

# The Secret Of Contentment

## *Series on Stewardship*

Picture this scene. Our family is at the beach on holiday. The sun is shining. We have just finished our midday meal and everyone is satisfied. Lyn and I are on our sun loungers under a tree, settling into our new books. The kids are happily playing. We are content and the kids are happy, when along comes the ice cream man with his ice cream van. We wouldn't even notice he is there except that he plays this ghastly tune "Greensleeves" over his speaker system. Suddenly world war three has broken out. The kids are all over us like a rash wanting an ice cream. They pester and they plead. "Everyone else is having one. I'm hungry. We are on holiday. Please! Please!" They just **have** to have one. I begin to have some very nasty thoughts about the ice cream man. He has taken a nice contented moment and turned it into cravings for something my children don't need and we can't afford. With one stupid little tune he has turned contentment into discontentment.

But let's not blame the kids, because we too get infected with this virus. We drive past a "For sale" sign in front of a home we can't quite afford, and we want it. We are satisfied with the car we drive until we see the next model with more bells and whistles. We are quite content with the I phone 3 until the I phone 4 comes out. We are part of a discontented consumer society that is addicted to more and more, even if we can't afford it.

This discontentment has resulted in whole nations being deeply in debt. Dave Ramsey is a financial guru who has a financial responsibility radio program that tries to teach people how to live within their means. He recently described what American spending and debt would look like for a family budget, because very few people can imagine what 14.2 trillion dollars of debt looks like. He said *"If their household income was \$55,000 per year, they'd actually be spending \$96,500—\$41,500 more than they made! That means they're spending 175% of their annual income! So, in 2011 they'd add \$41,500 of debt to their current credit card debt of \$366,000! You can't borrow your way out of debt, whether you're a typical American family or the entire U.S. government. At some point, you've got to say, "Enough is enough!" and make the hard cuts necessary to win over the long haul."*

### **The Deeper Problem – Discontentment**

You see the problem is not finances, or financial management or materialism. It's something much deeper that is embedded in the soul of every person on this earth. You find it in 3 year old kids in the supermarket who throw a wobbly because their Mum says "no" to their latest want. You find it in teenagers who go on a two week sulk because they can't have the latest smart phone. You find it in women who are forever looking in the mirror and hating what they see. You find it in men who spend most of their lives trying to prove to themselves that if only they can reach the top of the corporate ladder they will be fulfilled. There is a restlessness in the human spirit that leaves many people in a permanent state of discontentment. And as well as that, the devil whispers in our ear saying "You have got to have more". The actor Alan Alda has been quoted as saying, "It isn't necessary to be rich and famous to be happy. It's only necessary to be rich."

How many people do you know who can say "I have learned to be content, whatever the circumstances". Are you able to say that and mean it? The Apostle Paul wrote that when he wrote to the Philippian Christians. This is what he said.

***"I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. 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 everything through him who gives me strength". (Philippians 4:10-13 NIV)***

The man who wrote this statement about being content wrote that while he was under house arrest, chained to a Roman soldier 24 hours a day. He had no idea if the next day he would be killed, brought to court, or set free. He had often been put in jail. He had been beaten up by Roman soldiers and Jewish officials many times. He had endured a Roman flogging. He had been beaten with rods. He had been stoned with rocks and left for dead. He had been shipwrecked, had gone without food and had many a sleepless night. Yet he says, whether I have plenty, or whether I'm in want, I have learned the secret of being content. How can he say that? Is it possible to be content when you have virtually nothing, when your life is at risk, and when you are in prison? Yes it is. Contentment is possible when we have very little. But I think the bigger question for most of us is this. Is it possible to be contented when we have so much? The answer from the Bible is that every one of us can be content. No matter how much or how little we have, contentment is an attitude of the heart. Contentment has nothing to do with how much we have in the bank, how much we earn, our job status, the way we look or what we own. The contentment that the Apostle Paul is talking about comes from a different source altogether. It comes from really believing these truths.

### **1. God Is My Provider**

Part of the reason why Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians was to thank them for a gift of money they sent him while he was in Rome. The Lord had prompted the Philippians to take up an offering of money to send to him. While he was thankful to them for their concern for him, Paul was very clear that it was the Lord who was providing for his needs. When people show generosity towards us, it's the Lord who has prompted them to be generous. It's the Lord who knows our needs, and he is our provider. Jesus said;

***"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them". (Matthew 6:25-32 NIV)***

### **2. God Is My Father**

There has been a lot written in the last 50 years about having a healthy self image and developing self esteem. In the Western world, so much of the way we define ourselves is through what we do and what we own. If you are at a dinner party and someone just drops into the conversation that they have a Chateau on the lakefront, and they are the CEO of a multinational based in Geneva, we use that information to define them as a person. And they probably do too. For many people, self esteem is measured by their education, what they own, their net worth and what they do. But those are not the things that define a follower of Jesus. The thing that defines our worth is the value God puts on us. He adopts us into his family. We are children of the King. We are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. Our value doesn't come from self esteem, but God esteem. I'm valuable because God values me. How do I know? Because He gave His only Son Jesus for me.

