

Contentment

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What is 'contentment'? It is to be at rest and satisfied within the situation in which you find yourself. Our purpose here is to study what the Bible says about it. I believe we will find that what God expects of us is to be content with the supply of the physical things we are given: what to eat, what to wear, and basic shelter. As for spiritual growth, usefulness for the Kingdom, and suffering, what God expects is different. These questions will be considered one by one.

Material supply: We can start with 1 Timothy 6:6-10.

“Now godliness with contentment is great gain. 7 We brought nothing into the world and it is certain that neither can we take anything out. 8 So having food and clothing we will be content with that. 9 But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and into many foolish and harmful desires, that plunge people into ruin and loss; 10 because the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil; in their greediness some have been led away from the faith and have impaled themselves on many distresses.”

Verse 7 is reminiscent of Luke 12:15-21, the parable of the rich man who only thought about amassing money. I repeat the conclusion here: “But God said to him: ‘Stupid! This very night your life is being taken back from you;¹ then who will get the things you have prepared?’ 21 Just like that is he who accumulates treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.” “Just like that” = “Stupid!” Being rich toward God means investing in His Kingdom. That's right; nobody can take it from here, but if you belong to Jesus, you can send it on ahead, by investing in the Kingdom of God down here.

Verse 8 is reminiscent of Matthew 6:31-33, a word of Sovereign Jesus: “Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans seek all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need each of these things. Rather, seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” “These things” refers to food, drink and clothing – the basics. Jesus does not promise luxury, and not always 'comfort'. Just how seeking the Kingdom first works out in practice will differ from person to person.

In verse 10, the love of money is just a root, not 'the' root. Love of money is just one of the causes that lead people to do evil. As for the 'distresses', as the Text says, "the way of transgressors is hard" (Proverbs 13:15). Remember that the Sovereign said: “You cannot serve God and mammon” (Luke 16:13). Someone who switches

¹ “Taken back” – we have our life on loan, like a trust, and an accounting will be required.

from God to mammon will probably never switch back. The final 'distress' will be the Lake of Fire.

Commenting on the entire passage, it should be obvious that the Text is not teaching us to do nothing. 2 Thessalonians 3:10 and 12: "If anyone does not want to work, neither let him eat!" Well now, whoever goes without eating ends up dying. To work is mandatory. Now verse 12: "We exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread". Of course, to eat your own bread, you have to earn it first. To earn your own bread, you will need to take whatever work available, not wait for a 'decent job'. If you don't eat while you are waiting, you will die!

By the way, it seems that God does not like lazy people. "Six days you shall labor" is in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:9). The book of Proverbs criticizes the sluggard several times. The first one is in 6:6: "Go to the ant, you sluggard! Consider her ways and be wise." Where I live, I myself have a constant fight with the little ants: they never stop! There are other texts on the subject, but I have commented enough.

Now let's look at Philippians 4:11-13.

"I am not saying this because of lack, since I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 12 I know what it is to be restricted, and I know what it is to have an abundance; everywhere and in every way I have been initiated both into being well fed and into being hungry, both into having plenty and into having need. 13 I can handle anything through Christ who strengthens me."

In verse 11 Paul says that he had to **learn** contentment, so it is not something automatic, and it's not even easy. In verse 13 Paul is not claiming to be all-powerful ('I can do all things'), but God's grace is sufficient to meet whatever comes its way. This grace is given case by case, and sometimes we have to ask for it.

See also Hebrews 13:5.

"Your way of life should be free from the love of money, being content with what you have, because He Himself has said: 'I absolutely will not desert you; I most certainly will not abandon you'."

What a wonderful promise! The reference is to Deuteronomy 31:6 and 8. In verse 8 Moses said this to Joshua, but in verse 6 Moses said it to all the people. So, the promise is valid for anyone who is living on behalf of the Kingdom.

Spiritual growth: We can start with Ephesians 4:11-13.

11 Yes, He Himself gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers,¹ 12 for the equipping of the saints into the work of the ministry, so as to build up the body of Christ, 13 until we all attain into the unity of the faith and of the real knowledge of the Son of God, into a complete man, into the resulting full stature of Christ;

Verse 13 emphasizes the truth in verse 12—every believer is supposed to grow into full stature. Just because we do not reach a goal does not invalidate that goal. Until we reach the “full stature of Christ,” we must not stop growing.

Now let's look at Luke 10:27.

25 And then, a certain lawyer stood up to test Him, saying, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 26 So He said to him: “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” 27 In answer he said: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with

¹ I take it that this list follows the chronological sequence of the several ministries. An apostle introduces the Gospel into an area or context; a prophet gets the people's attention and an evangelist urges them to believe; but once people are regenerated then pastors and teachers come to the fore—they are the ones who equip the saints. It is simply a fact of life that someone with a shepherd's heart is not necessarily a good teacher, and an honest to goodness teacher often lacks a shepherd's heart. The functions are supposed to be complementary, and the object is to get all true believers involved in the work of the ministry. Life in Christ is not a spectator sport!

