

Sunday, September 25, 2022

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Godly Contentment

Luke 16:19 – 31

I Timothy 6:6 – 19

Mark Twain once observed that the Bible was a spectacular collection of the immoral—liars, cheats, adulterers, murderers, con artists, megalomaniacs, all of whom appeared to be loved by God! Twain was right. The God of all creation does seem to lean overboard in support of a host of sleazy types who live fast and loose on the edge of the Ten Commandments. And because of that characteristic of our God, it is OK to sometimes be embarrassed by the Bible and some of what we find in its pages (David Barlett, *Speaking Parables*, pp. 209–210).

I think the church has often given the impression that we have to show up here and pretend to be better people than we are, but that's not true. All we have to do is show up as our true selves. I agree with Frederick Buechner's conclusion that Alcoholics Anonymous comes closer to being the church Jesus founded than the actual church. And part of the reason is the honest beginning. MY name is _____ and I am an alcoholic/an addict.

My name is Rodney, and I am a sinner. If we can confess who we are and embrace one another in all our human needs, we may be a lot closer to the throne of grace than we are now. Let's start there and see what happens.

Now, I'm going to say a word and I want you to recall a moment. Are you ready? The word is contentment. There are two challenges with the idea of contentment. There's a fake contentment of this world – money, entertainment, and all the stuff that keeps us busy. Then there's biblical contentment. And there's the challenge of living in a world where discontentment has become a virtue. We think we are supposed to be discontent because we have to have more.

Our culture teaches us discontentment. The advertisers are our professors in the graduate school of discontent. The ads whisper, "More, more, more." How can we live with ourselves if we don't have a Lexus to remember? Or a Mercedes: "The best or nothing." Prada: "Be seen. Be heard." Tiffany: "Beautiful design makes a beautiful life." The media majors in creating discontent. Making money is their purpose and fomenting discontent and division is profitable. Of all things, now the churches are in the

manufacturers of discontent. Discontentment morphs into frustration, rage, and anger. Educators call it the conflict escalator.

We are a people of discontent, and we live in the land of discontentment. Nothing says discontent in the Gospel like our story of the rich man. "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day." We expect rich people to be content, but it's not always true. But then we read: "In hell he lifted up his eyes and asked for a drop of water." He now wants what he refused Lazarus – a drop of water, breadcrumbs from the table. He thought he was content; now he is the most discontented man in the world. Money can finance the pursuit of worldly contentment, but it can't make you content.

Will you look at a character in the New Testament with me? His name is Paul. He was the greatest missionary preacher of the first century. He was intelligent, highly educated, fiercely committed to the gospel of Jesus. At times, overbearing, pugilistic, he was frustrating. His first century attitude toward women emanated from the Neanderthal Age. He talked in language so high and exalted that he sounded overly righteous to ordinary people like us. Look, you can read some of Paul and roll your eyes.

Paul uses the word "content" three times in his letters. "Therefore I am **content** with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." "Not that I am referring to being in need, for I have learned to be **content** with whatever I have." "Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with **contentment**."

Listen to Paul talking about what he has endured and put up with: "We are handicapped on all sides, but we are never frustrated; we are puzzled, but never in despair. We are persecuted, but we never have to stand it alone: we may be **knocked** down but we are never **knocked** out! Every day we experience something of the death of the Lord Jesus, so that we may also know the power of the life of Jesus in these bodies of ours." "The struggle itself toward the heights," said Albert Camus, "is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." And we remember that Sisyphus was punished in Hades for his misdeeds in life by being condemned to the eternal task of rolling a large stone to the top of a hill, from which it always rolled down again. Let our work for the church be rolling the big rock up the hill every morning and then do it again and again and again. We are called to faithfulness not success. Do not despair. Lift up your hearts!

The contented person learns not to be turned upside down by surprises, ambiguity, contingencies, and the unexpected. They respond to all of it with surprising joy.

Paul was mistreated, hounded, persecuted everywhere he went. Look at Paul in Philippi. Beaten, arrested, jailed. The preacher's in jail; would you go my bail? Cashless bail? About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. Big earthquake. Jail break. Paul stopped during a jail break and baptized the jailer and his family.

Of all things, Paul and Silas stayed put at the jail, and when the jailer came and told them that the magistrate was setting them free, Paul replied, "We are Roman citizens and they have beaten us in public and have thrown us into prison, and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves." The magistrates were afraid when they heard that they were Romans, so they came and apologized to them. Even in contentment, Paul shows he could have a little residual resentment.

Circumstances can't spoil godly contentment.

Paul was not wanted in Antioch. So, beaten in Ephesus, jailed in Philippi, troubled in Thessalonica, stoned in Iconium, flogged in Philippi, scoffed at in Athens, attacked by the silversmith's artisans, the union for silver idol makers, arrested and beaten in Jerusalem. But he claims, "I am content." Whatever contentment is, in the New Testament, it is not a warm, fuzzy feeling, a day at the beach. Contentment is not the same as enjoyment. It can be close. I enjoy boiled crawfish and that approaches contentment on a hot spring Louisiana night when you get the sawhorses, put a sheet of plywood over them, roll out the butcher block paper, and pile it high with boiled crawfish, whole onions, potatoes, corn on the cob. A mixture of horseradish and ketchup and you are on your way to enjoyment that may come close to contentment.

When are you the most content? I am content when I am in a pulpit, preaching a sermon to an attentive congregation. I am caught up to the third heaven whether the congregation is attentive or not. I feel that my sermon is poured out each Sunday like a gallon pitcher of sweet, iced tea and when I am finished, when the last drop hits the floor, I am drained of all energy, thought, and movement. I have left it all in the pulpit and I am content.

Now, do we get it? Contentment is something on the inside of a person that can't be disrupted by what happens on the outside. Contentment has to be

learned through what we go through, what we experience. Contentment is not some over-hyped spiritual experience. Paul doesn't let what happens around him destroy his contentment. Paul doesn't let what people say about him spoil his contentment. If we can learn to not be knocked down by circumstances and criticism, we are on the road to contentment.

May I ask you a question? Do you want to be content? Are you willing to learn how to be content? Are we teachable? Not everyone wants to learn. The book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus "learned obedience through what he suffered." Contentment is a learned skill.

There is fake contentment – staying busy, going here and there, and telling yourself you are content. Then there's biblical contentment which comes as a byproduct of being faithful. Child psychologists tell us that there's an epidemic of child depression because of "fake self-esteem." Parents tell children they are wonderful, smart, outstanding and the kids know it's a lie and they are confused. Self esteem is a byproduct of doing well. The same goes for contentment. It is a byproduct of godly living.

I want the most attention-deficit, entertainment-addicted, money-crazy, ill-mannered, disgruntled generation in American history to be "content". Not content with injustice. Not content with mistreatment of others. Not content with oppression. Content because we are working on God's purposes of peace and praise.

Contentment has something to do with living a godly life: "Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment." The more we relate to God's love, hospitality, generosity, the more content we are. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness, and one of the side benefits will be contentment. Paul says we will be content if we roll up our sleeves, jump into the fray, "fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses." Pursue means to chase. Like Tommy Lee Jones in *U. S. Marshals*. "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

We can have contentment despite adverse circumstances and persecution. We can have contentment as a byproduct of doing well and being generous. I have been talking about Paul and his contentment, and now I need to you to see if you are on the road to contentment. May the Lord bless you. Amen.