

Stewardship Sermon 3 – Cultivating Contentment

It didn't take me long living down here in Lake Charles to learn that the stuff of life that we all work so hard for - houses, cars, clothes and toys - can be taken away over night! In a word- Hurricanes! The first storm, Rita, surprised us as Yankees because we were thinking in the back of our mind about tornadoes. I've been closer to tornadoes than hurricanes, so to prepare for Rita we packed our "Stuff" tightly and carefully in a closet not even thinking about flooding and water damage, which among other issues (like fallen trees and destroyed roofs and cars) is what we have learned to expect. So now, our furniture is a little water damaged and we don't have wedding photos and "pics" of the boys when they were young. Now, I'm better at remembering that everything in this world is temporary and a lot of our stuff is non-essential. The problem is our culture, including sometimes the way we look at scripture, is shouting to us that it's not true. So we all, to one degree or another, are pulled from a view of "I'm not defined by the abundance of my possessions" to "The one with the most toys wins".

Our theology gets affected too, as we buy into a myth of "sacrifice" vs. the "gospel of abundance" that Jesus talked about. Like the Hebrew children in Moses day, we need to learn that life in God's economy is far better than life with pharaoh. In Pharaoh's economy the Hebrews worked 7 for 7. If you want to eat, you work – *everyday*. But God taught the Hebrews that they could labor six days and on the seventh they could rest and hang with Him, and still get fed! God started creation with the Sabbath, and on top of that He wants us to understand that in His service we can depend on him – *and give away 10% of whatever we make or create!* The World tells us to expect sacrifice - that the "pie" is getting smaller- so we scramble for a bigger piece than the other guy and whine when we don't get it. But in God's world, in his service and economy, we can have a regular piece of pie because the pie is growing! Once we begin to live into God's world and trust it, things *like giving and contentment and simplicity begin to feel right and a smile starts to beam across our face.*

Restless Heart Syndrome: Struggling with Discontent

Pharaoh's world, our world, fosters discontent in our souls. Our author of *Enough* calls this RHS Restless Heart Syndrome. Like Restless Leg Syndrome our heart is restless - we are discontent! We just can't stay satisfied no matter what we have, buy, and possess. The thrill is in the purchase and the thrill wears off pretty fast. Look at what people get tired of and put out on the curb.

When discontent is a virtue

Now there is a discontentment that we want to have and foster – the discontentment God wants us to have. We come from the factory with a discontentment for certain things (the vanities) so that we will seek Him instead - 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 the gifts from God we should be thankful for, we often tire of or take

for granted. If we are not careful we find ourselves discontented with our homes, our work, our churches, our family members. We want to trade them in along with our cars and boats, we keep our eye out for a new situation, we wish our kids were perfect and we wonder about that person across the room. God must get awfully tired of our discontentment with his gifts to us and our compulsions for the things that enslave and hurt us. Aren't you glad He did something about it through Jesus who frees from our inner discontentment and reconnects to his Father?

Four Keys to Cultivating Contentment

So what can we do? How can we begin to live into God's economy not pharaohs? How can we *Cultivate Contentment*? Here are four keys to living inside of God's "covenant compound!"

1. **Four words to repeat: IT COULD BE WORSE!**

Say these words every time you find yourself feeling discontented with something or someone: "It could be worse." Make it a practice look on the bright side and find something good to focus on.

2. **One question to ask: HOW LONG WILL IT 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. Buying things compulsively and impulsively often results in buyer's remorse which could have been avoided if we had only waited awhile before buying. Try to give yourself a little time to distinguish between what you might want but don't need.

3. **Develop a GRATEFUL HEART.** Gratitude is essential if we are to be content. The Apostle in his letter to the Philippians, wrote about the "secret" of his contentment.

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:11-13).

Like Paul, we can learn to be content in whatever circumstances we may find ourselves "giving 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, comfort and money. The Bible says something quite different. From Genesis to Revelation, it tells us that we find our satisfaction in God alone. Saint Augustine once said, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee." And the psalmist declares, "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) 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). As we walk each day in this love we will find our souls satisfied and content because our perspective has changed from pharaoh’s world and economy to God’s. In God’s house and under his service - enough is more than enough. Try it, you’ll like it!

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.
2. Before making a purchase, ask yourself: Do I really need this? Why do I want this?
3. Use something up before buying something new.
4. Plan low-cost entertainment that enriches.
5. Ask yourself: Are there major changes that would allow me to simplify my life? 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.

Conclusion: Which tent will you live in?

Con-tent-ment or discon-tent-ment - you get to choose by deciding what your 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; and developing a Godly perspective on money and possessions. With a changed heart we decide to live simpler lives, wasting less and conserving more; and we choose to give more generously. Remember Jesus’ invitation in Matthew 11:28-30, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Closing Prayer

Lord, we pray that you might cure us of Restless Heart Syndrome. We are truly sorry for the times

when we were dissatisfied with the gifts you give us and we are also sorry for chasing after empty possessions instead of you. Give us a hunger to pursue righteousness and holiness, justice and love. Build in us a longing 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. Amen.

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