

Call to Worship

Jesus invites himself into our lives and, when he does, he introduces us to a very different way of living in the world. Contentment, the gracious receiving of God's peace through our trust of our Creator, is what Jesus shows us through his life, death and resurrection. That contentment is also what Jesus wants for each of us to have: a peace that passes understanding.

We come to the table of the Lamb; yearning to no longer have a starving hunger in our lives for the things that do not fill our souls.

Prayer of Invocation

This day, that you have made, will never be repeated. Reveal yourself to us, God at the center of all things, in a way we have never known. Stretch our understanding of how we can be disciples, bless us with your Spirit of inner peace, make this the start of a new chapter in our lives together with you. We pray always depending on your strength and your guidance. Amen.

The Word

Luke 12:15 Hebrews 13:5-6 Philippians 4:11-13

And 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."

The Apostle Paul told the Hebrews: Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for Jesus 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. What can anyone do to me?" To the people of Philippi Paul wrote: Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have.

I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Living the Word

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

In recent years we have witnessed a number of devastating natural disasters, including hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, and wildfires. Natural disasters remind us that everything in this world is temporary. This is why we can say with Jesus, "[My] life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15). Yet the culture is shouting that it's not true. The result is a wrestling match in our hearts. Despite the fact that we say we believe Jesus' words, we still find ourselves devoting a great deal of our time, talents, and resources to the acquisition of more stuff. We say that our lives do not consist in the abundance of our possessions, but we live as if they do.

Restless Heart Syndrome: Struggling with Discontent

Perhaps you've heard of restless legs syndrome (RLS), a condition in which one has twitches and contractions in the legs. Something I call Restless Heart Syndrome (RHS) works in a similar way, but in the heart—or soul. Its primary symptom is discontent. We find that we are never satisfied with anything. The moment we acquire something, we scarcely take time to enjoy it before we want something else. We are perennially discontent.

When discontent is a virtue

There is a certain discontent that God intended us to have. God actually wired our hearts so that we would not be content with certain things, causing us to seek the only One who can fully satisfy us. We are meant to yearn for a relationship with God, 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.

When discontent destroys

The problem is that those things we should be content with are the very things we find ourselves hopelessly discontented with. For example, we find ourselves discontented with our stuff, our jobs, our churches, our children, and our spouses. God must look down on us and feel the way we feel when we give someone a special gift and the person asks for the gift receipt. It's as if we're saying to God, "I don't like what you have given me, God. I want to trade it in and get something better."

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" of his contentment (Philippians 4:11-12). Like Paul, we can learn to be content in whatever circumstances we may find ourselves. Four keys, which include the "secret" Paul referred to in his letter, can help us to do that.

1. Four words to repeat: 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 discontented with something or someone: "It could be worse." This is essentially the practice of looking on the bright side or finding the silver lining. It is recognizing that no matter what we may not like about a thing or person or circumstance, we can always find something good to focus on if only we will choose to do so.

2. One question to ask: 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 when we make the purchase, but the item does not continue to bring satisfaction over a period of time. Many of the things we buy are simply not worth the expense. This is why it is a good idea to try before you buy.

3. Develop a grateful heart.

Gratitude is essential if we are to be content. The Apostle Paul said that we are to "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thessalonians 5:18). A grateful heart recognizes that all of life is a gift. Contentment comes when we spend more time giving thanks for what we have than thinking about what's missing or wrong in our lives.

4. Where does your soul find true satisfaction?

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

- "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee." (Saint Augustine)
- "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, 5-6)

- "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)
- 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.

Five Steps for Simplifying Our Lives

In addition to cultivating contentment in our lives, we need simplicity. Contentment and simplicity go hand in hand.

1. Set a goal of 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 the top-of-the-line product. When buying a new car, aim to improve fuel economy over your existing car by at least 10 percent. Reduce your utilities 10 percent by setting the thermostat back a couple of degrees when you are away during the day and asleep at night. Find other ways to reduce your consumption and live below your means. To find other ways of reducing consumption, do some research, share ideas with others, or have a brainstorming session with your family.

2. Before making a purchase, ask yourself: Do I really need this? Why do I want this?

These questions will help you determine the true motivation for your desired purchase. Is it a need, a self-esteem issue, or something else? You may find yourself wrestling with your true motive and decide that your reason for purchasing the item is not a good one.

3. 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.

4. 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 more pleasure you derive from low-cost, simple activities.

5. Ask yourself: Are there major changes that would allow me to simplify my life?

Consider downsizing your home, canceling a club membership you don't use, or selling a car to buy one you can pay for in full. Ask yourself questions related to your home, possessions, job, and activities to identify some significant changes that will simplify your life. Remember, if you cannot do all the things God is calling you to do and you're unable to find joy in your life, perhaps it's time to simplify in some major ways.

The Power of Self-Control

Simplifying your life requires the practice of self-control. Solomon wrote, "Like a city whose walls are broken through / 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 often comes down to making a choice between instant gratification and delayed gratification for some greater cause. The choice can be examined using three questions:

- What are the long-term consequences of this action?
- Is there a higher good or a better outcome if I use this resource of time, money, or energy in another way?
- Will this action honor God?

Conclusion: Which tent will you live in?

Will you live in "discon-tent" or "con-tent-ment"? You and you alone determine which "tent" will be yours. You choose it in large part by deciding what life is about. If you decide that "life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15), then you are choosing contentment. Choosing contentment means we look to God as our Source, giving thanks for what we have; we ask God to give us the right perspective on money and possessions and to change our hearts each day; we decide to live simpler lives, wasting less and conserving more; and we choose to give more generously.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we pray that you might cure us of Restless Heart Syndrome. We are truly sorry for the times when we received the gifts you give us and asked for the gift receipt: when we were dissatisfied with a person you entrusted to our care, with our children or parents, with our home or our car, with our healthcare or our jobs. God forgive us for the times we've offended you by our discontent. Forgive us for being content with the things we should not be content with. Give us a hunger to pursue righteousness and holiness and justice and love, to long for you and for your will in our lives. Help us to simplify, to get off the treadmill, and to find our peace in you. We ask these mercies in your holy name. Amen.