

Contentment

[Philippians 4:11](#)



We live in an utterly discontent culture. This came home to me so clearly when we were at Disney World. That's right, Disney World. If there is any place on the planet where kids should be happy, content, and filled with joy, it would be Disney World. But as we walked around the park, I saw so many miserable kids. They were crying, and whining, "*Why can't I have this, why can't we ride that?*" I was amazed at the discontentment that I saw at Disney World. We are a discontent culture. We are discontent with what we have; we are discontent with what we look like; with whom we are married to; with our vocation; with our church; and with our circumstances. Is this how it's supposed to be? If not, how can we learn to be content?



The Bible has much to say about the subject of contentment. Let me give you just a few examples. Notice what John the Baptizer said to these soldiers:

And some soldiers were questioning him, saying, "And what about us, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages." (Luke 3:14 NASB)

But godliness actually is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment. 7 For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. 8 And if we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. (1 Timothy 6:6-8 NASB)

Are there any of us who lack food and shelter? If not, we all should be content. But are we? Are we content with a place to live and food to eat? Not hardly!

Let your character be free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, "I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU," (Hebrews 13:5 NASB)

The Bible not only identifies contentment as a virtue, but speaks of contentment as a command. To be content is one of the most strongly worded exhortations in Scripture. God thought it so important that He included a prohibition against it along with the more abhorrent sins of murder, stealing, and adultery:

"You shall not murder."¹⁴ "You shall not commit adultery."¹⁵ "You shall not steal."¹⁶ "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."¹⁷ "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor."¹⁸ (Exodus 20:13-17 NASB)

We may be envious of another person's house, or their wife, but livestock is not a real issue with most people, and we don't own indentured servants anymore. However, the last clause—"*or anything that belongs to your neighbor*"—probably gets us all.

The opposite of coveting is contentment. If you're content with what you have, you won't covet what your neighbor has. We are commanded to be content with what we have: food, clothes, and wages. We're to be content because God is with us and will never leave us. Do you comprehend that? God is with us! He dwells with us. Think about that for a while.

I think it would be safe to say that most people never experience contentment. Most Christians don't know contentment. We are a very discontent generation, and it seems the more we have, the less content we are. We are commanded to be content, but most of us don't experience this, and I'm afraid we don't see the seriousness of it.

Discontentment is questioning the goodness of God. The very first temptation in the history of mankind was the temptation to be discontent. God gave Adam and Eve everything a human being could imagine. They had access to everything in the garden except one tree. Satan used that tree to sow the seed of discontentment in Eve's heart, which caused her to question the goodness of God. Discontentment is a serious sin that has permeated our culture. It's hard to find a truly content person.

Have you ever wondered what it takes to experience contentment in life? Most people think, "If I just had enough money, I would be content." But the fact is, most wealthy people aren't content. Rockefeller, who had a net worth of about 100 million dollars, was asked how much wealth does it take to be happy. His answer was simple: "Another million dollars."

That's human nature. Money never brings contentment. I heard someone say once that a person with six kids is certainly more content than a person with six million dollars. Why? Because a person with six million dollars wants more!

Other people think, "If I just had the right relationship, I would be content...If I could just find the person of my dreams." They're like the woman who said this prayer at night:

*"Father in heaven, hear my prayer
and grant it if you can;
I've hung a pair of trousers here
Now fill them with a man."*

She wasn't necessarily looking for Mr. Right...she was looking for Mr. Right Now. If you are not careful, it is easy to fall into the trap of believing that contentment is based on externals—possessions, or accomplishments, or relationships. However, the Bible teaches us differently.

