

MONDAY MANNA

11 January 2021

WHAT 'EXPERTS' DON'T TELL US ABOUT CONTENTMENT

By Jim Mathis

A few weeks ago, the pastor of our church asked us to write down one word that described our current emotional state. I wrote "content." Not that I am always content. A few times during recent months I have felt unsettled, even anxious, about everything that has been happening. Many days, I can say that I am starting to feel hopeful or optimistic – but feeling content is my main emotion.

Later, I looked up the word "content" in the dictionary and in a thesaurus. I discovered synonyms like "satisfied," "pleased," "tranquil," "at ease," "unworried," and "happy." Contentment does seem to serve as a gateway to experiencing happiness.

These days, entire industries seem dedicated to sowing discontentment. In fact, much of our culture has that focus. We are constantly told we will never be happy without the newest toy or tool, the shiniest and fastest car, a bigger and more elaborate house. We will not feel accepted, we are constantly told, until we use the right kind of deodorant, lose weight, or our team wins the big game.

Motivational speakers and self-help books tell us, "if we cruise, we lose." So, we are directed to get busy, never feeling satisfied. There is always something else emerging to deepen our feelings of discontentment with what we already have.

I think of the famed business magnate who was asked, "How much is enough?" His response was simple: "Just a little bit more." If we always want more, we will never have enough. The words "more" and "content" are bitter rivals. Contentment comes from being happy where we are and with what we have. I always want to do better work, feel healthier, and be more financially secure. But I also want to be more joyful, be a better friend and husband, and spend more time enjoying the blessings I already have.

Contentment is not a destination. It is a decision, followed by peace, joy, and gratitude. Acquiring more stuff will not bring more happiness; appreciating what we already have will. This is a central theme in Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." He spoke about being "*poor in spirit*," "*being meek (strength under control)*," having a "*hunger and thirst for righteousness*," being "*merciful*," and being "*pure in heart*" (Matthew 5:3-8).

These lead to contentment, Jesus taught, not acquiring material things. He went on to say, "*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*" (Matthew 6:19-21).

King Solomon devoted much of the book of Ecclesiastes to telling what he had learned about contentment, and the apostle Paul wrote, "*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...*" (Philippians 4:12).

A friend did her doctor's thesis on subsistence farming in Central America, studying the poorest of the poor. I asked if there were any surprises. She immediately began talking about how happy everyone was. These people, barely scratching out a living on a small plot of land, were as happy as can be. I heard country singer Marty Stuart say one time, "If I have a hundred-dollar bill in my pocket and a Cadillac to drive, I am satisfied. Who could want more?" I agree, and I don't even require a Cadillac.

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

What would be your personal definition of *contentment*? Do you consider yourself a person who is contented – with life and your circumstances? Explain your answer.

How have the events of the past year affected your sense of contentment? Did the problems that arose largely due to the COVID pandemic diminish your sense of peace and contentment, or did your experiences lead to greater contentment? Explain your answer.

Why do you think that material things and a constant striving for more – such as greater achievements, promotions, status – rarely leads to true contentment? Do you even agree with that conclusion? Do you think that if you only had “just a little bit more,” that would result in true, lasting happiness? Why or why not?

Name some of the influences that affect your sense of contentment – or discontentment – the most. What can you do about reducing or eliminating their negative impact in your life?

NOTE: If you have a Bible and would like to read more, consider the following passages:

Ecclesiastes 1:1-4,9-14, 2:10-11,17-24, 3:22; 5:18
Philippians 4:6-9,11-13,19