said: "Sooner or later, they'll be an opening"

His sister-in-law, my great-aunt Isabel, was *not* a contented soul. When she was out for a drive and she was on the main street, she would make a face at other drivers and point at them as a warning for them not to pull out in front of her.

I'd much rather be like my grandpa than my great aunt.

But have you ever thought that sometimes God *wants* us to be discontent?

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. We are meant to yearn to know God more, to cultivate a deeper prayer life, to pursue justice and holiness with increasing fervor, to love others more, and to grow in grace and character and wisdom with each passing day.

We are meant to be discontented with our spiritual lives, so that we can grow in grace.

The problem is that we get confused, and we start to be discontented with material things, rather than spiritual things.

For example, we find ourselves discontented with our stuff, our jobs, our churches, our children, and our spouses. We can look at our spouse or child and wish they were different.

And I think God must be sad when we do, because we are rejecting one of the creatures God made.

When we get discontented with material things, we need to hear Jesus say to us:

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"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*)

To put it simply, God wants us to be discontented with who we are. God does *not* want us to be discontented with what we have.

My grandmother knew contentment about the things she had. She lived simply. For her, food was for sharing. She could make wonderful meals out of the simplest ingredients. Ever had home-made egg noodles? All they're made of is flour, salt and eggs. But they make chicken soup taste like it was made in heaven.

Food can be simple and still good.

One of the cookies she made at Christmas was called Fatigman, which means "Poor man's cookies." Cheap, but tasty.

The Apostle Paul is an excellent example of contentment. In his letter to the Philippians, he wrote of the "secret" to his contentment (Philippians 4:11-12). Paul wrote: "I can do all things in Christ, who strengthens me." Like Paul, we can learn to be content in whatever circumstances we may find ourselves.

We can be more content if we learn to say, "It Could Be Worse." I look in the mirror and say, "It could be worse." I reflect on the struggles other people go through, and I say, "It could be worse." We can always find something good to focus on.

We can be more content if we ask about a purchase or an experience: "For How Long Will This Make Me Happy?" Sometimes the satisfaction is very short-lived.

The writer of Ecclesiastes was tempted to overspend, thinking stuff would make him happy. He wrote in Ecclesiastes 2:

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*)

We can be more content if we ask, "Where does my soul find True Satisfaction?"

The world answers this question by telling us that we find satisfaction in ease and luxury and comfort and money. The Bible, however, answers the question very differently. From Genesis to Revelation, it tells us that we find our satisfaction in God alone. Psalm 63 states:

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"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." (Psalm 63:1, 6)

Jesus said the two most important things we must do are to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," and to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37, 39). If we keep our focus on these two things, we will find satisfaction for our souls and lasting contentment.

Saint Augustine echoes the Bible in poetry:

"Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless
until they find their rest in thee." (Saint Augustine)

Saying "It could be worse," and asking "How long with this make me happy?" and asking "Where does my soul find true satisfaction can help us be more content.

We also become more content as we simplify our lives.

Simplifying our lives means making them less complicated. Less stuff to worry about, fewer deadlines to meet, more time to enjoy the simple things. How many of you enjoyed the absolutely astounding fall color when the sun shone through the leaves last week? It's hard to enjoy simple things like that when you're rushing around.

All of us know how to simplify our lives. We purchase fewer things, and make fewer things work better. Before buying something, we ask ourselves, "Do I really need this?" Simplifying means reducing, reusing and recycling. It means buying things that last, and lasting with them.

Simplifying means having fewer distractions from what's really important. As the book of Hebrews says:

Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he 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)

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Simplifying your life requires the practice of self-control. Solomon wrote, "Like a city whose walls are broken down / is a [person] who lacks self-control" (Proverbs 25:28, NIV). When a city's walls are broken through, the enemy can march right in and destroy it. There is no longer any protection.

Likewise, self-control is a wall around your heart and life that protects you from yourself, from temptation, and from 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 and choosing not to act upon the opportunity for instant gratification for some higher cause or greater gratification later.

Here's a question:

If you had to suddenly leave your house because a forest fire was raging nearby and would consume your house in a few minutes, what would you take from the house?

Have you got that idea in your mind? Imagine the most important thing that you would take from your home.

Now, raise your hand if the item was something that had been handed down to you in the family. You may put your hands down.

Now, raise your hand if it was something of beauty that has very little practical value. You may put your hands down.

Now, raise your hand if the item was something connected to an organization or group of people that you value. You may put your hands down.

Now, raise your hand if it was something like picture albums or something else that represents or portrays people you know and love. You may put your hands down.

If you raised your hand, the item that you were thinking of had a meaning greater than the thing itself. You were actually taking something that represents your *values* out of the house.

Now, can you think of things that are put away somewhere that, if they burned up in a fire, it really wouldn't matter? Are there things in your house that aren't of any practical value, and really don't speak of your values?

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Those are the things that, if you want to simplify, you can get rid of. That's the stuff that's just stuff.

Being contented or not contented has a lot to do with your relationship with stuff. Do you own the stuff? Or does the stuff own you?

Being contented also has to do with our acceptance of other people, and our reliance upon God instead of just ourselves. It really is about relationships.

I end by asking you which tent you want to live in. Will you live in discon-**tent** or con-**tent**-ment?

When you live in the discon "tent," other people look a lot like things, like barriers or ladders to success, like burdens or maybe even objects of beauty. But in the discon "tent," you are really essentially alone, because you don't understand the others and they don't understand you.

When you live in the con "tent" ment tent, it's a lot different. People look like people, and things look like things. And the things are really tiny and unimportant next to the people. There is also room in the con "tent" ment tent for God's creation to come in. Love can be shared with animals who cannot speak for themselves, and you can care for the earth, because you know it is teeming with all sorts of life.

Choose your tent carefully.