Today we're going to look at a few Bible verses written by undoubtedly one of the most ambitious men in all of Scripture—the Apostle Paul. Paul was a man driven to excel, driven to succeed in all that he did. Throughout his life he accomplished many great things. Today, he would be accused of being a workaholic. His objective in life was to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to everyone he could, and he never stopped working. He was beaten, and he continued to work. He was shipwrecked, and he continued to work. He was criticized, persecuted, starved, and imprisoned; and yet he continued to work. Toward the end of his life, from his jail cell, he wrote these words:

Not that I speak from want; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. (Philippians 4:11 NASB)

Paul tells us here that he learned contentment. It wasn't something that he always had, he learned it. The word **"content"** here is from the Greek word [autarkes](#) [au]ta[rk]hv]. It means: *"to be self-sufficient, to be satisfied, to have enough."* It indicates a certain independence, a lack of necessity of aid or help, to be contained. It was used in extra-biblical Greek for a person who supported himself without anyone's aid. Paul is saying, "I've learned to be independent of external circumstances. I've learned to be self-sufficient." Paul was totally independent of man, because he was totally dependant upon God.

Notice what Paul says about his contentment, **"I have learned."** The word he uses for "learned" is [manthano](#) [man]a[nw], it means: *"to learn under discipline, to learn by experience."* Contentment didn't come automatically, he had to learn it through the experiences of life. If we are going to have contentment, we must learn it, it doesn't come naturally. Our culture produces discontentment.

Paul learned that contentment isn't found in success, or accomplishments, or prosperity, or fame, or power, or prestige—even though he experienced all of those things during the course of his lifetime. Paul learned that the secret of contentment is not in any external experience.

Finding contentment in life is not a matter of making a wish list of achievements and acquisitions and marking them off one by one. Contentment is within our reach even if we never get those things that are on our wish list. Contentment is not a by-product of affluence, achievement, or acquisitions.

Let's look at some principles that will help us to be content in any circumstance.

1. Contentment Comes from Trusting God Even When Life Seems Unfair.

We can trust God, because He is sovereignly ruling the universe and all that happens in it:

also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, (Ephesians 1:11 NASB)

God has a plan, and He is working His plan. God's plan may not always seem fair to us, but then where did we ever get the idea that life is supposed to be fair? Did you leave the hospital after your birth with any kind of guarantee that only good things will happen to you? The truth is that life is made up of a mixture of mirth and misery, blessings and burdens, triumphs and tragedies. This was true for Paul, it is true for me, and it is true for you. No one who lives long in this world can miss that reality. It was Jesus who said, *"...In the world you will have tribulation"* ([John 16:33](#)).

The seed of contentment is planted through trusting God to take care of me when I am treated unfairly. Consider Paul's circumstances as he wrote this verse stating his contentment. He is in jail. He has no freedom. He is uncertain of what is going to happen to him. He well understood the times in which he was living and knew that it was very possible He could be executed. As it turns out in this imprisonment, he was eventually released. However, within less than five years, he would be arrested again and this time would be executed. His life ended when he was [beheaded](#) on the orders of the Roman emperor, Nero.

So there you have it. It is okay to admit it. Life can be very frustrating, because life often seems unfair. We may be diagnosed with cancer. Our business plan, which appears fool-proof, could blow up in our face. The deal of a lifetime could turn out to be the worst deal we ever made. Our children may not delight us—instead they may disappoint us. Friends could turn out to be enemies. The company you work for might

decide you are expendable. Your mate could break his or her vow of faithfulness and turn away from you. What are you going to do? You can get bitter, or get depressed, or you can extend your trust in God. Contentment comes by believing that God will take care of us in every situation.

I imagine that at some point of his imprisonment, as Paul sat handcuffed in his prison to his jailer, that he wondered, "How in the world can anything good come from this?" One can almost see the smile that must have crossed his face when the light dawned on him. The solution was imbedded in his biggest problem. His greatest hardship was the constant chains which bound him to his captors, his guards. Now, these were not ordinary prison guards. These were the Praetorian Guards, the most loyal and trusted of the emperor's men. These men answered directly to Nero. Everyday another new guard was chained to Paul. And everyday Paul talked with people about Jesus. Do you realize that no preacher ever had such a captive audience! Suddenly, Paul saw the wisdom of his imprisonment. What appeared to be a disaster was, in fact, an opportunity. Paul had the chance to penetrate the heart of the Roman Empire, the very men who surrounded the emperor, with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

When life seems so unfair, we must remember that God can take our worst difficulties and work them out for good in our lives and the lives of other people. Notice what Joseph said to his brothers who hated him and sold him into slavery:

"And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. (Genesis 50:20 NASB)

Life may have seemed unfair to Joseph, but God was working His plan. If none of us are able to escape a world, which at times seems so unfair, that only leaves us with the choice of correctly responding to that reality. I cannot prevent what may occur, but I can choose how I will respond to it. Those issues will rob you of contentment unless you choose to extend your trust in God, even when you cannot make sense of what has happened. We need an attitude based on trusting God's wisdom in allowing this event to occur in our lives.

