

"How Much Do We Need To Be Content?"

Ted Engstrom for 20 years was the respected President of World Vision, a Christian humanitarian organization. He said some things a number of years ago that I believe are just as relevant today as then. He said, "I find it impossible to read the Scriptures without facing the question of lifestyle...still, I find that many North Americans stumble on the primary question of how it will help the world's poor if we go with one less shirt or recycle our food scraps into a potluck casserole...I could take to time to spell out the economic connection. It may be complex, but it does exist. I could demonstrate that to raise the standard of living among poor people, we must lower the standards of the rich. But I believe the motivation for change goes deeper than that...(a) hang up for many Christians is the problem of where to begin. Do we divest ourselves of everything we don't actually need...no, I don't think so. Nor do I think I can tell anyone where to begin...I can only suggest that we start somewhere...". He confessed how his own efforts to live a simple lifestyle were difficult and marked with failure.

For many Americans, the last 12 plus months living with COVID have been tough financially and economically. Yet, compared to the rest of the world, our standard of living is still high. Most of us have much more than we need.

Today I want to think with you about *contentment*, and the question, "How much do we need to be content?" (I confess right off the bat that I'm preaching this sermon for *me!*)

Scripture has a lot to say about our relationship to material things, and our desire for wealth, for "stuff". Let's start by looking at some words from the Apostle Paul, found in 1 Timothy, chapter 6. 1 Timothy 6:6 says, "But godliness with contentment is great gain." Living a godly life, and being content with what we have, is a real plus!

Then the apostle says something that we all know: "For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it" (1 Timothy 6:7). Before the birth of one of our children my wife Nancy dreamed that she gave birth to a little girl, and the baby came out dressed in a pink outfit! Well, we don't come into this world dressed in baby clothes or with cash in our hand, do we! And we don't exit this life taking with us any of our material possessions. No, we *can't* take it with us – we all know that!

Listen to what Paul writes next: "But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that" (1 Timothy 6:8). Honestly, if everything that we have were stripped away, except for food for the day, and some clothing, would we *really* be content?

The next 2 verses speak of the pitfalls of wanting material things too much: "Those 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 a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1 Timothy 6:9-10). Think of some of the ugly things that people have done for money. People in prison who've committed white collar crimes. People who've lied or cheated just to pocket some extra money. Those who've drifted from the faith and their relationship with God in pursuit of material things.

All through the Bible there are verses that warn us of the danger of wanting too many material things. Psalm 62:10 says, "Though your riches increase, set not your heart on them." Ecclesiastes 5:10 (with insight into human nature) says, "Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income." Bible scholar William Barclay put it well: "The strange thing about wealth is that there never seems to come a time when a (person) can say, 'Enough'". In the parable of the sower, Jesus said one of the things that can choke the influence of God's Word in us is the "delight in riches" and the "desire for other things" (Mark 4:19). Jesus once said, "Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven..." (Matthew 6:19-20).

How much do we need to be content? How much do we need to possess before we'll be satisfied? Someone has observed, "One of the most puzzling phenomena of our time is the increase of discontent. We live in an affluent society; we have more money, more leisure, more resources, more goods of every kind than any nation has ever had; yet in the midst of this abundance, there is growing dissatisfaction, frustration and bitterness. It is evident that something has gone wrong."

Modern advertising feeds into and fuels the problem. Ads try to convince us that we really *need* what we in most cases really *don't* need: the new car or SUV or truck, the latest fashion in clothing. Advertisers aim to create a feeling of *discontent* in us. I read of a cowboy from a large ranch in Texas. He spent his life in the open country. Finally some friends took him to Dallas, and one of the big department stores. He walked from one floor to another in the large building, up and down the aisles, eyes wide open in amazement. Finally, someone asked him what he thought. This very unsophisticated cowboy said he thought it was "purty", but he never in all his life saw so many things he didn't need.

How much do we need to satisfy us? How many shirts and pairs of pants do I need? How many dresses or outfits, ladies? How many pairs of shoes? How many new vehicles or home improvements? How much can I justify spending on things for myself when people in the world are starving? It's estimated that about 9 million people – adults and children – will die this year of hunger. 25,000 today will die of starvation. That's 17 people every minute. 1 person dies every 3-4 seconds. So by the time I have preached this message, anywhere from 350-425 will have died because they lacked enough food to survive. (This is hard! I'm preaching to myself).

Paul's words to Timothy confront and challenge us: "But if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content" (1 Timothy 6:8). So what can we do? I'm not preaching this sermon just to make us all feel guilty and depressed, but I struggle with this. I want a lot of things I don't need. I don't have all the answers, but here are a few thoughts:

First, get a broader perspective: the affluence we experience in the U.S. is not the norm for most people in the world.

