

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

CULTIVATING CONTENTMENT

Hebrews 13:5-6

By

Steven J. Cole

February 20, 2005

© Steven J. Cole, 2005

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, Updated Edition
© The Lockman Foundation

February 20, 2005
Hebrews Lesson 53

Cultivating Contentment Hebrews 13:5-6

A Jewish man in Hungary went to his rabbi and complained, "Life is unbearable. There are nine of us living in one room. What can I do?" The rabbi answered, "Take your goat into the room with you." The man was incredulous, but the rabbi insisted, "Do as I say and come back in a week."

A week later the man returned looking more distraught than before. "We can't stand it," he told the rabbi. "The goat is filthy." The rabbi said, "Go home and let the goat out, and come back in a week." A week later the man returned, radiant, exclaiming, "Life is beautiful. We enjoy every minute of it now that there's no goat—only the nine of us." (*Reader's Digest* [12/81].) Contentment is more a matter of our perspective than of our circumstances, isn't it!

But even among God's people, true contentment is not common. The Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs captured this fact by titling his book, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. The philosopher, Immanuel Kant, saw this when he observed, "Give a man everything he wants, and at that moment, everything will not be everything" (cited by Richard Swenson, *Margin* [NavPress], p. 190).

Though rare, contentment is not just nice for believers. The participle implies a command: "Be[ing] content with what you have." To grumble about our circumstances is to challenge the love and goodness of our heavenly Father. To be discontented implies that He has not provided us with what we need. Discontent was the sin of Israel in the wilderness. God had just miraculously delivered them from slavery in Egypt and He was miraculously meeting their needs, yet they grumbled about their hardships and threatened to return to Egypt.

The exhortation of our text may stem from what the author said in 10:34, where he reminded them that in the former days (10:32), "you ... accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one." But now they needed endurance (10:36). Perhaps after

their property had been unlawfully seized, anxiety had set in. Some of them now were focused on regaining their possessions, no matter what it required. But, pursuing material things can easily cross the line into loving them. And the love of money or things (13:5) is opposed to the love of the brethren (13:1). So the author calls them to contentment and shows them how to cultivate this rare, but essential, Christian jewel.

Contentment is cultivated by pulling the weeds of greed and by building your life on God and His promises.

1. Contentment must be cultivated.

Like a beautiful garden, contentment does not grow without deliberate aim and effort. The apostle Paul wrote from prison (Phil. 4:11), "I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am." If Paul had to *learn* contentment, then so do we.

What is Christian contentment? Jeremy Burroughs defines it as "that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition" (in Swenson, p. 200). John Owen wrote, "... contentment is a gracious frame or disposition of mind, quiet and composed; without, [1.] Complaining ... at God's providential disposals of our outward concerns; [2.] All envy at the more prosperous conditions of others; [3.] Fears and anxious cares about future supplies; and, [4.] Desires and designs of those things which a more plentiful condition than what we are in would supply us [with]" (*An Exposition of Hebrews* [The National Foundation for Christian Education], pp. 411-412). To develop and maintain contentment, we must realize that...

A. The world constantly seeks to make us feel discontented.

All advertising, whether on TV, billboards, or in catalogs, is designed to make you think, "I need this product to be happy!" A PBS television program stated that the average American sees over a million commercials by age 20 (Randy Alcorn, *The Treasure Principle* [Multnomah Publishers], p. 50). I don't know how they came up with that number, but it averages out to 137 per day, if you start at birth! Even a fraction of that many commercials has got to affect us! So we have to fight the influence of the world, or its swift current will sweep us downstream.

Before we go farther, we should address the question that our text raises, "Is it wrong to seek to better our circumstances through hard work and a better income?" The opposite question would be, "Should we be unconcerned about material things and our financial condition?" Should we just drift through life without ambition, living from hand to mouth?