Let me share with you a story that displays this kind of trust in God in difficult times. It was told by a Russian Pastor in the context of explaining how he became a Christian. Before his conversion, he had been a member of the feared and infamous KGB, the secret police of the Soviet Union. His job was to harass the illegal worshipers of Russia. One particular evening, he told how he and his partner had learned of a small band of Christians worshiping in a home. They broke into the house, and all of the Christians fled—all of them but one elderly woman, who they assumed was too feeble to run away. As they began to interrogate her, they were astonished to learn that she had made the intentional decision to not run away. With courage in her voice, she said to the policeman, *"I stayed because God ordered me not to run away from you. Instead, He told me to stay and tell you about Him."*

"Old woman," they replied, "Why would you be willing to be a traitor to your country and to spend the rest of your life in prison because of a dead Jew?" "I am not a traitor!" she said. "I stood with my husband in the snow against the Germans at Leningrad. When he fell and died, I took his place. I can still see his blood in the snow. I buried all of my children in the siege of the city that winter. I did all that, because I loved my country, and because I was not afraid to die, and I am not afraid of you either. God ordered me then, and He is ordering me now! And the Jew called Jesus, whom you say is dead, is alive." And then the KGB officer said, "Her face grew gentle and her voice turned soft, and she took my hand and placed it in hers and said to me, 'He is alive, you know, and you may know Him as well as I do.'" He went on to say, "She was arrested that night, and I never saw her again, but I kept her New Testament and read it. It

should be of no surprise that I am a Christian and a preacher of His Gospel today." Contentment begins when one realizes you can still trust God even when life seems unfair.

Until you come to the place in your life that you understand that God is sovereign and is ordering everything for His own holy purposes and is working all things after the counsel of His own will, you will always be discontent, because you'll try to control everything in your life, and you'll be frustrated when you can't.

2. Contentment Is Developed by Being Certain of God When Life Is Uncertain.

Paul had a greater problem than losing his freedom. Even more threatening was the uncertainty of what the Romans would decide to do with him. Have you ever noticed that not knowing is worse than knowing? Have you ever had to wait for medical tests to come back? Have you ever had somebody tell you that it is very important that they speak with you, but they cannot do so for another day? Have you ever received that dreaded letter from the IRS, which informs you of an impending audit?

Most of us can live with the worst kind of news better than we can with the uncertainty of not knowing what is going to happen. We can imagine scenarios many times more troubling than reality may be. Imagine what it was like to sit in a prison for two long years without having any idea of what was going to happen to you. Paul could have become preoccupied with being executed. He might have become preoccupied with the ordeal of rotting away in a lonely prison with no friends or family to comfort him.

There will be times in all of our lives that consist of uncertainty. Which one of us knows what tragedy, sorrow, or crisis may be waiting around the corner of tomorrow? That is why living in the real world has never been for the faint of heart. And, it is one of the primary reasons we live in a society with so many addictive behaviors. We have a tendency to medicate ourselves from the fear of the unknown. We temporarily escape from reality, because it seems so frightening to us. Let's face it—it is not easy to learn to live by faith in uncertain times. There is only one way to gain faith, and it is by experiencing the sufficiency of God. I am convinced that Paul gained contentment in God **only after** experiencing the sufficiency of God in frightening moments of his life. Have you ever read Paul's odyssey of faith? How did he gain so much trust in God? Here is a portion of his own testimony:

Are they servants of Christ? (I speak as if insane) I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. ²⁶ I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; ²⁷ I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern? (2 Corinthians 11:23-29 NASB)

It was only by going through days and nights of uncertainty that Paul discovered that God knows how to take care of His children in uncertain times. And, He not only will meet all of your needs, He will likely enable you to discover the very purpose of your life by permitting you to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. God can use every circumstance in our lives for good if we will allow Him to do so.

