Chapter 10
## Contentment vs. Greed

*There are two ways to get enough; one is to continue to accumulate more and more. The other is to desire less.*
—G.K. Chesterton

*It is arguable that materialism is the single biggest competitor with authentic Christianity for the hearts and souls of millions in our world today, including many in the visible church.*[i]
—Craig L. Blomberg

Compared to the average person on the globe, I live in luxury. I live in a beautiful house in a very nice neighborhood. All of my family's basic needs are met, plus more. I have every reason to be content with the lot God has given me. But sometimes I get sucked into looking at what my neighbors have that I don't and feeling envious.

Envy is defined as "painful or resentful awareness of an advantage enjoyed by another, joined with a desire to possess the same advantage."[2] The author of Ecclesiastes observes this phenomena: "Then I observed that most people are motivated to success by their envy of their neighbors. But this, too, is meaningless—like chasing the wind" (Ecc 4:4 NLT).

We all know what envy looks like in our own lives. We see fancier cars, bigger houses and more recreational toys. We see people that seem to live carefree lives and something pulls at our hearts, even though in reality they're not really carefree. That's part of the deception. When I focus on material things I sometimes forget the essential truth of who I am—an eternal person with an eternal destiny.

Our culture feeds our imagination with a desire for more, more, more. When our imaginations run wild, fed by the media and fuelled by our own lusts, we succumb to the spirit of envy and greed. These desires are cleverly re-packaged by the media, leading us to a place where our values become subverted: "Covetousness we call ambition. Hoarding we call prudence. Greed we call industry."[3]

### An Age-Old Problem

Envy and greed are ancient urges, bred into humankind in the fall. Around one thousand years before Christ, during King David's reign, Asaph was one of the key worship leaders. In Psalm 73, we get a glimpse into Asaph's struggle to stay free from envy and bitterness. While the "wicked" around him were enjoying the easy life, he was struggling to get by. Asaph had to fight to stay pure, to keep a right perspective, just like us.

He honestly tells us about his envy of the rich. He is disgusted with their selfish, godless behavior. Embroiled in anger, Asaph almost slid down the slippery slope:

But as for me, I almost lost my footing. My feet were slipping, and I was almost gone. For I envied the proud when I saw them prosper despite their wickedness" (Ps 73:2-3 NLT).

These passages from Asaph's story could just as easily be descriptions of the rich and corrupt people of our day:

> They seem to live such painless lives ... They don't have troubles like other people; they're not plagued with problems like everyone else. They wear pride like a jeweled necklace … These fat cats have everything their hearts could ever wish for! … Look at these arrogant people—enjoying a life of ease while their riches multiply (Ps 73:4-7; 12 NLT).

This passage brings to mind certain professional athletes that have been in the news over the past few years. The top players get out of college at twenty-one years old and because of their extraordinary talent they quickly sign contracts for multimillions. They are the cream of the crop and some of them become infamous for their shameful behavior—sexual assault, drug abuse and disgusting conceit. They haven't had to "pay their dues" and work their way up the ladder in pro sports because they're so talented. Fabulous fame and huge wealth is handed to them on a silver platter. Their fans worship them as kings of their sport.

Whether it is self-absorbed athletes and actors, businessmen who build their empires on the backs of the poor or tyrannical dictators who slaughter thousands at will, there is no lack of people who have been tainted by money, power and fame.

As we look at these people we might wonder what it would be like to be them. We might think that if only we had: the salary, the looks, or the profile of some celebrity we would have it made. We can spend hours on these daydreams, all the time giving in to the spirit of greed that is so prevalent in these times. The sticky web of "the deceitfulness of riches" can easily entangle us.

Why does it bother us?

There are rich people all around us. Some of them are obnoxious and arrogant and many are not. Why did this bother Asaph so much? Why should this bother us? One reason it bothers me is that I'm vulnerable to the same lusts in which others so openly indulge. When I judge others for their greed and pride, it's only a reflection of that same tendency in me.

In his letter to the church in Colosse, Paul says "Don't be greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world" (Col 3:5 NLT). A definition of greed is: "a selfish and excessive desire for more of something (as money) than is needed." Wanting more than we need is so common in our culture that we do it without thinking about it. And then we wake up to God's reality.

Paul the Apostle describes what happens when people refuse to acknowledge God's existence. "Their lives became full of every kind of wickedness, sin, greed, hate, envy … " (Rom 1:29 NLT).

When we read this terrible list of sins, we think, " … such derelicts these people are!" But Paul cautions us: "You may think you can condemn such people, but you are just as bad, and you have no excuse! When you say they are wicked and should be punished, you are condemning yourself, for you do the very same things" (Rom 2:1 NLT).

**Conflict and Resolution**

As Asaph's story unfolds we see him in incredible conflict. He's trying to figure it all out, to make sense of seeming injustice and unfairness. Reading between the lines Asaph is asking: "Why do good things happen to bad people? These people mock God, and deny his existence!"

