

# The Discipline of Contentment

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*Second in the series: Keys for a Generous Life*

**Scripture: 1 Timothy 6:6-19**

**Key Thought: Contentment helps us avoid traps in this life and be prepared for the next.**

## **Intro:**

In 1957 the California Senate, in a 20 – 7 vote, killed the bill to make “In God We Trust” the official state motto. Opponents said the bill would jeopardize the long accepted but unofficial motto “Eureka,” which appears on the state seal. “Eureka,” which means “I have found it,” was put on the seal 100 years ago as a symbol of the discovery of gold in California.

There it is—a modern-day parable for us. Where does our trust lie? Jesus warned us in the Sermon on the Mount,

*“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. Matt 6:24 NIV*

Paul is approaching the same tender subject in our text for today but from a slightly different angle. Paul also warns us about loving money.

**Loving money is the source of many troubles.**

## **“root of all evil”**

Often the statement of Paul in 1 Tim. 6:10 is misquoted as “money is the root of all evil.” But that is not what it says. In the King James Version, which was the formative translation for American culture and literature, this verse reads,

*“The love of money is the root of all evil.” 1 Tim 6:10 KJV*

It is important to note that it is not the possession of money itself that is the issue. It is our attitude toward money and material goods; our covetousness and greed that is the problem. In Greek, the word for “evil” is plural, which leads to the modern translations rendering as “all kinds of evil” (NIV, NRSV). So many different problems stem from us wanting more.

## Loving money leaves us with anxiety over possessions

### We fight over money

What are some of the problems that we might mention? Some are terrible. James tells us;

*What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. James 4:1-2*

We don't have to look far in the news to see that happening between people and between nations. It happens in families in times of inheritance. It happens in businesses and in so many other situations as well.

### Possession can take over our lives

But let's think some more. We'll get down to some practical troubles that money and possessions bring on us. Think about the fact that everything that we have requires a little piece or pieces of our life to maintain; to store, to walk around, to clean, to dust, etc. The extreme is demonstrated in those who are driven to accumulate, and they collect so much junk of all kinds that they cannot function in their homes anymore. Stuff is literally piled up, leaving barely a place to walk. We define that as a mental illness and in such extreme cases it certainly is. But the extreme only demonstrates to us all what our greed and habits of accumulation are slowly doing. We can see those habits of accumulation in ourselves, and they keep us from being satisfied. Often our own attitudes of wanting a little more need to be seen as a spiritual illness. Such an attitude slowly robs us of contentment and the simplicity of life that we could have. We are thinking more stuff is better. But in truth, more stuff may be hindering us from enjoying the "life to the full" that Jesus promised (John 10:10).

## Frequently tempted by money

There are other temptations that we should mention that Paul might have in mind as he writes verse 9.

*Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. 1 Tim 6:9 NIV*

When making more money becomes a primary focus, there is a huge temptation to take unethical shortcuts to make an extra buck. Fraud, theft, failing to report income for taxes, etc.—there are so many of these schemes that we can't imagine them all. All come from one root, the love of money.

Then, I have observed in life that there are a couple other classes of temptations that go with having money. There is the temptation to buy immoral luxuries. So, the rich are among the customers for expensive illegal drugs. We regularly have sad stories emerging in the news of rich powerful men using their wealth and influence to purchase sex and using their wealth and influence to avoid the law as well.

This review of just a little of the bad news of which Paul reminds us should make us eager to hear the Good News which he announces.

## **Contentment leads to good things.**

I find that Good News in 1 Tim. 6:6, my text verse for today.

*Godliness with contentment is great gain. 1 Tim 6:6 NIV*

That is the Good News from God's Word for us today. One thing I love about God's Word is that it provides positive healthy direction for our lives. When we listen to what God's Word tells us we will walk in both holiness and health. May God say of us as he did the Israelites,

*Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!*

*Deut 5:29 NIV*

So, since we want things to go well with us, the path toward that goal is not the path of greed, covetousness, and avarice, it is the path of learning to fix our hearts on God and learning to be content. In our society, where one key job of ubiquitous advertising is to make us discontent, learning to be content is not an easy job.