I'm so grateful to God that I've been able to go to Kenya, 4 trips there. It's been a humbling experience. In the little village of Musese, almost no one has an automobile. People walk, or ride bikes. Some of those better off can afford motorbikes. Our mission teams have been served

meals in homes where people hardly could afford to do that. I've been invited into mud huts and graciously served tea and biscuits by people who had practically nothing. I wish that everyone could spend a month in Kenya or some similar place – maybe it would help us to be more content with what we have.

One report says that the United States has less than 5% of the world's population, yet we consume a third of the world's paper, one quarter of the world's oil, 23% of the coal, 27% of the world's aluminum. We create 40-50% of the world's solid waste! So, get a broader perspective, and realize that even those of us in the U.S. who don't have much are better off than many people in the world.

Next: Do something – something – to curb our desire for more and more. I referred earlier to Ted Engstrom, World Vision President. He suggested that if we can't go all out and live a "simple lifestyle", that we adopt a "modified lifestyle" as a starting point.

Some of the great saints throughout church history have renounced wealth and worldly possessions, in order to serve God and others. The late Mother Theresa was one of those extraordinary persons. They are still a light in a dark and selfish world. But for most of us, that's not workable nor realistic. So maybe a modified lifestyle can be a beginning point.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh had a wise and balanced perspective on living a more simple lifestyle. She said, "The problem is...how to remain whole in the midst of the distractions of life...the solution for me, surely, is neither in total renunciation of the world, nor in total acceptance of it. I must find a balance somewhere." She went on to say we begin to find this balance when we learn what she calls "the art of shedding." Getting rid of the unimportant things – going our way without the extra baggage. Much of our unhappiness comes from wanting too much for our own good. We're much more content when we come to know how many things we can do without.

This can simply mean asking ourselves more often: "Do I really need this?" Do I really need that coat or slacks or pair of shoes? The electronic device? The new tool or decoration for the home? Then instead of buying this item, take what we would have spent and give it to someone in need: some mission project, or Water Street Mission.

There's a true story about a farmer in northeastern Connecticut. It's goes back a number of years, but it can still teach us and inspire us. Every Saturday night this farmer would go into town. He'd gaze in the various store windows and look at the many gadgets, novelties, clothes, and products for one's home or car or boat. "Now I don't need that," he'd say. "And over there's something I'll never use. I can get along very nicely without them." Then he'd jot down the prices of these items, and on Monday morning he'd go down to the bank and deposit an amount equal to the price of these materials. 25 cents. 50 cents. A dollar. (I told you the story is dated!). In some 30 years or so he banked over \$30,000. When he died, he left this money to equip libraries and state parks.

Much of what we buy we really don't *need*! When CB radios were popular, I just *had to have*

one. I looked at the ads every week, checked out the prices, secretly envied those people who drove around talking on their CB radios (this was before cell phones). But, with a young family, I could never scrape enough money together to buy one. A few years later someone *gave me one* – after the fad had passed. I put it in the car for a month or so, then took it out. That CB radio *I just had to have* wound up in the attic, then in the trash.

So, get a broader perspective and see how much we have compared to most in the world...do *something* to cut back on our wanting too much...and ***understand that not being more content with what we have is a spiritual issue***. Inner contentment is a *spiritual* quality. To be able to be content with what we have is a mark of spiritual maturity. Hebrews 13:5 tells us: "Keep your lives free from the love of money and *be content with what you have*, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you'". The Apostle Paul demonstrated great spiritual maturity when he said this about himself: "I have learned to be satisfied with what I have. I know what it is to be in need and what it is to have more than enough. I have learned this secret, that anywhere, at any time, I am content, whether I have too much or too little" (Philippians 4:11-12).

In the Scripture we looked at earlier, 1 Timothy 6, Paul goes on to instruct those who are rich. (Again, compared to most of the world, most of us are "rich"). "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (1 Timothy 6:17). Don't be boastful if we are well off. Don't put our hopes in wealth or material things, which are so uncertain. Trust in God, not things.

Paul goes on: "Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life" (1 Timothy 6:18-19). If we are blessed materially, we should be generous and willing to share. In that way, we'll be laying up treasure in heaven, as Jesus said.

One of the sisters who ran Sacred Heart Catholic School in San Francisco used to give her 2nd graders an exercise. She'd ask them to draw a picture of what they would like to do with Jesus if he would decide to come and be with them for a day. The kids seemed to like the assignment, and often came up with some interesting responses. One time a little girl came up and said, "Sister, my drawing is almost finished. But I have a question to ask." "Sure, what is it?" the teacher responded. The little girl went on: "Sister, how do you spell Bloomingdale's?"

Wouldn't that be interesting! Taking Jesus on a shopping trip to Bloomingdale's, or Boscov's or Macy's or Kohl's! Or having Him sit down with you to order some things from Amazon. *I wonder how much He would buy!*

You know, the thing that gnaws on me is that if I'm a Christian, I'm supposed to do what Jesus would do.