As with many biblical principles, there is a balance that we must maintain by holding seemingly opposite truths in tension. On the one hand, the Bible condemns laziness and calls us to work hard to provide for our family's and our own needs (Prov. 10:4-5; 24:30-34). Paul strongly states (1 Tim. 5:8): "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." He reminded the Thessalonians of his own example of hard work to provide for his needs (2 Thess. 3:7-12). He commanded them (3:10), "if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either."

The Bible also commends wealth as a sign of God's blessing (Ps. 112:3; Prov. 10:22). It commands us to manage the money and possessions that God has entrusted to us carefully and to have the foresight and discipline to provide for anticipated future needs (Prov. 6:6-11; 13:22; 15:6; 21:5, 20; 27:23-27).

On the other hand, the Bible warns us about the dangers of wealth (Prov. 11:4, 28; 30:8-9). Jesus shocked the disciples when He said, "Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:23). Paul warned (1 Tim. 6:9-10), "But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."

As you hold these truths in tension, your *motive* for seeking more money is crucial. To seek to meet legitimate personal or family needs so that you don't become a burden to the church or society is proper. To want more money so that you can give more is good (2 Cor. 9:8; Eph. 4:28).

But if you drift into trusting wealth rather than the Lord for present or future security, you're off course (Prov. 11:28; Jer. 17:5-

6). If you're storing up treasures on earth, rather than in heaven, you'll lose it all (Matt. 6:19-34). If you live in abundance, but don't help the poor, you're committing the sin of the people of Sodom (Ezek. 16:49). If you're seeking contentment in money or things, rather than in God Himself, you will come up empty (1 Tim. 6:5-10). So, be careful so that you're not deceived.

B. Contentment does not grow without cultivation and maintenance.

You may be content in the Lord today, but tomorrow you could be tempted toward greed or envy. Contentment and greed are attitudes that start in your mind. To cultivate contentment, you've got to guard your thought life and constantly work at developing a biblical view of life, of material possessions, and of eternity. You have to avoid comparing yourself with others, recognizing that God is sovereign and that He has different purposes for different people. Perhaps He knows that if He entrusted more money to you, you would stop trusting Him and be spiritually ruined.

So to cultivate and maintain contentment, you must daily bow before God's sovereignty, trust Him to provide for all of your needs, and keep an eternal perspective. The beloved Psalm 23 is a picture of a contented sheep, enjoying the provision of the Good Shepherd. Meditate on it until it becomes your perspective.

But our text recognizes that the garden of contentment does not grow weed-free. Therefore,

2. Contentment is cultivated by constantly pulling the weeds of greed.

"Make sure that your character [or, way of life] is free from the love of money." This is not the only place where greed is listed in the same context as sexual immorality (Rom. 1:26-27, 29; 1 Cor. 5:10-11; Eph. 4:19; 5:3, 5; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 4:3-6; 2 Pet. 2:14). The Bible presents greed as a terrible sin, equal to idolatry (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5). It ruined Balaam (2 Pet. 2:15), Achan (Josh. 7:1, 20-21), Elisha's servant, Gehazi (2 Kings 5:20-27), the rich young ruler (Matt. 19:16-22), Judas Iscariot (John 12:6), Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-10), and Felix (Acts 24:26).

Jesus mentions "worries and riches and the pleasures of this life" as the thorns that choke out the word from bearing fruit

(Luke 8:14). He warned, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). He went on to tell the parable of the rich fool who planned to build bigger barns to hold his wealth, but died that night. He concluded, "So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God" (Luke 12:21).

So greed or the love of money is a dangerous weed that keeps popping up in each of our lives. You can pull it one day, and it comes back the next. You will not enjoy God's contentment unless you keep weeding. Here are four ways to keep it from taking over:

- A. To pull the weeds of greed, acknowledge God's ownership of all that you have.

Psalm 24:1 declares, "The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains." Paul asks rhetorically (1 Cor. 6:19-20), "Or do you not know ... that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price; ..." Jesus frequently used parables in which God is the owner and we are His managers or stewards (Matt. 25:14-30). As such, the owner entrusts us with resources that we are to use to make a profit *for His purposes*. The owner lets us draw a reasonable salary, but to squander the owner's assets on frivolous things for our own use is to be an irresponsible manager. If we do that, we're forgetting that we don't own the store. We just work there, managing it for the owner. Someday He is going to check the books to see if we made a profit for His interests.

