

DISCONTENTMENT

A study from the series

What Keeps Me from Growing.

by Woodrow Kroll

Leaning on his fence one day, a devout Quaker was watching a new neighbor move in next door. After all kinds of modern appliances, electronic gadgets, and plush furnishings had been carried in, the onlooker called over, “If you find you’re lacking anything, neighbor, let me know, and I’ll show you how to live without it.” Apparently that Quaker and the apostle Paul had both learned the secret of contentment.

Discontentment seems to be a universal problem. And it seems to have been around for a long, long time. Consider these comments.

Socrates (469-399 BC) the famous Greek philosopher who is credited with the development of western philosophy, said “Contentment is natural wealth, luxury is artificial poverty.”

Epicurus lived 341-270 BC. He was an ancient Greek philosopher and the founder of the school of philosophy called Epicureanism. Epicurus said, “If thou wilt make a man happy, add not unto his riches but take away from his desires.”

Seneca was a Roman Stoic philosopher and statesman. He lived 4 BC to AD 64. He was tutor and later advisor to Emperor Nero. Seneca said, “It is not the man who has too little, but the man who craves more, that is poor.”

Webster defines contentment as having the ability “to limit one’s requirements, desires or actions.” So is discontentment simply the opposite? Is it just a lack of contentment? No, it’s much more. To be discontented is defined by the dictionary as having “a sense of grievance of dissatisfaction, a restless aspiration for improvement.” To be discontented is to desire circumstances different from what you have now, or to restlessly long for circumstances that you think are better than you have now.

I Samuel 22:1-2 says, “David departed from there and escaped to the cave of Adullam. And when his brothers and all his father’s house heard it, they went down there to him. And everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was bitter in soul, gathered to him.” Those words “bitter in soul” are derived from the Hebrew word for discontent. On the other hand, Paul says that “there is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world” (**1 Timothy 6:6**).

Having said that, there are no verses in the Bible that use the word discontented or discontentment except 1 Samuel 22:2, the verse I quoted a moment ago.

Discontentment: Good and Bad

But before we see the dark side of discontentment, let’s recognize there is also a

lighter, brighter side. There are two types of discontentment; one is good and the other is bad.

It is only when you are discontented with your present situation that you will do something to change it. For example, until you become discontented with the way your prayer life is going, you'll never ask the Lord to reinvigorate it

If you're not discontented with the way you are reading your Bible—hit and miss, once this week not at all the next—you'll never take real time with God seriously.

If we are never discontented with the current state of our Christian life, we'll be stuck where we are spiritually forever, or worse, be taking steps backward. If everyone were perfectly contented there would be no progress in any area of life.

We tend to forget that happiness doesn't come as a result of getting something we don't have but rather in recognizing and appreciating what we do have,

The bad or dark side of discontentment can be traced to an even darker sin. Discontentment is the by-product of covetousness. We covet when we crave something that we don't have but someone else does. It is the 10th of the 10 Commandments. "You shall not covet" (**Exodus 20:17**).

Bottom line: covetousness is the craving for circumstances that are different from our own and that leads to discontent with the circumstances we find ourselves in. So, a lack of contentment has really bad roots and it produces equally bad fruit.

Jesus is the one who makes the link between covetousness and discontent. He said, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (**Luke 12:15**). But if our life does consist of the things we possess, and those things aren't enough to make us happy, we will be discontented and that's where some of you are living right now.

Now, let's turn our attention to why discontent can ruin your life.

The Downside of Discontent

Here are some things you should think about with regard to discontent.

1. Discontent changes our focus.

Instead of focusing on God as our provider and the one who gives us the abundant life, we focus on the things we lack rather than the things we have in Christ.

That was Israel's problem during their wilderness wanderings. God opened the waters of the Red Sea and Israel marched out of Egypt on dry ground. You would think that would cement their focus on the power of God, but no. At every turn, the Israelites showed their discontent with regard to food and water, and their prospects for success. Exodus 16:2 says, "In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron."

