

Discontentment



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Why Am I So Unhappy?



RESOURCES FOR BIBLICAL LIVING

LOU PRIOLO



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Lou Priolo, series editor

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1. *Contentment is realizing⁵ that God has already provided everything that a person needs to glorify and enjoy him.*

When I first learned the truth contained in this concept, it was stated something like this: “Contentment is realizing that God has already provided everything I need for my present happiness.”⁶ This definition is, of course, factual. But I decided to align it more closely to the Westminster Catechism, because in so doing, it now represents not only the *blessedness* of our primary purpose in life (to enjoy God), but also our *responsibility* (to glorify him).

The Greek noun translated as *contentment* in 1 Timothy 6:6 means “self-sufficiency.”

“How do you get contentment out of that?” you may wonder.

The idea is a God-dependent self-sufficiency—that is, a kind of self-sufficiency that is dependent on God’s abundant resources rather than one’s own. If you are content, you have, by God’s grace, the *inner resources* to face living without those *outward things* that others depend on for their happiness. If you are truly content, you will be self-sufficient in a God-dependent sort of way. You will not depend on any *outward resources* for your source of strength, comfort, help, or hope; you will seek nothing more than what God has graciously given you, knowing that he has provided everything you need to enjoy, love, serve, and glorify him.

And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, *always having all sufficiency in all things*, may have an abundance for every good work. (2 Cor. 9:8 NKJV)

Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with

5. To *realize* something is to make it real, to comprehend it fully.

6. I am indebted to the Institute in Basic Life Principles for the first two definitions of contentment developed in this booklet. The original wording of this first definition is from their Character Bookshelf Series game *Character Clues* (Oak Brook, Illinois: Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts, 1974).

humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things *through Him who strengthens me.* (Phil. 4:11–13)

What exactly are these inner resources? Below are some of the more prominent ones.

The Holy Spirit. “He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man” (Eph. 3:16).

The internalized Word of God. “And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph. 6:17).

Faith in the living sovereign God. “In addition to all, [take] up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one” (Eph. 6:16).

Prayer. “With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit” (Eph. 6:18).

Truth and wisdom. “He . . . walks with integrity, and works righteousness, and speaks truth in his heart” (Ps. 15:2). “Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom” (Ps. 51:6). “In [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3).

A thankful heart. “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:6–7).

Hope. “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 15:13). “Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17–18).

A disciplined mind (self-control). “For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline” (2 Tim. 1:7).

The fruit of the Spirit. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law” (Gal. 5:22–23).

Christian character. “For bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come” (1 Tim. 4:8). “Your adornment must not be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God” (1 Peter 3:3–4).

Please allow me to ask you some very penetrating, heart-searching questions at this point. Actually, all these questions relate to your own ultimate happiness.

- Do you really believe that money (or whatever else you love inordinately) can make you happier than these inner resources?⁷

7. If you coveted these treasures as much as you coveted money—if you spent half as much time, effort, and thought cultivating these inner resources as you spend cultivating material wealth—not only would you mortify your inordinate lust for money

- What is it that would make you happy?
- What are you waiting for to be happy (a spouse, power, friends, the approval of men, a different geographic location)?
- Would you really be happier if you had what you think would make you happier?
- If you think you would be happier, do you think the Lord is going to give you that desire *before* you learn to be content?

He has promised to provide not for all your wants but rather for your needs: “And my God will supply all your *needs* according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19).

*2. Contentment is realizing that true satisfaction can come only from building one’s life around those things that cannot be taken away or destroyed.*⁸

Jesus warned about the ephemeral nature of worldly possessions:

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 neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matt. 6:19–21)

To put more stock in, to seek more pleasure in, to put more confidence in, or to place more value on temporal things than eternal ones is to set oneself up for tremendous dissatisfaction—if not utter devastation if those things are taken away (as by thieves)

and learn how to be content, but you would experience *far greater* happiness than all the money in the world could afford you.

8. The Institute in Basic Life Principles’s definition for the character trait of *security* is “structuring my life around that which cannot be destroyed or taken away” (*Achieving True Success: How to Build Character as a Family* [Oklahoma City: International Association of Character Cities, 2006], 59).

or destroyed (as by rust). In fact, to love such temporal things inordinately (to covet them to the point of idolatry) is to invite discontentment and misery into your life.