I will venture some further observations about this. What would be the function of an apostle within an established, functioning congregation? Probably none at all, in that specific capacity—he might function as a teacher. Presumably the apostolic function is directed outside of established congregations, unless it be as God's special emissary, an official intervener, for disciplinary purposes.

I will take up evangelist next; what would his function be within an established congregation? Well, can you evangelize someone who is already regenerated? Evidently the function of an evangelist is directed to unbelievers, who should not be members of the congregation (although some often are). Of course an evangelist might also function as a pastor or teacher. A truly gifted evangelist will function beyond the limits of a local congregation.

As for the prophetic function, I will address the question of supernatural revelation of information not available through existing channels. (1 Corinthians 14:3 speaks of 'edification', 'exhortation' and 'comfort' as coming from a prophet.) We understand that the Canon of Scripture is closed; God is no longer giving written revelation that is of general or universal application. But that does not mean that God no longer speaks into specific situations. Divine guidance is a type of prophecy; He is giving information not otherwise available. I myself have been contemplated with a prophecy delivered by someone who had no idea who I was, and not in the context of a local congregation. The function of a true prophet cannot be limited to one congregation. Indeed, God may use a prophet at city, state or country level. Our world desperately needs prophetic voices.

A teacher usually resides in a specific community, but his ministry may range beyond it. A pastor's function is local, just as he was chosen and ordained locally. It is simply a fact of life that someone with a shepherd's heart is not necessarily a good teacher, and an honest to goodness teacher may not have a shepherd's heart. The functions should complement each other, and the goal is to get all true believers involved in the work of the ministry. Life in Christ is not a spectator sport!

all your mind, and, your neighbor as yourself.”¹ 28 So He said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this and you will live!”

Notice that Jesus agreed with him. If you check Deuteronomy 6:5, it mentions only three components of the person, while here in Luke 10:27 there are four. The explanation I give is that the third Hebrew word has such a broad semantic area that in Greek it was considered necessary to use two words to cover that semantic area. What is being said is that we must love our God with all of our being, with all that we are and have. It should be obvious that this is not to stop ever.

Consider also John 14:21-23.

21 The one who has my commandments and keeps them, he is the one who loves me. Now the one who loves me will be loved by my Father; and I will love him, and reveal myself to him.” 22 Judas (not the Iscariot) says to Him, “Lord, just how is it that You are going to reveal Yourself to us and not to the world?” 23 Jesus answered and said to him: “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word. And my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

In verse 21 the Lord gives an important insight on spiritual growth, here: our love → our obedience → His love → His self-revelation. Can you love someone you don't know? Perhaps in theory, but not really. The more you know someone the more you love him/her (especially if they are nice). As we come to know the Lord we grow to love Him, which translates into obedience, which leads Him to reveal Himself to us, which increases our knowledge of Him, which increases our love for Him, which increases our obedience, which increases His self-revelation, which increases our knowledge, love, obedience, and so on. It is an upward spiral which takes us ever closer to Him. But there is one 'small detail': if we stop, He does too.

Now for verse 23: Like, wow—did you get that? We have always been taught (correctly) that the Holy Spirit indwells the true believer, but here the Lord says that the Father and the Son can be at home with us as well. That is all three persons of the Trinity! There is a condition, however—we must keep Jesus' word, which is really the Father's (next verse). The indispensable evidence that we love God is to obey His word; this stimulates His love in return. There is evidently some sense in which we influence the manifestation of His love, at least. The answer to Judas' question is that the 'revealing' is one on one, and is triggered by one's obedience. So the world is out.

Now let's look at Matthew 13:12: “For whoever has, to him more will be given and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken

¹ See Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18—to include the 'neighbor' he had to quote from a different book.

away from him.” Spiritual growth is like going up an incline on a bicycle with no brakes; if you stop pedaling, you start to go backwards. We must keep learning and growing; if we stop, we start to lose.

Usefulness for the Kingdom: Our spiritual growth has everything to do with our usefulness for the Kingdom, obviously. Then, when you understand that God has a specific direction for your life, you should do what you can to prepare yourself for that function. Each life represents a potential, and the full realization of that potential can only be achieved if the life is lived for the Kingdom of Christ on earth. When someone throws away that potential by choosing an inferior road, it is a cause for sadness, not for contentment. Satisfaction is part of contentment, and we are not to be satisfied with inferior roads.

There are also texts with a general application:

1) “Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness” (Matthew 6:33). ‘Seeking’ is a process, and it is something every Christian should do.

2) Matthew 5:13-14: “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt becomes insipid, with what will it be salted? It is then good for nothing except to be thrown out and trampled down by the people.¹ You are the light of the world. A city located upon a hill cannot be hidden.” The ‘point’ is that both salt and light are aggressive. If you put a pinch of salt in a pan of rice, it seasons all of it. Darkness is simply the absence of light. We have a duty to actively promote Kingdom values in all environments where we work.

3) 1 Timothy 3:1-2: “Here is a trustworthy word: if a man aspires to the position of overseer,² he desires a good work. 2 Now then, it is obligatory for the overseer to be above reproach, a one-woman man,³ temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, good at teaching [and the list goes on].” The ‘point’ here is that this ambition is declared to be a good thing. The long list of prerequisites serves to prevent anyone from doing so out of mere personal ambition and not for the good of the Kingdom.