[Elisabeth Kübler-Ross](#) is an authority on assisting people in dealing with death. She recently made the statement that evil is a reality in this world. She wrote that none of us will escape its visitation in our lives; we simply have to choose the "high choice" or the "low choice" when it occurs. She told the following story to illustrate what she meant:

An affluent young wife and mother lived in California. One weekend, this mother and several of her friends took their young children to a popular beach. All of the children were wearing life vests, and there was a lifeguard nearby. The mothers were sitting under an umbrella watching their children play in the surf. Suddenly, the water around the children boiled, and a huge shark appeared and took this mother's only child in his jaws and then vanished. Nothing was left except a few pieces of the life vest and crimson water.

Kubler-Ross was summoned two months later. She found the mother in a catatonic state. Kubler-Ross spent almost one year with this mother bringing her through this tragedy. Recently, Kubler-Ross wrote, "That was almost ten years ago. Today, that same mother directs a nation-wide program which assists parents of more than 10,000 children who have died violent deaths. She made the high choice."



Life is not only unfair, it is also uncertain. Paul made a choice. He said, "I win whatever happens. I am that certain in God's care for me. As long as I am in prison, I will witness of Jesus to my guards. If I am released, I will go back and help the churches I began and strengthen new Christians. If I am executed, I will go to heaven to be with the Lord." In spite of uncertainties, Paul extended his contentment by discovering God's love in uncertain times.

3. Contentment Comes When We Learn to Be Satisfied with the Basics of Life.

Not that I speak from want; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. (Philippians 4:11 NASB)

The Greek word for "want" is *husteresis* [uʃtɛllɹhsiv], which means: "lack." Paul is saying, "I don't lack anything." Paul was content with very little. He was a prisoner, a content one. It didn't matter that he was chained to a Roman soldier, he was content. Look at what he told Timothy about contentment:

But godliness actually is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment. ⁷ For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. ⁸ And if we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. ⁹ But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang. ¹¹ But flee from these things, you man of God; and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. (1 Timothy 6:6-11 NASB)

Notice what he says we are to be content with: **food and covering**. The Greek word for "food" is *diatrophe* [diatɹɹfh/], it means: "nourishment, that which is needed to sustain life." The Greek word for "covering" is *skepasma* [skɛllpasma], it is a broad term which may include the idea of "shelter." Are you content with the basics of life? I know that none of you lack these things.

This is tough for our culture. We're not content with little or much. We are far, far beyond food and clothing. We eat for entertainment, and we possess every kind of gadget imaginable, and still we want more!

Do you understand that the purpose of all advertisement is to produce **discontentment**? It is geared to create a need that you didn't know you had, so you will go out and buy what you don't need with money that you don't have. The goal of TV producers is not to put programs on to entertain you, the goal of TV producers is to make you buy something. So, the primary issue on TV is the commercials, and the programs are only to get you there so you can see the commercials. And if the program doesn't get you there to see the commercials, the program is canceled.

We have developed a concept of life that says, "**The whole of life is a process of man meeting his needs.**" Where does that come from? Freud's humanism, stems from the need of our existence is to satisfy ourselves, because there is no God. And everyone is out to meet his own needs. The big problem is that we don't know what our needs are. It should be clear that we are way beyond food and clothing. Our culture is defining our needs.

We need to meditate on the words of Jesus until we are convinced of their truthfulness:

And He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." (Luke 12:15 NASB)

We must learn the truth of this if we are ever going to be content. Life does not consist in the abundance of the things we possess!

Does being content mean that we should never buy a new house or car? If we are content with the house and car we have, we'll just keep it until it falls apart—right? No, being content doesn't mean that you never seek to improve on what you have, but it does mean that you shouldn't be dependant upon those things for your contentment or happiness. If you have the means to purchase something, then it's alright. But don't let your lack of means cause you discontentment. God will give you what He desires you to have through the means of work or inheritance. So, be content with whatever you have, because you don't deserve anything!

If contentment meant that you never sought to improve your situation, than Paul would not tell the slaves to gain their freedom if they could ([1 Corinthians 7:20-24](#)).

