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## PRESCRIPTION FOR CONTENTMENT

1 Timothy 6:6-8

By

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Lesson 21

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The Russian author Tolstoy tells the story of a rich peasant who was never satisfied. He always wanted more. He heard of a wonderful chance to get more land. For 1,000 rubles he could have all the land he could walk around in a day. But he had to make it back by sundown or lose all his money.

He arose early and set out. He walked on and on, his greed driving him just a little farther as he saw new territory. Finally he realized that he had to turn back and he had to walk very fast if he was to get back in time to claim the land. As the sun got lower in the sky, he quickened his pace. As the sun neared the horizon, he began to run. Finally, he saw the starting place. His heart was pounding rapidly and he was gasping for breath, but he gave it everything he had and plunged over the finish line, fell to the ground, and collapsed, just seconds before the sun disappeared below the horizon. A stream of blood poured out of his mouth and he lay dead. His servant took a spade and dug a grave. He made it just long enough and just wide enough and buried him.

The title of Tolstoy's story is "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" He concludes by saying, "Six feet from his head to his heels was all he needed."

Although Tolstoy penned his tale in 1886 in Russia, it speaks to our times. A T-shirt put it: "All I want is a little bit more than I'll ever have." Let's face it: the world instills in us the attitude, "To be happy, I need more." That's the underlying assumption behind all advertising: "You can't be happy until you own our product. If you want to enjoy life, then you need this. And you can buy now, pay later, on our easy credit plan!"

And so we take the bait. Of course we need two incomes to support that kind of lifestyle, so both husband and wife go to work. We spend our lives collecting trinkets and toys, in bondage to our credit cards.

But one thing is lacking in this frenzied pursuit for material things: Contentment. Many Christians get sucked into the swamp of discontent. Are you a contented Christian? Think over this past week: Was your time spent pursuing godliness with contentment, or was it consumed with going after material things? I'm not talking about the basics--food, clothing, and shelter. I'm talking about a lifestyle marked by the pursuit of all of the junk that Madison Avenue tries to convince us that we need.

Our text shows us that God has called His people to a life marked by contentment. Becoming a godly person brings us great gain--not necessarily in the material realm, as some false teachers in Paul's day and in ours say--but in the inner person. Part of the gain of godliness is contentment. But how do we gain contentment? How do we extricate ourselves from the pervasive appeals of our materialistic culture so that we can be content with what we have (Heb. 13:5)? In these verses (1 Tim. 6:6-8) Paul shows us that

Contentment comes from having the priority of godliness, not gain, and the perspective of the eternal, not the temporal.

1. Contentment comes from having the priority of godliness, not gain.

Paul has just (6:3-5) confronted the false teachers who supposed that godliness was a means of (material) gain. But then with a play of words, he clarifies that godliness is actually a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment (v. 6). Godly people have the inner peace of knowing that they are right with God and that whether they live or die, they belong to Him because He is truly the Lord of their lives.

Paul is simply presenting the two choices of masters Jesus gave: God or mammon (money). Note verse 9 in contrast with verse 11: a man of God must flee from the desire to get rich and pursue godliness. Fleeing and pursuing are opposites. Take your pick: You can pursue godliness, or you can pursue material gain. Those are the only options. You may not choose both.

Do you wrestle personally with the radical exclusivity of Jesus' words, "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Luke 16:13)? He didn't say, "You *should not* serve God and mammon," but rather,

"You *cannot* serve" them both. Most of us try to work out a compromise: How about if I'm 60 percent for God and 40 percent for mammon? But Jesus knew our hearts, so He drew the line in the sand as if to say, "Choose your lord! Will it be God, in which case you relinquish all right of ownership? Or, will it be mammon, in which case—let's say it plainly—you are not serving God?"

Does this mean that to follow God you have to take a vow of poverty? No, when we come to 6:17-19 we'll see that it is possible to be both good and rich. But let's not be too quick to squirm out from under Jesus' radical demands! There ought to be an observable difference between the lifestyles of Christians, whose Master is God, and pagans, who are seeking contentment by living for the things of this world.

If God is truly my Master, so that I find contentment by pleasing Him, it will show up in how I spend money and in how much I give to His cause. That's why I think tithing is a misleading concept. If you follow God, you don't just pay Him off with ten percent and then you're free to squander the rest as you like. He owns it all; you just manage it for Him. An outsider ought to be able to look at your checkbook and tell who your Master is!

We would be wrong to judge one another when it comes to material possessions. Each person must answer to the Lord. But it would also be wrong *not* to judge ourselves! We need to ask ourselves honestly, "Am I seeking first God's kingdom and righteousness, or am I seeking first the things of this world?" My use of money and things do, in fact, reflect my priorities. I believe that Jesus and Paul are both clear, that we must seek to live as simply and economically as possible ("food and covering"), and free the rest to further God's kingdom. If you don't struggle with this continually, you're probably living for gain, not for godliness. Contentment comes from having the priority of godliness, not gain.