On two different occasions in the New Testament, the apostle Paul linked covetousness to idolatry:

For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. (Eph. 5:5)

Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and greed, which amounts to idolatry. (Col. 3:5)

Much has been made lately about the addictive nature of people with various so-called psychological disorders. The truth is, we all have “addictive natures” in one way or another. This is so because we long for whatever brings us pleasure in ever-increasing measure. As Solomon put it:

Sheol and Abaddon are never satisfied,
and never satisfied are the eyes of man. (Prov. 27:20 ESV)

He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance with its income. This too is vanity. (Eccl. 5:10)

When we go from longing for something to loving it, we are especially in danger of becoming in bondage (“addicted”) to it. Now, temporal things (things that can be taken away or destroyed) are especially dangerous to become addicted to because if we love them (inordinately long for them), they will hurt us. The Bible speaks of those who love money, pleasure, preeminence, wine and oil, sleep, the world, and even their own lives (to name a few). But other things—eternal things—are fine to love because even if we are not satisfied with them and so

long for more of them (even to the point of becoming addicted to them), we will suffer no harm. For example, the Bible encourages us to love Christ. Can too much love for him be a bad thing? Is he such a terrible thing to be addicted to? Can we love the Father too much?⁹ The Bible also speaks of loving the written Word of God, of loving our neighbors, of loving wisdom, mercy, justice, and truth.¹⁰

3. Contentment is delighting in God more than in anything else.

The Protestant Reformer John Calvin referred to the human heart as a “perpetual factory of idols.”¹¹ God has given us the ability to seek our happiness in anything we choose. We can delight in possessions, activities, ideas, money, pleasure, approval from others, our work, and even certain people. But Psalm 37:4 says, “Delight yourself [seek your happiness] in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart.” We may lawfully delight not only in the Lord but also in his Word, his will, his ways, and his wisdom (cf. 2 Chron. 17:6; Pss. 1:2; 40:8; Prov. 8:30). The problem comes when we either seek our happiness in those things God forbids or seek our happiness in lawful things (things that God allows) more than in him.

We know that it’s wrong to seek our happiness in things that God expressly forbids—such as drunkenness, fornication, and marriage to an unbelieving spouse. But when we delight too much in those things that God allows (such as food, money, our jobs, leisure activities and avocations, or even the people we love), we can also be guilty of idolatry.

The question to ask yourself is: “In what do I delight?”

9. At this point, I am reminded of that old saying, “He is so heavenly minded that he is of no earthly good.” The problem is that to be heavenly minded in the biblical sense is to be earthly good—to not be earthly good is to not be properly heavenly minded.

10. Many such good things are lawful for us to love because by virtue of their very “good” nature, they are self-limiting in preventing their own abuse.

11. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: The Edinburgh Printing Company, 1845), 1.11.8.



Cultivating Contentment

You're unhappy, and you can't put your finger on why. The most confusing thing is that you're a Christian—you never thought you'd have to deal with this! It couldn't be a heart problem . . . a sin problem . . . could it?

If you're a Christian, you may not have considered contentment to be related to your unhappiness. But unless you can say you trust God everywhere he puts you and are happy with whatever he gives you, by definition you are not content! And when that happens you are left with a major cause of unhappiness.

Lou Priolo helps you identify discontentment in your life through first analyzing the level of your contentment. What's more, he helps you move forward, describing what true biblical contentment is and laying out Scripture's own directions for cultivating it.

The Resources for Biblical Living booklet series addresses a wide range of practical life issues in a straightforward, down-to-earth, and most of all, biblical manner.

“Discontentment among Christians is a far bigger problem than we either realize or acknowledge. Lou Priolo puts his discerning finger right on the real issues and helps us ask probing questions designed to reveal our troubled consciences' covetousness and idolatry. He clearly shows that at the root of our lack of contentment lies a believer who isn't fully satisfied with God and his bountiful provisions. May we take the message of this booklet to heart so that we may be genuinely content in Christ.”

—**Lance Quinn**, Pastor of Grace Advance at Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California

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