

Cultivating Contentment
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September 27, 2009

Les and Leslie Parrott, Christian marriage advocates, were between speaking engagements, and they needed to board a small three-person Cessna to make the jump over Puget Sound in Washington. The pilot told them that it was going to be a little noisy while they were up in the sky but the sights were sure to be pretty flying over the islands. After they overcame their fear of being aboard such a little plane, they rather enjoyed the flight. The pilot, upon getting ready to land the aircraft, told them, “The most important thing about landing is the *attitude* of the plane.” They questioned him, thinking that he meant to say the *altitude* of the plane. The pilot explained to them, “The attitude has to do with the nose of the plane. If the attitude is too high, the plane will come down with a severe bounce. And if the attitude is too low, the plane may go out of control because of excessive landing speed.” The pilot added as they were approaching, “The trick is to get the right attitude in spite of atmospheric conditions.” [Parrott, 59-60]

Today we are going to focus upon cultivating and maintaining the right attitude towards life in spite of what is going on in the world around us, in spite of the threats of terror, in spite of the upcoming flu season with the concerns of H1N1 and in spite of the economic cloud that is looming overhead. You may live in a house, townhome or an apartment, but Adam Hamilton suggests that each of us also lives in a “tent.” Every day we decide which tent we are going to live in. If our homes have mats outside the doors that read *Welcome*, what, then, does the sign on the door of the tent you live in read? Does it read *Discontent* or does it read *Contentment*? The tent in which each of us dwells is based upon our attitude about life no matter what the atmospheric conditions may be.

One morning this week, I watched the footage of the flooding in the Metro Atlanta area. For two years now they have been in a severe drought, and the shortage of water was made up in about a four-day period. The once dried up lakes and riverbeds were filled to overflowing and the water had nowhere to go but into cars and homes. When we watch the stories and see the videos of such devastation, we get to watch how people are reacting to such a difficult and trying time in their lives. It is like we are

invading their personal space as we see how they respond to the crisis at hand. We hear people say, “I just can’t believe it.” “How will we ever get through this?” “I have never in all my life seen so much water.” “What are we going to do?” “This isn’t supposed to be happening.”

One lady was being interviewed as she stood in her flood ravaged home where everything was a total loss. As she spoke her eyes filled with tears and her voice began to break. Her tears were not tears of sadness though she had much to be upset about as her living room was more like a temporary aquarium for catfish than a place where her family could sit and play board games. The tears that flowed seemed to be the kind of tears that flow when one is content, when one has an overwhelming sense of gratitude and appreciation. In that moment, as she was reflecting on all her losses she had this grand realization of what was truly important in her life. She said, “I have my family, we are all safe and that is what matters. The car and the things in this house are really just stuff. That is all it is—stuff—stuff that can be replaced, or not.” [*Good Morning America*, story on Sept. 22, 2009]

As I watched her story of putting life into perspective, I heard the words from the Apostle Paul filling my head, words that he wrote in a prison cell, chained to its walls, “for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” [Philippians 4:11-13]

This woman living in northern Georgia revealed what we already know—everything we have is temporary. All the things we have worked so hard to obtain can be gone in a moment even without warning. Though we might be able to grab a few precious items with us from a home about to be consumed by a rising tide, we certainly are not going to take anything with us when we depart this life. Yet much of life seems to be filled with chasing after many a thing. The author of Ecclesiastes reminds us that this is a “chasing after wind.” [Ecclesiastes 2:11]

It is perfectly normal to have possessions. It is great to be able to provide for our families with a home and cars and to have a few amenities that can provide pleasure. It is the attitude toward them and the constant pursuit of more that gets us in trouble. If we

believe that the things we buy provide for our happiness, or we won't be happy until we have certain things, then our happiness will slip through our hands with the close of each event we attend, each vacation we go on or each time we buy something that is the state of the art at the time of purchase only to realize that something better and faster is coming out in a month.

Last year, Randy Pausch, a professor at Carnegie-Mellon, became famous with his version of "The Last Lecture." He wrote a story, in a book by the same name, about a time in his life when he was the bachelor uncle who enjoyed driving around in his convertible sports car. He wanted to take his young niece for a ride in his fairly new car, but his sister would have none of it. She didn't want her daughter to be responsible for getting the car dirty or staining the upholstery in Uncle Randy's precious jewel of a car. With that, Randy Pausch looked at his sister and dumped a drink on the seat of the car and he proclaimed, "Now she can go for a ride!" Even before facing life with a terminal illness, he already had the right attitude towards possessions and about life. [Pausch, Randy "The Last Lecture"] Such an attitude toward life certainly helped him when his physical condition changed.