To pull out the weeds of greed and to get God's perspective on money and possessions, yield it all to Him because He rightfully owns it. You need to manage it and take care of it for Him, but if He takes it away, that's His business. I know that it's painful to suffer a financial loss or to have property stolen. But it's less painful if you can say, "Lord, they stole *Your* property!"

- B. To pull the weeds of greed, put your treasure where you want your heart to be.

Jesus plainly taught, "for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:21). You've experienced this principle. Perhaps you invested in a stock, such as AT&T. You pick up the paper and read that some communication giant has just bought out

AT&T. Do you go, “Ho hum,” and turn the page? No, you read that article carefully to learn whether your AT&T stock is going up or down. You may read the Wall Street Journal to get their take on things, and maybe call your broker. Why? Because your heart followed your treasure into AT&T.

If you want your heart in the things of God, invest your treasure there. If you support a missionary in China and you read about a government crackdown on Christianity in China, you’ll have that missionary and country on your heart in prayer. You’ll contact him to find out what’s going on. Your heart is there because you invested your treasure there.

C. To pull the weeds of greed, live in light of eternity.

Greed is always shortsighted, focused on this life only. Put a man on his deathbed, and offer him a billion dollars. Apart from leaving it to his heirs, the money would be worthless to him. Death isn’t a pretty good chance—it’s a certainty! And you leave it *all* behind. Two people were discussing the recent death of a wealthy man. One asked, “How much did he leave?” The other answered, “All of it!” You never see a hearse pulling a U-Haul!

You can’t take it with you, but you can send it ahead to the Bank of Heaven. Both Jesus and Paul talked about laying up treasures in heaven (Matt. 6:19; 1 Tim. 6:17-19). Jesus told the parable about the unrighteous steward (Luke 16:1-8), who knew that he was going to get fired. So he quickly used what he had to make friends for himself for the future. Jesus applied it (16:9), “And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings.” He did *not* say, “*if* it fails,” but, “*when* it fails.” Money *will* fail us at death. Jesus is telling us to use unrighteous money now to make friends for eternity. Use your money that undoubtedly will fail to invest in something that certainly will succeed, namely, bringing people to heaven.

D. To pull the weeds of greed, make it your aim to give more, not to accumulate more.

Giving is God’s antidote for the poison of greed. But when we get more money, we’re all tempted to spend or keep it for ourselves. God may be sending you more to help you get some things

to make life more comfortable. As a loving Father, He does not deny His children good things. But He may be sending you more so that you can channel it to further His purposes. If you assume that it's all to spend on yourself, you may be misusing it.

As I've often taught, tithing (giving 10 percent) is *not* God's standard for New Testament giving. It may be a convenient *low* amount to start with, but the New Testament standard is, as God has prospered you (1 Cor. 16:2). Remember, He owns it *all*, not just ten percent! In the context of an appeal for giving, Paul wrote, "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every *new toy*" (2 Cor. 9:8). No, he *didn't* say that! He said, "for every *good deed*"! When God gives you an abundance, if your needs are met, prayerfully consider giving the surplus to the Lord's work.

George Muller, who depended on God's people for his support, lived simply and gave away the rest. For many years, he almost, if not completely, supported the entire staff of 33 missionaries with the China Inland Mission (Roger Steer, *George Muller: Delighted in God* [Harold Shaw Publishers], p. 224)! In a typical year, 1874, he lived on eight percent of his income, and gave away 92 percent (A. T. Pierson, *George Muller of Bristol* [Revell], pp. 183, 338). Muller could have been a wealthy man, living lavishly. He chose instead to live simply and lay up treasures in heaven. Giving is God's way to pull the weeds of greed.

Contentment must be cultivated, and it comes by constantly pulling the weeds of greed. But what's the motivation for this?