But Paul uses the language of profit and loss here to deliberately turn the tables on our materialistic thinking. He is saying, "You think the way to profits is by loving money and striving for more every day. But I say to you that the true way to profit is through contentment."

*Godliness with contentment is great gain. 1 Tim 6:6 NIV*

## **Contented people have an inner peace**

How can this be so? Well, for one thing, contented people have an inner peace. I read a funny illustration that gets the point across.

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*The rich industrialist from the North was horrified to find the southern fisherman lying lazily beside his boat, whiling the day away.*

*"Why aren't you out fishing?" said the industrialist.*

*"Because I have caught enough fish for the day," said the fisherman.*

*"Why don't you catch some more?"*

*"What would I do with them?"*

*"You could earn more," was the industrialist's reply. "With that you could have a motor fixed to your boat, and go into deeper waters and catch more fish. Then you would make enough to buy nylon nets. These would*

*bring you more fish and more money. Soon you would have enough to own two boats . . . maybe even a fleet of boats. Then you would be a rich man like me."*

*"What would I do then?" asked the fisherman.*

*"Then you could really enjoy life."*

*"What do you think I am doing right now?"*

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I guess the fisherman had the perspective of contentment.

### **Contented people have a lifestyle of greater simplicity.**

Assuming our basic human needs are met, food, clothes, shelter, then contentment is not about how much we have, or which brands we have, it is about how much we want. Paul gave us a good example when he said,

*"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." Phil 4:11 NIV*

When we are content, then we do not need to complicate our lives by accumulating unnecessary things. Contented people can keep priorities in the proper order.

When our top priority is our loyalty to Christ's kingdom, then we can trust God to take care of the rest.

### **Contented people may save money much more easily.**

Sometimes those who love money, tend to spend it to satisfy their other lusts or to show off their wealth while those who are contented don't need to spend it in order to be happy. If that is so, who might end up with more money? Those who are contented may well come out ahead. Saving money is much easier for the contented heart.

### **Contented people can be generous**

But there's one more thing about contented people. When one is greedy one holds on to their money tightly and is not willing to give it away. Research on giving shows the surprising truth that the percentage of income given by those with higher incomes is less than the percentage given by those of lower income. So how much we have or earn is not what determines what we will give. Rather, when one is contented with what one has, then one can hold possessions and money more lightly and be willing to be generous.

#### **Contentment essential for generosity**

Paul gave generosity as a test to those in 1 Timothy to whom he was writing who were rich in this world's goods. He urged them to be "generous and willing to share." Unless you learn the secrets of inner contentment you just won't be generous. Unless you're trusting God for your daily supply and for maintaining that which you have, you can't do it. It was a good test as to where their trust really resided. Paul wrote;

*Command those who are rich...to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life. 1 Tim 6:17-19 NIV*

### **Treasures in heaven**

We should take note especially of two more things in these verses. First, generosity enables us to “lay up treasure” for the age to come. We are not told what the treasure is exactly. We are just being informed that generosity in this life is a great preparation for the next life. We think of setting aside resources as a good preparation for our earthly future days. And we often use that as an excuse not to be generous. But the Holy Spirit is saying to us that from God’s point of view, when we are generous, we are setting aside resources for the age to come. Like Jesus watching the widow who put in all she had, God is impressed with generosity and is waiting to reward it. Wow!

### **Take hold of true life.**

Secondly, those who are generous have a chance to “take hold of the life that is truly life” (1 Tim. 6:19). I think of this phrase as having a double meaning.

On the one hand – having eternal life with Jesus is the true life - to be with Him in eternity will make any other prize pale in comparison to that privilege. The phrase “To take hold of” means to run this race so as to be able to receive the prize – eternal Life with Jesus. The expression “take hold of” is also used in 1 Tim 6:12.

*But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. 1 Tim 6:11-13 NIV*

The Greek verb here can also mean "to experience something," either positively or negatively. If this is the idea here, then Timothy and his hearers are being urged not only to possess eternal life but to experience it, that is, to act in such a way so as to show that eternal life is indeed part of their experience in the here and now (see UBS Handbook Series. Copyright (c) 1961-1997, by United Bible Societies). So, Paul is urging those who have earthly possessions to live out their eternal life through the way that they manage God’s resources entrusted to them. The two ideas dovetail because Peter reminds us that when we diligently put into practice what we believe, it confirms our spiritual destination.

*Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*

*2 Peter 1:10-11 NIV*

Having a spirit of contentment does not leave us listless and without an agenda for our lives. We just have a different kind of primary purpose – “pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith!” That is a big assignment. All of us must seek money to make a living and get along in this world. But as Christians, seeking money is not our highest goal. It is only a means to higher God-given goals.

## Keys for continued contentment:

So how does one go about learning contentment? Let's say I notice myself struggling with wanting more of this and more of that and I find myself focusing more on getting more of life's goods all the time. How do I combat that preoccupation? Allow me to offer 5 suggestions for better balance.

### 1. Lean into our dependence upon God.

Jesus taught us to pray,

*“Give us this day our daily bread.”*

Jesus gently chided his disciples about worrying about their daily needs. Then he coached them on an alternative perspective.

*But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Matt 6:33 NIV*

So, when we find ourselves overly focused on what we need, the first thing to do is remind ourselves that our dependence is on God. Even if we have means, our dependence is still on God, not on our earthly means. That is the perspective that leads to peace.

### 2. Define “enough” around basic needs. V. 8

Paul also has some practical advice about how we define our needs.

*But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. 1 Tim 6:8*

What Paul is saying is that we need to define what is enough around our basic needs. If Paul had lived in a harsh winter climate like ours, he probably would have included words about shelter and warmth; it's part of our basic need. However, we must admit that our definitions of what we “need” tend to wander easily into what we “want” or what we would “like.” Two of the ways that home budgets get in trouble is buying more expensive cars or houses than we can afford. Our wants take over. The writer in Proverbs prays,

*“Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.”*

*Proverbs 30:8 NIV*

One helpful habit is to consider our reason for buying something before we buy. Are we buying for genuine need? Or do we think we “need” it because advertising has convinced us? Are we buying for status because a neighbor or friend has one? Upgrades and improvements are tricky. We can rationalize most anything as an improvement. Gadget salesman pedal everything as an improvement. But some improvements are wise investments. Perhaps a good question is, “What happens if I don't buy it?” Or we might ask about function. “In what way will what we are buying help us stay whole and healthy?” Will it help me grow in my primary profession?” “Will it help my faith journey?” Ask questions to help us discern.

### 3. Know where your weaknesses are that lead to accumulations

For example: Hobbies are a blessing but can be a danger from the standpoint of contentment. Put limits on them. Make them purposeful. Most of you know I have a Christmas village with trains. Now it is a great temptation to collect more train stuff and more houses for my village. But I can only use so much stuff. So, I am trying to allow what I can actually use to limit my collecting.

Another guideline that I have given myself to avoid accumulating is this, “Don’t buy projects.” If you are like me you are always seeing something and thinking, “I could do this with that!” But at the same time, you know that there are a whole list of projects that you already have sitting around that you haven’t finished.

What guidelines have helped you to avoid accumulating?

#### **4. Learn to enjoy things without owning them.**

Another great suggestion is to learn to enjoy things without owning them. Borrow books rather than buying them. Find sources for videos and movies without buying them. Go to a park. Enjoy the outdoors. Rent a small engine tool rather than buying it.

#### **5. Develop the habit of giving**

Finally, being able to be generous is a test of contentment. Develop the habit of generosity with what God enables you to earn and with the material things that you have.

A young man who attended our church in Kirksville now lives in Delaware and runs a non-profit that helps inner city children have access to technology. He told the story on his Facebook page about his daughter, their only child, who is probably about 8. Not too long after Christmas she met a girl her age from the city who didn’t have much. She found out that the girl didn’t really have dolls. She gave her the expensive American girl doll that her she had begged her parents to get her for Christmas. When her father questioned her about it, she said simply, “I have a whole houseful of toys, and she didn’t have any.” He and his wife could not say a thing. While the doll had been expensive, they admired her generosity and the spirit of giving that she had shown was exactly what they try to live out as they live out their Christian values day by day. They found themselves admiring their daughter’s generosity.

Our friend Mark Cable once wrote a catchy song with haunting words.

Who owns what?  
What owns who?  
If you can’t give it away,  
then it owns you!

Contentment enables generosity.