Our final principle in learning to be content is:

4. Contentment Is Perpetuated by Being Concerned for the Well Being of Others.

If you live only for yourself, you will never be content. Contentment begins to be a reality when you have more concern about how it is with others than about how it is with you.

Most of us never experience contentment, because we demand our world to be exactly the way we would like it to be—that's a curse. We want to force everything into a mold that we have made. We want our partner in life, husband or wife, to be exactly the way we expect them to be in order to fulfill our

expectation, our design, our agenda. We would like our children to absolutely conform to this pre-written plan, which we have ordained for them to fulfill. We would like everything in our world to fall into its perfect niche. You'll never know contentment until you get away from the idea of designing your own agenda and lose yourself in a preoccupation with the well being of others.

Look at what Paul told Timothy:

But godliness actually is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment. (1 Timothy 6:6 NASB)

The word “accompanied” here is *meta* [meta/], and can be translated: “*which leads to.*” So we could translate it: “Godliness actually is a means of great gain which leads to contentment.” The only way that a child of God will be content is if he or she is Godly. Godliness is a heart fixed on God that results in actions that are pleasing to God. The greatest commandment that Jesus gave us was to love God and love others:

"Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?"³⁷ And He said to him, "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND."³⁸ This is the great and foremost commandment.³⁹ "The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.'⁴⁰ "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:36-40 NASB)

Christianity is others oriented:

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself;⁴ do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. (Philippians 2:3-4 NASB)

If we are not putting others first, we are not godly, and if we are not godly, we will never be content.

Let me ask you, “What are you living for? Is your contentment based on what you may gain for yourself or on what you may do for others in the name of Jesus Christ?” If you want to find contentment in this life, you need to put others first.

[G. W. Target](#) wrote a short story in 1973 called “The Window.” It illustrates powerfully the choice we all have of living for self or living for others:

Two men were confined to a hospital due to their illness. They shared the same room for a number of months. One man was so sick that he had to lay on his back at all times. The other man was also very sick but because of the accumulation of fluid in his lungs, he had to sit up for one hour every day. His bed happened to be next to the only window in the room. Each day for one hour, he would describe to the other man in the hospital bed what he saw out the window. The other man, who could not sit up, began to live for that one hour each day when the man would report on what he could see. One day he might speak of the beautiful lake down below. He might describe the fisherman and the results of their efforts. Another day, he might describe the skyline of the city in the horizon and the busy lives people there were living. On still another day, he would describe the vista of the

mountains in the distance, capped with snow.

As time went on, the man confined on his back began to resent the reports from the window. He was ashamed at first to admit that to himself, but he had to be honest. It does not seem fair that the other man was the one who had a window by his bed. It was not fair he could look out at the world below while he could not. In time, this resentment turned to anger and then bitterness. One night, he was awakened. The man next to him was coughing, desperately needing to clear his lungs. He looked over and saw him grasping to reach his call button for a nurse. However, his coughing had caused him to be too weak to do so. It would have been very easy for the other man to push his own call button, but he didn't. He chose to offer no help and in a few moments, the coughing ended. It was replaced with a labored wheezing and finally by silence. In a few hours, the nurse discovered that the patient by the window had died during the night. His body was removed from the room and the other man said quietly, "Since I am now alone in this room, may I have my bed moved where I can look out the window?"

The nurse agreed with the request. After his bed had been moved, and the man was alone in the room again, the man summoned all of his strength and pulled himself up on his elbows. Finally, he would see all that awaited him out the window. It was then that he discovered that outside the window was nothing except a brick wall.

Contentment is derived in this life from what I give to others, not in what I gain for myself. So contentment comes from:

1. Trusting God Even When Life Seems Unfair.
2. Being Certain of God When Life Is Uncertain.
3. Learning to Be Satisfied with the Basics of Life.
4. Being Concerned for the Well Being of Others.

If you really want to be content, remember what Paul told Timothy, "Godliness which leads to contentment is great gain." Seek to be Godly, and you'll be content.

This message was preached by [David B. Curtis](#) on November 25, 2007. Tape #391.



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