In the parable of the rich fool, Jesus teaches that "one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." [Luke 12:15] Yet, everywhere we turn we hear the message that we need to have certain things in life to be content and to find true happiness. How often we have moved into a new house, the house of our dreams, only to start planning what we are going to do to make it better, to improve upon the dream, or we start eyeing a new house. We get excited about the car we are about to purchase. We enjoy it until we realize that it comes with sixty months of car payments. Before the car is paid for we start looking for another even if the one we have is still running well. Some people will go from job to job and be completely miserable in every job they have instead of finding good reasons to show up to work on Monday.

All of us could harp on something or someone. It doesn't take long to be among friends or family only to hear someone start complaining or talking negatively. Have you ever known someone who isn't happy unless they are complaining, unless they are miserable? Growing up I can remember my parents' response to me or one of my siblings when we were complaining about someone or speaking harshly about another.

They would put an end to it by asking us to say something nice about the person. So we would stop and offer a nice word or two. That worked when we were young children, but when we became teenagers and we would hear a parent say, “Now say something good about the person because all I have heard is negativity,” we would pause for a moment and then say something like, “Well, she is not related to us.” My father would reply, “Yes, that is a good thing.” So, sure there will be people we don’t like, there will be a boss who makes work difficult, not everything a spouse or child does is pleasing in our sight; however, contentment or discontentment is a choice we make no matter what the atmospheric conditions are in life.

It is better to seek to be content at work, with a spouse, with a car or a house instead of moving on to something or someone else. For chances are, if you are discontented here, you will be discontented somewhere else. It won’t take long. We search for what will make us happy, believing that it is some one or some thing that can make us happy. And the search for true happiness, this desire is innate. It is not a bad thing; God wired each of us to seek what will bring forth contentment in life. The only problem is that we often search in the wrong places and try to fill our lives with an abundance of possessions believing that they will be able to satisfy us or perhaps another person can make us happy.

Adam Hamilton calls this misguided search “Restless Hearts Syndrome” where we will search and search for something to satisfy our desire for contentment and we will do this repeatedly until we truly realize that God is Enough, that the love of God, being loved by God and sharing in God’s love is truly enough in life. [Hamilton, p. 55] When we experience that love and are aware of such a love, we begin to experience a life of contentment as we have the right attitude no matter what the economist says, no matter who is elected, what the doctor reveals to us, what the boss places on our desk or if we just stepped in doggy poop.

St. Augustine once said, “Our hearts are restless until they find rest in God.” Then and only then will we experience a life of contentment. Adam Hamilton, in his book *Enough*, offers Four Keys to Cultivating Contentment and then he offers Five Steps to Simplifying Life as he believes “contentment and simplicity go hand in hand.” [Hamilton, p. 65]

The first key to contentment is to understand that no matter what: *It could be worse*. Whenever we find ourselves wanting to move into the tent of discontent we need to state, “It could be worse.” These four little words, when said or thought, can certainly change one’s perspective. When it is raining outside and it is keeping us from taking our morning walk, remember: *It could be worse*. I am sure there were some Hokie fans complaining about the rain yesterday as they stood for three hours in the downpour rain. Remember: *It could be worse*. It could have been worse if they lost—they could have been Penn State fans standing in the rain for hours only to watch their team collapse in the dark of night. When you realize that you left your mobile phone at home and you will be without it the rest of the day, remember: *It could be worse*. When the new dog chews on everything in the house but her chew toys, remember: *It could be worse*. When the basement floods about an inch or two during a big rainstorm, remember: *It could be worse*. When your spouse burns dinner and the kitchen is filled with smoke, Adam Hamilton advises not to say, “It could be worse”—just *think* it. [Hamilton, p. 60]

The second key to contentment is to ask yourself, “How long will this make me happy?” Whatever it is that we are planning on buying we ought to ask, “How long will it make me happy?” If I buy the box of donuts, will I still be happy after thirty minutes of running later that day? How long will this gift we purchased bring fulfillment in the lives of others? Will it last after the item is taken out of the box—a day, a week, a month or two? Will I still be happy in this house ten years from now or am I buying an item simply because I am supposed to buy something? Will I continue to appreciate this dining room table or am I settling because this one is on sale and I am always happy about a sale? Does this car have the potential to bring satisfaction six years from now, or do I like the fact that it comes with a DVD and GPS navigation system and with the sale it seems like I am getting these bells and whistles for free?