2. Contentment comes from having the perspective of the eternal, not the temporal.

Verse 7 focuses us on the transitory nature of life and of the futility of putting our hopes in temporal things. You can't take it with you! A lot of people get caught up in climbing the ladder of success only to find that the ladder was leaning against the wrong

wall! A sad article in last Sunday's paper told of how the once-mighty baseball slugger Ted Williams is, at 75, barely able to move, due to several strokes. This man who achieved the pinnacle of athletic success and fame can hardly plod along with a walker now. Williams is quoted as saying, "Supposed to be the golden years. You wonder." If we are leaning our ladder against the temporal which will perish instead of the eternal which will outlast this world, we are climbing it in vain.

How can you tell if your life is marked by the eternal perspective? If you are living for the eternal, not the temporal, you will experience three facets of contentment: freedom from greed; freedom from anxiety; and, freedom from circumstances as the basis for happiness.

- A. The eternal perspective will result in freedom from greed.

(Note Luke 12:13-21, esp. v. 15). Have you ever thought about how we rank various sins? We have our lists of really bad sins and of those that aren't so bad. Where does greed rank in your list? It's almost a virtue in America!

If you look up every reference to "greed" or "covetousness" (the same thing), you will find that most often it is mentioned right next to sexual immorality. In 1 Corinthians 5:11 Paul says that we should not even associate with any so-called Christian who is covetous. In Colossians 3:5 Paul says that greed is equivalent to idolatry. Greed is a serious sin! It will create a number of problems. Let me point out just two:

(1) Greed creates family conflicts (Luke 12:13). These two brothers were at odds because one wouldn't divide the family inheritance with the other. But when Jesus gives this warning against greed, the text implies that He is applying it to the man who felt cheated, not the other man (who may not even have been present). Isn't that interesting! I would have expected the Lord to say, "You have been wronged! What a greedy brother you have!" But instead He warns the man about his own greed!

Greed creates relational conflicts. How about it, wives? Are you content with what your husband provides? Husbands, are you greedy for your toys, so your wife is left without adequate money

for the household? A classic place to watch the fur fly between family members is when a family member dies. I read some time ago about one of the nephews of the Ford family who was suing another family member because his multi-million dollar inheritance wasn't as high as he thought it ought to be!

(2) Greed creates perverted values (Luke 12:16-21). The man in the parable valued personal affluence and comfort above riches with God. He sought contentment, and verse 19 sounds like he had it. But it didn't last. The only kind of contentment worth having is the kind that lasts. So what if you have plenty stored up for years to come if you die tonight? So what if you work all your life to put aside a nice little nest egg for retirement if you can't be guaranteed of enjoying it?

I read somewhere that the average life expectancy of the American male after retirement is three years. It's not wrong to plan for retirement. But if you're living for the day when you can quit work and live for selfish pleasures, then greed has perverted your values. You're not living for the eternal kingdom of God, but for the enjoyments of this life. Focusing your life on the eternal perspective will result in freedom from greed.

B. The eternal perspective will result in freedom from anxiety.

(Luke 12:22-34). While the Bible does not prohibit and even encourages us to make prudent provision for future needs (Prov. 6:6-11), it never teaches that the way to be free from anxiety is to save enough to cover every future need. While it would be irresponsible not to provide for our family's needs, it would be worldly to trust in our provisions or to greedily store them up for ourselves with no view of our stewardship to the rightful owner, namely, God. Our anxiety over money often reveals both greed and a lack of faith, which the Lord here rebukes.

The key to overcoming anxiety with regard to financial matters is given in verse 31. It's a conditional promise. You must do something: Seek for His kingdom. Then God will do something: Add these things to you.

What does it mean to seek God's kingdom? God's kingdom is the realm where He is king. There is a future aspect of the king-

dom, in that some day Jesus Christ will return to earth bodily to reign. But there is also a present aspect of the kingdom, namely, submitting yourself to Jesus Christ as King and seeking to bring others under His reign.

How you do that will vary, depending on your spiritual gifts, personality, and other factors. But whether through leading a Bible study, through quiet conversation over dinner, or by helping a neighbor fix his car, or what ever—by your lifestyle and by your words you are committed to one objective: to see Jesus Christ enthroned as King over all.

Do you seek God's kingdom? Let me give you some questions that will help you answer that question honestly:

(1) What do I want most in life? When I reach the end, what do I want to look back and see that God did with my life above all else?

(2) What do I think about the most? We all have a lot to think about—family, jobs, future, the news, school, friends. But what occupies your mind when you are alone? Do you think about the cause of Christ and how you fit in?

(3) How do I spend my spare time? You may be saying, "What spare time?" If you're a workaholic, that says something about your values. The way you spend your time reflects what you are seeking in life. It may be obvious, but it needs to be said: Jesus did not say "Seek first the TV set and all these things shall be added unto you."