Tuari Reweti was a Maori youth pastor in my previous church. I once went with him to introduce him to a much older Maori man that I knew, who was an Elder of his tribe, and a Christian leader of some stature. I was fascinated to see how the meeting went. First they did the hongi. A hongi is a traditional Maori greeting where people press their noses and the foreheads together, and exchange breath. Then they talked about where they were from – their mountain, their river, their tribe, their land, and finally, their fathers. With the Maori people, it's not about what you do for a job, or your education or your money – it's your whakapapa – your ancestry. It's who you are related to that is important. It's who you belong to. As I watched Sam and Tuari that morning I thought – this is what it means to be in the family of God. Who am I? I'm David McChesney, son of Vic and Edith McChesney, husband of my wife Lyn, father of my three children and grandfather of my 5 grandchildren, child of God. That's it. Nothing can beat that. I belong to Jesus Christ. What more could I want than that? God is my Father. That's where contentment comes from.

### **3. Contentment Is Learned**

The Apostle Paul says he has learned to be content. Contentment doesn't come naturally. We have to learn it. How do we learn to be content? I want to give you some practical ways that you can learn to be content. They will take practise. But the more you practise these things, you will find your level of contentment going up.

- **Thank God Every Day For What You Already Have**

Spend a few minutes every day itemising all the things you already have, rather than focussing on the things you don't have. Unless you are blind, thank him for all the things you can see. The Mt Blanc. The blue of the lake. The majesty of the mountains. The ant scurrying round. The bird building it's nest. Thank him for the things you can hear. The sound of children laughing. For music. For Swiss cowbells. Thank him for all that you can taste. For French bread. For Swiss chocolate and cheese. Thank God for the people who show his love to you. Thank him for your parents and your children, for your friends. For the freedom to worship. For your health. For the job you have. As the old hymn says, "Count your blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done". Your level of contentment is directly related to your ability to thank God for all he has given you. Show me a discontented person, and I'll show you someone who doesn't understand or appreciate what God has done for them.

- **Tell Yourself The Truth**

Let me describe a typical family scene. Mum and Dad say to the kids – "where shall we go to eat". And because some marketing genius has indoctrinated our kids, they all say "McDonalds" – because every little kid has a McDonalds shaped vacuum in their souls. And when they go to McDonalds the thing that the kids want is the happy meal. It is "the meal of great joy." You aren't just buying chicken McNuggets and a tiny plastic toy. You're buying happiness.

So, Dad buys them the Happy Meal, and it makes them happy for about a minute and a half. But then the happy wears off. You never hear of a young adult coming back to his parents and saying, "Gee, Dad, remember that Happy Meal you gave me? That's where I found lasting contentment and lifelong joy. I knew if I could just have that Happy Meal, I would be content for a lifetime, and I am. Thank you". In fact, the only one that Happy Meals bring real happiness to is McDonald's. That's why Ronald has that silly grin on his face. Twenty billion Happy Meals. Now, you would think that bright kids would figure this thing out. "You know, I keep getting these Happy Meals and they don't give me lasting happiness, so I'm not going to be a sucker any more. I'm not going to set myself up for disappointment anymore." But it never happens. They keep buying Happy Meals and they keep getting disappointed.

People, it's time to start telling ourselves the truth about our happy meals. And all the other stuff we keep on buying and doing, thinking it's going to bring us contentment. It's time to stop setting ourselves up for disappointment. It's time for us to identify those things that promise contentment and yet leave us disillusioned, and stay away from them. As an act of faith let go of the desires for things you want, but don't need, that you know won't satisfy. You will know what they are for you. The more you tell yourself the truth, the more your contentment levels will go up.

- **Appropriate The Power Of Christ.**

Paul says **"I can do everything through him who gives me strength"**. He's not saying he is self sufficient. He is saying he is Christ sufficient. The greatest treasure we will ever have is our relationship with Christ. He is the source of our strength. It's Christ in me that brings contentment. Paul is echoing the teaching of Jesus, when he said **"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."** (John 15:5)

Jesus is saying that apart from him, we can do nothing of lasting value in our lives. Paul is saying the same thing in a different way. We can do everything through Christ who gives us strength. The secret of being content is staying connected to Jesus. It is his strength that will provide the contentment we need.

It's connection to him that brings lasting contentment. When we are close to him, everything else pales in comparison. The secret of contentment is knowing Christ who gives us strength. Nothing else will satisfy us. Let God be your provider. Enjoy him as your Father. And with Christ as your source of power and strength, learn to be content.

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