

“Satisfied?”
Sermon Series on
Learning the Art of Contentment in a World of Consumption
Dr. Peter B. Barnes
November 1, 2015
(1 Tim. 6:6-10)

Many years ago, there was a comedian named George Carlin who was one of the most popular funny men on TV for a long time. His routine as the Hippy Dippy Weatherman was a classic. But the monologue I remember most was the one he did about “stuff.”

He said, “So when you get right down to it, your house is nothing more than a place to keep your stuff...while you go out and get...more stuff. Because that’s what this country is all about. Trying to get more stuff. Stuff you don’t want, stuff you don’t need, stuff that’s poorly made, stuff that’s overpriced. Even stuff you can’t afford! Gotta keep getting more stuff.

“So you keep getting more and more stuff and putting it in different places. In closets, in the attic, in the basement, in the garage... So now you got a houseful of stuff. And even though you might like your house, you gotta move. Gotta get a bigger house. Why? Too much stuff!”¹

Carlin’s comedic social commentary hits close to home, doesn’t it? His monologue connected with people because we can all identify with the reality that lies behind the laughter. There was an article in *Time* magazine earlier this year which began, “For middle-class Americans, it’s never been easier to feel consumed by consumption. Despite the recession, despite a brief interlude when savings rates shot up and credit-card debt went down, Americans arguably have more stuff now than any society in history. Children in the U.S. make up 3.1% of the world’s kid population, but U.S. families buy more than 40% of the toys purchased globally. The rise of wholesalers and warehouse supermarkets has packed our pantries and refrigerators.... One-click shopping and same-day delivery have driven purchasing to another level altogether, making conspicuous consumption almost too easy. Our stuff has taken over.”²

Can I get a witness? Lorie and I can’t park both of our cars in the garage because we have too much stuff in it. And there’s a closet which we’ve been intending to clean out and organize for about a year, but every time we open it the task looks too daunting. So we close the door and say, “We’ll get to it next weekend!”

The question we should all ask ourselves is, “With all of this stuff in our lives, are we now satisfied and content? Have all these things brought us an inner sense

of well-being?” I think most of us would acknowledge that the answer is “no.” All the things we have accumulated haven’t produced the kind of satisfaction and contentment we thought they would. In fact, it’s just made us want more.

As a follower of Jesus Christ, what am I to make of all this? What does it mean to think in a way that honors Christ about all the stuff that fills my closet, garage, basement, and storage unit? How does the One whom I call “Lord and Savior” want to reshape my attitudes toward this spending and accumulating, and all this stuff? And how can I learn the art of contentment in a world of consumption?

For the next four weeks we’re going to take a look at this subject and explore what the Bible has to say about it all. My hope and prayer is that at the end of this month, and just as Black Friday and Cyber Monday are upon us heading into the holiday season, we’ll come away with some new insights and perhaps some new commitments centered on the Lord Jesus Christ and what the Bible has to say about how to cultivate a deeper life of contentment.

*

The early followers of Jesus Christ were not that different from you and me, and the first generation of believers who lived in the cities of Ephesus, Laodicea, and Corinth also wrestled with the problem of materialism just like we do. When the apostle Paul wrote to his young apprentice Timothy, the young pastor was in the city of Ephesus. Paul left him there to help organize the church which the apostle founded, and the purpose of the letter was to instruct Timothy on key things he needed to keep in mind as he helped provide leadership to this new worshipping community.

One of the matters about which Paul writes had to do with the issue of materialism which was affecting members of Timothy’s church. The city of Ephesus was the fourth largest city in the ancient world, and it was only surpassed by Rome, Alexandria, and Syrian Antioch. Ephesus dominated trade along the coastline of the Aegean Sea, and its harbor welcomed ships from all over the Mediterranean.

In addition, roads connected the city of Ephesus to manufacturing and agricultural centers to the East. As a result, the city had enormous wealth. In today’s terms, Ephesus was considered the Hong Kong or New York City of the ancient world. Timothy was serving a church at the epicenter of an international shopping center, and part of the job Paul wanted him to do was to help the members of his church live a Christ-centered life in the midst of all the materialism of their day.

In his letter the apostle writes, *“Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People 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. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Tim. 6:6-10).

Paul reminded Timothy of three things in his admonition regarding contentment. First, he said to remember we brought nothing into this world, and it’s for sure we can take nothing out of it with us. There are no U-Haul trailers following the hearse at a funeral. The second thing Paul said was that God provides us with everything we need in life – maybe not all we want, but certainly what we really need. If we have food, clothing and shelter, we should be grateful, because not everyone in this world has even that.

The final matter in Paul’s admonition was a warning about the love of money and our desire to acquire. Nowhere in Scripture does it ever say that money is a bad thing in and of itself. What the Bible *does* say is that the *love* of money is the root of all kinds of evil. The problem comes when our love of money displaces our other affections and commitments in life, and we begin to compromise our values in pursuit of what Jesus called *mammon*, or wealth.