Caught in a moment of rage he questions whether he has made a big mistake by following the narrow path of worship and purity: *"*Did I keep my heart pure for nothing? Did I keep myself innocent for no reason?" (Ps 73:13 NLT).

He sees all the self-indulgent fun that the ungodly are enjoying and thinks about what he is missing. "Maybe I should just eat, drink and be merry like the rest of them. If it feels good, maybe I should just *do it.*" In deep despair, he's vulnerable to temptation. He's forgetting that the wages of sin is death.

Asaph can't believe God would really let such horrible injustice happen. He is full of questions and confusion; there are no immediate answers. His frustration reaches a boiling point, and for a while he blames and questions God: "Does the Most High even know what's happening?" (Ps 73:11 NLT). Asaph sees no justice: "So I tried to understand why the wicked prosper. But what a difficult task it is!" (Ps 73:16).

Does it bother you that there are a small percentage of highly privileged in the world and billions of "have-nots?" Is it fair that your rent is so high that you can barely make the payments, while your landlord is rolling in the dough? Does God see what's happening, and if he does, why isn't he doing anything about it? Does he see the terrorism, the rapes, the murders, and the oppression of the poor that runs rampant in our world? Why does evil seem to win the day so much of the time?

A few years ago I delivered a check from our church to a refugee family who had no money for rent or food. They came to Canada from a war-torn third world country. The head of the family was earnestly looking for work, but to no avail. It didn't seem fair and I still have questions about the way things worked out for them. Didn't God make all people equal in his sight? Why do so many people try so hard to make ends meet, only to end up on welfare, while the rich keep getting richer? So many of our questions will remain unanswered this side of heaven. We can only trust God will make it all right in the end.

**The Turning Point: Worship**

Asaph's saga takes an abrupt turn for the good when he goes to church one day:

> Then I went into your sanctuary, O God, and I finally understood the destiny of the wicked. Truly, you put them on a slippery path and send them sliding over the cliff to destruction. In an instant they are destroyed, completely swept away by terrors. When you arise, O Lord, you will laugh at their silly ideas as a person laughs at dreams in the morning (Ps 73:17-20 NLT).

When Asaph went into God's sanctuary and reflected on a life of righteousness and its rewards, everything shifted. As he opened his heart to God in worship, he got a whole new perspective. This is worship as Paul describes it in Romans 12. Real worship will " … transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect (Rom 12:2 NLT).

Worship is a *safe place*—living there keeps us away from the slippery slope of greed. Dallas Willard describes it this way:

> Worship is the single most powerful force in completing and sustaining restoration of the whole person … Worship is at once the overall character of the renovated thought life and *the only safe place for a human being to stand*"[4] (emphasis added).

Just by turning to God, and meditating on the truth, Asaph's feelings and outlook on life shifted dramatically. All of a sudden, he was at peace. Though he couldn't explain the present injustice, he knew that God would eventually right every wrong. Asaph saw that ultimately there is no reward for the unrighteous. The pleasures of the unrighteous are short-lived and fleeting.

When he saw life through God's eyes, Asaph realized how hardened his heart had become:

"Then I realized that my heart was bitter, and I was all torn up inside. I was so foolish and ignorant—I must have seemed like a senseless animal to you" (Ps 73:21-22 NLT).

A *senseless animal!* Sound familiar? It does to me. When I lose perspective and harden my heart, I get angry and frustrated and complain about things I want but don't have. It's impossible to think clearly when we're full of anger at others and God. When we insist on knowing all the answers, we put ourselves in God's place. Only he knows how everything fits together, how all the wrongs will be made right.

**The Path of Purity**

The very first verse of the psalm is a huge key here: "Truly God is good to Israel, to those whose hearts are pure" (Ps 73:1 NLT). When we return to purity, to complete devotion to God, we can *see* again. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matt 5:8). When there is no conflict of loyalties, no mixture of motives, and no hypocrisy, we can be content.

Are we citizens of heaven or earth? For a while, we live in both worlds, but Peter urges his brothers and sisters to live as *aliens* in this world: "Dear friends, I warn you as 'temporary residents and foreigners' to keep away from worldly desires that wage war against your very souls" (1 Pet 2:11 NLT).

When he succumbed to the spirit of Greed, Asaph's soul was ravaged by the evil one. His own evil desires opened a door for spiritual warfare that wreaked havoc in his soul. Though there was truth in his assessment of the ungodly, it was mixed with his own envy and greed. He stood in judgment against others, and so placed himself at odds with God.

Asaph's story shows us that only one kind of love can *win*—the love of our Father *or* love for the things of this world. The two simply cannot co-exist. In his lapse into greed Asaph had no compassion for his self-absorbed neighbors. If we are living in love, we'll have compassion for everyone, even the unjust. "Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you" (1John 2:15 NLT).

**Nearness to God is The Answer**

This psalm resolves so beautifully as Asaph once again finds contentment in being a simple child of God, delighting in the Lord.

> Yet I still belong to you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, leading me to a glorious destiny. Whom have I in heaven but you? I desire you more than anything on earth. My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine forever (Ps 73:23-26).