(4) How do I spend my money? Where you put your money is where your heart will be (v. 34). Jesus did not say, "Where your heart is, there your treasure will be." It's the other way around. Your heart follows your treasure. If you put your treasure into the stock market, your heart will follow. If you put your treasure into recreation, your heart will follow. If you put your treasure into the kingdom of God, your heart will follow.

Godfrey Davis, who wrote a biography on the Duke of Wellington, noted his advantage over other biographers: "I found an old account ledger that showed how the Duke spent his money. It was a far better clue to what he thought was really important than the reading of his letters or speeches."

I would encourage you to invest wisely in that which furthers the kingdom of God. That will include giving generously to His cause, of course. But it also includes spending your money on developing relationships with people you're seeking to win or build in Christ (Luke 16:9). Take your family on a short term missions trip. Invest in attending a good conference to increase your ministry skills, such as the Precept training or the Self-Confrontation course. Rather than cluttering your home with junk, why not invest in good Christian books and worship tapes to help your family grow in Christ?

(5) Who are my heroes? Whom do you admire the most? Why? Is it someone who has climbed the ladder of financial success? Or is it someone who has accomplished much for the kingdom of God? Your heroes reflect your values.

The eternal perspective means seeking God's kingdom above all else. It will result in freedom from greed and in freedom from anxiety.

- C. The eternal perspective will result in freedom from circumstances as the basis for happiness.

Contentment means that you are focused on the eternal. You are aware of the shortness of life. Therefore, your life is committed to seeking first the kingdom of God, the only thing that will last. Since you trust in the sovereign God, you're not tossed around by changing circumstances.

You can see this principle illustrated throughout the Apostle Paul's life, but perhaps no where as clearly as in Philippians 4:10-13. The theme of Philippians is joy, and that is quite remarkable, because Paul was in difficult circumstances. He was in prison under false charges (and had been for over two years!). Other Christian teachers were attacking him. The legalists were trying to win over his converts. The church in Philippi had some conflicts between members. And Paul had been short of funds, until a gift arrived from Philippi. And yet he overflows with joy.

To be dependent for contentment upon whether the economy is in an upward swing and your stocks are doing well and you are in fairly good health and are relatively free from problems is to be in bondage to circumstances. At best that's a shaky sort of content-

ment, because life is filled with problems and uncertainties. Real contentment involves having the eternal perspective, and it frees you from circumstances as the basis for happiness.

### Conclusion

There is a legend about a rich man who had a dumb servant. One day the master got exasperated with him and said, "You've got to be the most stupid man I've ever known. Look, I want you to take this staff and carry it with you. If you ever meet a man more stupid than you are, give him the staff."

The servant took the staff. He met some pretty dumb men, but he was never sure if they were more stupid than he was, so he kept the staff. Then one day he was called back to the castle. He was ushered into his master's bedroom where the master said to his servant, "I'm going on a long journey." The servant asked, "When will you be back?" The master said that he would not return. The servant asked, "Well, sir, have you got everything prepared for the journey?" The master said, "No, I really haven't made much preparation for it."

The servant said, "Could you have made preparation? Could you have sent something on?" The master said, "Yes, I guess I had a lifetime to do that, but I was just busy about other things." The servant went on, "Then you won't be back to the castle, the lands, the animals, the servants?" The master said he wouldn't be back.

The legend concludes that the servant took the staff he had carried for many years and said to the master, "Here, you take the staff. I finally met a man who was more stupid than I."

There may be some hearing these words who are reasonably content in life. You're in good health, your needs are met, you enjoy many good things in life, you have a nice family. But your contentment is not tied in with godliness. It's the contentment of circumstances. Being diagnosed with a terminal illness, becoming paralyzed from an accident, losing your job, the death of loved ones—any of these unforeseen events would plunge you into despair, because you're not living for the eternal, but for the temporal. You need to see that true contentment only comes from making godliness your priority and eternity your perspective.

Others may profess to be Christians, to have the hope of heaven, but you've gotten caught up in the pursuit of the things of this world. It's an easy trap to fall into. You need deliberately to reaffirm your commitment to God and to free yourself from the dominion of mammon. That might mean having a giant yard sale and giving the proceeds to the Lord's work. It definitely means getting out of debt and becoming faithful in your stewardship. It means getting your priorities straight and setting some goals in line with them.

God has called His people to a life marked by contentment. Contentment comes from having the right priority--godliness, not gain; and the right perspective—the eternal, not the temporal. Jim Elliot, who was martyred at 28, wisely wrote in his journal when he was a 22-year-old college student, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." You can't keep the things of this world; you can't lose the promises of God regarding eternity. Order your life in line with that truth, and you will know God's contentment.

### Discussion Questions

1. Why is it not possible to serve both God and mammon?
2. Is it possible to pursue career success, with its financial rewards, yet not to serve mammon?
3. How can we determine what "a simple lifestyle" means? Must every Christian live simply and give the rest away?
4. How can we know when we've crossed the line from prudent provision for the future into hoarding?

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