2. Discontent is a personal attack on God.

That sounds a bit strong, but think about this. In the wilderness the Israelites were dissatisfied with the way God was handling things. Whenever God tested their faith, they failed the test. Rather than encourage each other by reminding them God brought them safely out of Egypt and had a plan to take them to the Promised Land, they chose rather to be discontented and decided not to trust God.

Are we any better? God gave us the **Romans 8:28** promise: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." But instead of trusting His promise and His purpose, we

get angry with God when discontentment causes us to question whether He really loves us. We complain that others are blessed more greatly than we are. We can't bring ourselves to enjoy Him or His Word because we are so discontented with Him.

3. Discontentment retards our spiritual growth.

As the Israelites in the wilderness demonstrate, the longer they experienced the care and supply of God, the more discontented they became. It was the lack of contentment in the hand of God that caused their spiritual growth to be anemic and eventually brought judgment to them. Of the 2 ½ to 3 million people who walked through the Red Sea on dry land, only two—Joshua and Caleb—walked through the Jordan River on dry land. That happens to us too. The less contentment we have in life, the less growth toward maturity we experience, so if you are discontented today, be aware of what “the winter of your discontent” can do for you.

Hope for the Discontented

Philippians 4:11-13, “Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

Did you notice the word that brings hope to all of us? Did you hear it? Even a spiritual giant like the apostle Paul admitted, “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.” Paul learned to be content. It didn't come naturally to him either, but he learned it. So what was it that taught Paul how to be contented? It was his belief that even in his situation in life Christ would enable him to be a victor, doing all things through Christ who strengthened him.

Remember what Paul said about his thorn in the flesh. “Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 **Corinthians 12:8-9**).

Look at the progression in these verses. Paul begins with the discontent over his circumstance. He has this physical problem; he doesn't like it; he doesn't want it; he asks God to remove it. But God doesn't. Instead, God meets his need in another way. God gives him sufficient grace to deal with the weakness in his life.

So, stage one is discontent with his thorn. Stage two is the realization that God isn't going to remove the cause of his discontent but is going to help him deal with it. Stage three finds Paul boasting more gladly in his weakness because he realizes that God is going to use it to bring the power of Christ upon him. Discontentment morphs into gladness when the apostle allows God to work out His plan in Paul's life.

Here's the thing. God does the same thing for you and me. He doesn't take away our discontentment; He uses it for a higher purpose. What we need to do is stop complaining about what we don't have and concentrate on what God has given us. We need to trust Him to know what He's doing in our life, even if we don't know what that is. We need to rejoice in our circumstances, not blame God for them.

Here are some things you can do to cultivate contentment in your life.

How Do We Cultivate Contentment?

1. Work at it! Paul had to “learn” contentment (**Philippians 4:11**). Focus on the things which cultivate contentment, not the things that fuel discontentment.

2. Transfer your attention from the things that make you discontent to the eternal realities of having Christ in your life. **Matthew 6:33**, “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” Jesus said, “live with a kingdom perspective and you won’t live in discontentment.”

3. Learn that happiness is not tied to things. You and I live in a society that doesn’t believe this or it wouldn’t be so discontented. But listen carefully to the very words of Jesus: **Luke 12:15** “And he said to them, ‘Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.’”

Discontentment ruins your life. It robs you of joy. It thwarts your spiritual growth. It damages our relationship with God. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you see the hand of God in your life and be grateful for the life He has given you. No matter how bad it may appear when compared with other’s lives, it is your life. It is God’s gift to you. And it has eternal value. Be content and be happy in God’s grace.

A BAKER'S DOZEN OF VERSES ABOUT CONTENTMENT

Hebrews 13:5 “Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”

Psalms 37:4 “Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.”

1 Thessalonians 5:18 “Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

Matthew 6:33 “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

Luke 12:15 “And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

Romans 8:28 “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

1 Timothy 6:6-10 “Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.”

Philippians 4:10-13 “I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

Luke 3:14 “Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

Matthew 6:24 “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

2 Corinthians 9:11 “You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God.”

2 Corinthians 8:9 “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”

Luke 11:13 “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”