The NIV Bible says " … he is *my portion* forever" (Ps 73:26, emphasis added).

> What a turnaround! In the classic pattern of a psalm of lament, the worshipper moves out of despair into an entirely different frame of mind; his eyes are opened to another reality. His pain hasn't

> disappeared, but his bitterness is no longer blurring his vision of God. He regains his grasp on life.

When Asaph remembers to whom he belongs, life makes sense and he claims, *"I still belong to you."* So much is contained in those few words. To jolt myself out of crazy thinking I sometimes speak these words to myself: "I belong to you, Lord. I am yours. I repent from thinking I am my own boss. I repent from self-centered living. The only place I want to be is with you."

In Asaph's reunion with the Lord we see a picture of intimate friendship, God holding his right hand. Asaph has broken out of his spiritual stupor, he comes close to God, finding comfort and strength. And don't forget that this all started when he went into God's sanctuary. He made the choice to seek God, and God met him. A humble heart opens the way for intimacy with God.

Asaph's sense of responsibility as a leader of God's people also kicked into gear. He had too much integrity to let his temper tantrum control his life, and because he had built his life on righteousness, he couldn't possible betray himself and those around him. The storm clouds of bitterness disappeared when he repented.

**The Man in the Cardboard Box**

When we compare ourselves to those who have more than we have we are tempted to complain. When I've traveled internationally and seen how much I have in comparison with most others I have been jolted into repentance for complaining about a lack of cash flow. And when I see how happy and content the poor can be, I'm convicted of my sin of materialism.

My friend Mac Jardine and his wife lived with the poor in Hong Kong for a number of years. Mac's favorite story is that of a very special old Chinese man. Mac liked taking rice boxes to street sleepers and on one such day, he and some Chinese friends visited a very old man in his "home," a box about the size of a refrigerator carton, located on the top of an old high rise building in the central part of the city. Mac relates what happened:

> We climbed up many flights of stairs to his home and gave him a rice box. I saw that he was blind, but had a huge smile on his face! I asked the guys why he was so happy. The old man responded, with an even bigger smile, that he had had such a wonderful day with Jesus! It amazed me that he had almost nothing except two cats, was completely blind, and yet was so happy.

Mac learned a lot from this old man about being content in simply knowing Jesus; he learned about being satisfied because God is *"holding my right hand."* This poor man shows us where true riches are found—in experiencing God's love and being thankful no matter how humble our home may be.

He may have owned almost nothing, yet—or perhaps we should say "therefore"—he had an amazing intimate friendship with Jesus. There was very little to distract him from basking in the presence of his loving Father, so he was free of the entanglements that most of us battle. Though he had no earthly comforts, he was free of envy and bitterness.

Is knowing God enough for us? Or do we require some other condition to be met before we'll be content? For the man in the cardboard box it was good enough to be *near to God*. These words of Asaph the psalmist could have been written by this man from Hong Kong:

> Whom have I in heaven but you?
> I desire you more than anything on earth (Ps 73:25 NLT).

Asaph sees heaven. He sees the futility of wanting a perfect life on earth. He sees the shortness of this life compared to an eternity with God. He allows the joys of the future age to break into his present existence. He chooses to treasure God over *anything* on earth.

In addition to his emotional turmoil, Asaph has another problem; he is physically sick. He says, "I get nothing but trouble all day long; every morning brings me pain … My health may fail, and my spirit grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine forever" (Ps 73:14, 26 NLT). He was facing his own mortality, staring at a sickness that may have proved fatal and it brought his life into sharper focus. Realizing that only unseen things are eternal he came alongside God where he could find a permanent refuge. The lust for earthly luxuries no longer held him captive because the end of his earthly life was right around the corner. Why worry about the things that we can't bring with us?

At the conclusion of the Psalm, Asaph writes: "But as for me, how good it is to be near God! I have made the Sovereign LORD my shelter, and I will tell everyone about the wonderful things you do" (Ps 73:28 NLT). Asaph shows us the way to contentment. He went into God's sanctuary of worship and humbled himself, purifying his heart from envy. With clean hands and a pure heart, he could once again see God clearly. He found his real treasure once again.

> Others may climb to the top of the corporate ladder …
> but as for me it is good to be near God.
>
> Others may indulge in endless extravagant luxuries …
> but as for me it is good to be near God.
>
> Others may never have to worry about earning a paycheck …
> but as for me it is good to be near God.

While traveling this road of worship, like Asaph I sometimes forget who my traveling partner is. I'm distracted by enticing attractions along the road, lured in by the adventure and treasure I might find on a side street. Then I realize I just want to stay on the main

road with Jesus. I don't want to be burdened with any extra baggage that I might pick up if I take a different route.

May God give you contentment as you draw close to him and let him take your hand. May you overflow with joy like the man in the cardboard box because you have the privilege of walking with Jesus all day long.

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1. Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches,* (Downers Grove, Il.: Intervarsity Press, 1999), 132.
2. "Envy," Merriam-Webster Dictionary http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/envy (accessed Sept 10, 2010).
3. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 71.
4. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 107.