History is filled with the names of people who sold their souls for the almighty dollar. They never quite had enough. They always wanted more. In survey after survey, when people are asked how much money would be enough for them to make in their jobs in order to be happy, they always answer, “A little more than I’m making right now.”

In contrast to all this, Paul presents an alternate vision of life which tries to cultivate an attitude of contentment. When the apostle affirmed the value of a contented life, he was describing an inner fullness that wasn’t contingent on material comfort or outward circumstances. In his own case, Paul said he experienced contentment in life situations that were very uncomfortable. A partial listing of what he had to deal with during his missionary adventures included shipwreck, flogging, mugging, dangerous river crossings, nights without sleep, and hunger (2 Cor. 11:23-27). And yet he was able to say with confidence in his letter to the church in Philippi, “*I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances*” (4:11).

But Paul didn’t present himself as a stoic who just gutted it out during tough times. Rather, he describes himself as one who had known both joy and sorrow, who had lived in affluence and in poverty, and yet he was content. And he revealed that contentment is a state of mind and heart which is independent of outward circumstances. Are you that kind of person? Have you come to a place in your life where you can rest in the Lord’s provision and cast your material burdens on Him? And have you experienced contentment in your life?

Jeff Manion says that contentment is the cultivation of a satisfied heart. It's the discipline of being fully alive to God and to others, whatever our circumstances. Contentment isn't achieved through getting everything we want but by training the heart to experience full joy and deep peace even when we don't have what we want.³

G.K. Chesterton, the great British journalist and Christian writer of a previous generation, once said, "There are two ways to get enough. One is to continue to accumulate more and more. The other is to desire less and less."⁴ That is the challenge for every person in this room, including me.

We all have a problem with wanting more. There's a prevailing spirit of discontent in our culture today, and we're all a part of it. Far too many of us are adherents of what one writer calls "The Cult of the Next Thing" – the next weekend, the next vacation, the next purchase, the next experience. Bigger, newer, better – these are the attributes of the next thing. This cult's central message proclaims, "Crave and spend, for the Kingdom of Stuff is at hand!"

Richard Foster has written in his excellent book, *Celebration of Discipline*, "Because we lack a divine Center [in God] our need for security has led us into an insane attachment to things. We must clearly understand that the lust for affluence in contemporary society...has completely lost touch with reality. We crave things we neither need nor enjoy. ...We are made to feel ashamed to wear clothes or drive cars until they are worn out. The mass media have convinced us that to be out of step with fashion is to be out of step with reality. It is time we awaken to the fact that conformity to a sick society is to be sick [ourselves]. Until we see how unbalanced our culture has become at this point we will not be able to deal with the mammon spirit within ourselves nor will we desire Christian [contentment]."

There was once a nightingale that traded its feathers to a peddler for worms. Just a single feather from its wing was all the peddler asked in exchange for worms. It seemed a painless daily transaction. This happened day after day, until finally the nightingale had traded so many feathers it could no longer fly.

One day as the peddler made his rounds, he found the nightingale standing by the roadside bedraggled and exhausted. It seems the little bird had worked the whole night through digging enough worms to reverse the trade so she could get back her wings. When the peddler walked up, she made her offer, but the peddler threw back his head and laughed. "What do you think I'm in this for?" he said. "My business is worms for feathers, not feathers for worms!"⁵

The way of the world is things for souls, and it will trade you anytime and anywhere you choose. But it is powerless to reverse the trade. The world's flea market leaves your hands full and your heart empty. Only Christ can reverse the trade. Only He can satisfy the longing of your heart. Only Jesus can give you contentment.

*

I have a homework assignment for you. Later on today, I want you to take out a sheet of paper and write down 5 things for which you are thankful, and share your list with a family member or a friend. Take an inventory and make a list of the ways God has blessed you, and think about why you should have contentment. The second thing I want you to do this week is to give away something. Find something you can give away and downsize a little bit. You can give it to Goodwill or the Salvation Army, or you can make it a gift to someone else. Just make a practice of giving something away this week.

In Romans 12 the apostle Paul writes, “*Don’t let the world squeeze you into its mould, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will for your life*” (Rm. 12:2). The follower of Jesus is one who lives in a manner that is counter to the culture of the world around them. How is God calling you to change the way you live so you can be more conformed to a life that keeps Christ at the center and discover contentment which only Jesus can provide?

There are some excellent books you can read if you want to go deeper. Jeff Manion’s book *Satisfied* and Jen Hatmaker’s book *Seven* are good places to start. Remember, a growing Christian is a reading Christian. I want to encourage you to take the next four weeks as we make our way through this series of sermons and think and pray about all the stuff in your life and how God might want you to learn more about the art of contentment in a world of consumption. It may just change your life. Amen.

¹ George Carlin, *Brain Droppings*, pp. 37,38.

² “The Joy of Less,” by Josh Sanburn in *Time*, May 23, 2015, p. 46.

³ Jeff Manion, *Satisfied*, p. 26.

⁴ Taken from a sermon preached by Heidi Husted.

⁵ Taken from a sermon preached by Paul Eckel.