4) 1 Corinthians 7:20-21: “Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called. 21 Were you called while a slave? Do not let it bother you, but if you can really

¹ ‘Christians’ who have caved in to the world’s values and life style are like insipid salt – good for nothing except to be thrown out. (Insipid salt was thrown on the road, which helped to keep down the dust.) The implications of this have become increasingly serious in today’s world.

² The term here is usually rendered ‘bishop’, but today a bishop is one who has authority over a number of other pastors/presbyters/elders, whereas in the New Testament these four terms evidently refer to a single office in the church.

³ That is what the Text says, strictly speaking, emphasizing the quality—a man who has only one wife, but has a wandering eye, would not qualify. However, the term ‘woman’ can also mean ‘wife’, and because of the reference to children in verse four most versions render ‘wife’. The term “man” here refers exclusively to males; there is no room here for a female overseer.

become free, do so.” It is not for us to be distressed because of our social condition, but if the Lord opens an opportunity to improve it, I believe that we can (and should) take advantage of it, just like the slave. This improvement is expected to translate into benefit for the Kingdom. There are other texts, but I think we can go on.

Suffering: I think it is obvious that it is hard to be content when you are suffering. Further, if it is God Himself who has sent the suffering, it is not for us to be content; it is to learn the lesson He is trying to teach us. Consider Hebrews 12:5-11:

“You have forgotten the exhortation that instructs you as sons: “My son, do not make light of the LORD’s discipline, nor lose heart when you are reproved by Him; 6 because whom the LORD loves He chastens, yes scourges every son whom He accepts.” 7 If you are enduring discipline, God is dealing with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not discipline? 8 But if you are without discipline (something everyone undergoes),¹ then you are illegitimate and not sons. 9 Furthermore, we have had our human fathers as correctors and respected them. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits² and live? 10 Now they indeed disciplined us during a short period as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, so that we may partake of His holiness. 11 Now no discipline seems to be pleasant at the time, but painful; yet afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been exercised by it.

The quote is from Proverbs 3:11-12. When I was a boy my father had a horse, a gentle creature, and a proper horsewhip to go with it. I found myself on the business end of that whip more than once (more often than did the horse), and I can assure the reader that it was not a pleasant experience. So God’s scourgings tend not to be very pleasant; but if we end up partaking of His holiness (verse 10), it will be worth it. At the end of verse 11 we have the ‘secret’—we must be “exercised” by the discipline; that is, we must learn whatever lesson the Lord is trying to teach us. There are notable cases, like Job’s experience and Paul’s ‘thorn’.

There is also the problem of the consequences of sins. Everything in life has consequences; they can be either good or bad, depending on the cause. We spend our lives victimizing and being victimized. We victimize others with the consequences of our sins and we are victimized by the consequences of others’ sins. That is a two-way street, but the flow is not the same in both. Obviously some people sin more than others, and some hurt others on purpose. And the function also enters the equation: when the head of the family sins, the family suffers; when

¹ At that time there was probably no culture dominated by relativistic humanism.

² “The Father of spirits”—an interesting concept. All created spirits owe their existence to Him.

a pastor sins, the church suffers; when the mayor sins, the municipality suffers; when the governor sins, the state suffers; when the president sins, the country suffers. And there is no way to escape this suffering, unless God performs a miracle in specific cases. And there is more: sins accumulate. When the 'bucket' is finally full (Genesis 15:16), God determines the destruction of the entity, and whoever is close by suffers. The 45th chapter of Jeremiah deals with such a case. Baruch thought he deserved special treatment, but verses 4 and 5 give us God's answer.

And then there is the matter of 'completing' the sufferings of Christ. Consider Colossians 1:24: " Now I rejoice in my sufferings¹ on your behalf and supplement in my flesh the things lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the Church". Evidently the ongoing well-being of the Church requires suffering on our part (we cannot add to the saving work of Christ), the enduring of affliction—Satan and his minions are very active in this world. Let's also look at 2 Corinthians 1:5: "Because just as the sufferings of the Christ flow over into us, so also our encouraging overflows, through Christ." We get our share of suffering, we participate in Christ's sufferings. Evidently for God's Kingdom to increase among men, as we continue to undo Satan's works in the world, we have to suffer. Evidently for God's Kingdom to increase among men, as we continue to undo Satan's works in the world, we have to suffer. 1 Peter 4:13 links this suffering to our reward: the more that we suffer for the sake of the Kingdom, the greater the reward.

Conclusion: What is 'contentment'? It is to be at rest and satisfied within the situation in which you find yourself. What God expects of us is to be content with the supply of the physical things we are given: what to eat, what to wear, and basic shelter. Naturally He will have to supply the things necessary for us to do the work He assigns us to do. As for spiritual growth, usefulness for the Kingdom, and suffering, what God expects is different, as explained above.

¹ I confess that I have not yet arrived at this spiritual level, to rejoice in suffering.