The third key to contentment is to develop a heart of gratitude. One cannot experience contentment without having this attitude in spite of atmospheric conditions. It is tough to complain when we are *thanking* God instead. I have found that when I am moving from the place of contentment, bent on complaining about something or someone, offering words of thanksgiving to God changes my perspective. The next time you find yourself wanting to bad-mouth another or feel that your child or spouse can’t do

anything right, start talking to God and think of all the reasons you are thankful that they are in your life, and whatever it is that was in the way can be placed in its proper perspective instead of being a wedge between you and contentment or a wedge between you and another person. Gratitude expressed will bring us closer not only to God but to others.

The fourth key to contentment is, “Where does my soul find true satisfaction?” Every day we are bombarded with the voices of others telling us what we need in order to find satisfaction, but the Bible teaches us that Christ is the source of our true satisfaction.

Hamilton offers Five Steps for Simplifying Life that will help us stop “the relentless pursuit of stuff.” [Hamilton, p. 65.]

First, Set a goal of reducing consumption, and choose to live below your means. Remember, just because we can doesn’t mean we have to. Just because it is there doesn’t mean we have to have it. We need to cultivate the habits of reduce, reuse and recycle. If the world can’t keep up with our habits then we need to change our habits. Back in May, my family and I unplugged the extra refrigerator and freezer in the basement. For us they were used only when we bought extra stuff (which often remained in the freezer or refrigerator too long). I never liked pouring out jugs of milk that we failed to use because we forgot they were there. Unplugging these appliances was something we did to simplify our lives. Others might want to adjust thermostats or stop purchasing single bottles of water. We each can find ways to reduce consumption.

Second, Before making a purchase, ask yourself, “Do I really need this?” and “Why do I want this?” Why do you want a new house, new car? Why do I want the I-phone instead of my year-old Blackberry? Am I purchasing this because it helps with my image and it says I am successful? Am I buying this for my children out of guilt because I am not spending as much time with them as I should? Ask why, and if the reasons are good, then go for it. Make the purchases when the motives are right.

Third, Use something up before buying something new. The person who works at the dump sees many a valuable item thrown away. Wear things out before replacing them and take care of what you do have.

Fourth, Plan low-cost entertainment that enriches. We have discovered the joy of staying home and playing board games. I have mastered the art of cheating at Candy

Land so that I never win. Bowling on the Wii video game is fun and it is easier on the back. A rented movie and a bag of popcorn is as much fun as spending fifty dollars to go to a movie and hear the people behind you fishing around for their popcorn or listening to them answer their telephone during the movie. This doesn't mean going out to the movies or the bowling alley isn't fun; it just means there are cheaper options that are just as meaningful.

The last step is to ask yourself, "Are there major changes that would allow me to simplify my life?" The assumption is that the answer is yes. Yes, we all could do something that would help us to simplify our lives. We have given up cable, satellite radio, the downstairs freezer and refrigerator, the newspaper, gym membership and at the same time we have cut up three credit cards. Sure, we could afford these things (except the credit cards), but we realized that these things were not necessary for us now. We are finding that we are more content now than we were before. Just because we can chase after the wind doesn't mean we have to.

Stewardship is more than about giving to God a tithe and offering. Stewardship is more than about what we might give to God and the church. God cares not only about our gifts and our generosity, God cares deeply about how we handle the other ninety percent. God cares about our attitude when it comes to finances, and for us to have wholeness and peace in this area of our life then we need to make sure we do our part in having the right attitude when it comes to our possessions and our spending.

We can find ourselves doing a lot of praying during these economically challenging times—praying for a recovery, praying that the market will turn around..., but if we don't take steps towards simplicity and cultivate contentment then we will miss the lessons to be learned during these lean times and we might fail to hear the call to live more simply, and to have the right attitude in spite of our current conditions.

Resources:

Hamilton, Adam. *Enough Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009, 53-74.

Parrott, Les and Leslie. *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006, 59-60

*The story from *The Last Lecture* by Randy Pausch. Recalled from reading this story over the summer.

**Good Morning America*, newscast. Tuesday, September 2, 2009.