3. Contentment comes by building your life on God and His promises.

"For He Himself has said, 'I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you,' so that we confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What will man do to me?'" The first quote is not found in this exact form in the Old Testament, but there are many similar quotes (Deut. 31:6, 8; Josh. 1:5; 1 Chron. 28:20; Isa. 41:10-13). Perhaps the author was lumping them together in summary form. The second quote is from Psalm 118:6. These verses could easily be expanded into another sermon, but note briefly:

- A. Contentment comes through building your life on God Himself, not on something you want Him to give you.

If you are “using” God to give you what you want, you will never be content, because things can never satisfy our hearts. You get what you thought would make you happy, but the glitter quickly wears off, and you go searching for something else. Only God can satisfy our hearts. Israel in the wilderness craved intensely for meat. God sent them meat, but with it they got leanness of soul (Ps. 106:15, NASB, margin). Rachel told Jacob, “Give me children, or else I die” (Gen. 30:1). God gave her children, but she did die at the birth of the second son.

By way of contrast, in Psalm 73, the psalmist was envious of the prosperity of the wicked until he considered things in light of eternity. He realized that God would judge the wicked, but that he would go to heaven. Then he exclaimed (73:25-26), “Whom have I in heaven, but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” Yes! Build your life on God Himself and your soul will be satisfied. David was in a barren desert, with enemies seeking his life. But because he sought God, he wrote, “My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness, and my mouth offers praises with joyful lips” (Ps. 63:5).

- B. Contentment comes through building your life on God’s certain promises.

“*He Himself* has promised!” These promises are not the words of fickle men, who may mean well, but who often fail. These are the promises of the living God, who spoke the universe into existence, who never fails! The author mentions two promises:

- (1) Build your life on God’s promise never to desert or forsake you.

Our English translations do not bring out the Greek, which has five negatives for emphasis. Perhaps the best English rendering is the hymn, “How Firm a Foundation”:

“The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not, desert to his foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I’ll never, no never, no never forsake!”

God hammers home the assurance that there are no circumstances, ever or anywhere, in which He abandons His children. Even when His saints go through horrible persecution or tortuous deaths, He is there with them and uses the trial to take them to be with Him in heaven for all eternity. The reality of that comforting truth enables us to be content in all circumstances. Our money, our health, or our loved ones may all be taken, but God Himself remains! Having God is all that we need for contentment!

(2) Build your life on God's promise to be your helper.

The Hebrews were facing persecution, which is scary. But the author quotes Psalm 118:6 to make the point, if God is your helper, what can man do to you? In fear, you may say, "Man can take all my earthly possessions! Man can torture me or kill me or my family!" True, but no one can take the Lord or His riches in heaven from you, and that's what matters. As Martin Luther put it ("A Mighty Fortress is Our God"), "The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still. His kingdom is forever."

Conclusion

Henry Kissinger observed, "To Americans usually tragedy is wanting something very badly and not getting it. Many people have had to learn in their private lives, and nations have had to learn in their historical experience, that perhaps the worst form of tragedy is wanting something badly, getting it, and finding it empty" (cited by Swenson, p. 196).

So, where do you begin to cultivate contentment that will never disappoint? You have to start in the right place. A. W. Tozer had it right when he said, "The man who has God for his treasure has all things in One" (*The Pursuit of God* [Christian Publications], p. 20). A Puritan sat down to his meal and found that he had only a little bread and some water. His response was to exclaim, "What? All this and Jesus Christ, too!" George Muller used to say that the first business of every day is to be truly at rest and happy in God (Pierson, pp. 257, 315). Start there! And make sure to spend some time each day pulling the weeds of greed.

Discussion Questions

1. How can a believer know when “enough is enough” with regard to our level of affluence?
2. Should Christians have investments, savings and retirement accounts? If so, how do we know how much?
3. How can a Christian determine whether to take a job promotion that requires a move and more of his time?
4. Where is the line between seeking God for something you want Him to give you, and seeking God for Himself?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2005, All Rights Reserved.