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CONTENTMENT

By Rich Fisher

A few years ago, a survey found Britons were less happy than in the 1950s – despite the fact that we are three times richer. The proportion of people saying they were “very happy” had fallen from 52% in 1957 to just 36%.¹ Whether or not money can buy you love, it seems it cannot buy you happiness.

All around us we see a society that is deeply dissatisfied and obsessed with getting ahead; whether it's the next career move, making home improvements or pushing our children to do well at school. And Christians (both as individuals and as churches) are not immune from this. Why is it that we are so quick to grumble about our leaders when we do not like the style of preaching, rather than being grateful for the man the Lord has sent to minister to us? And when things go wrong why is our first thought: ‘Lord that’s not fair!’ rather than being thankful that things are not worse?

Of course, there are some things Scripture would urge us not to be content about, for example, our sin and our knowledge of Christ (Phil 3.12-16), and we should not be negligent in using our God-given gifts and abilities (Mtt 25). Nor should we not try to improve our circumstances if God gives us opportunity (1 Cor 7.21). But in the areas of prosperity and the circumstances of our lives, many of us do suffer from discontentment. The aim of this article is to convince you that being content is actually a good thing; and not a second best for those who are not as successful as they want in this world. After all, the apostle Paul regarded contentment rather highly (1 Tim 6.6).

In our frustration with our lack of contentment, we may be tempted to think that contentment is something you can do nothing about (‘I’m just not a contented person!’), or that we must simply wait for the Holy Spirit to grant us contentment. We are in danger of forgetting how Paul describes his own experience. In Philippians, writing from prison he writes, ‘*Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.*’ (Phil 4.11). Clearly Paul thought contentment is something that must be learnt.

To help us learn contentment, we will be taking a short lesson from the book ‘*The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*’, by the puritan Jeremiah Burroughs.

What is Christian contentment?

Burroughs reminds us that contentment is about the heart. It is an inward characteristic. For example, in Psalm 62 verse 1 it is not just David’s tongue that is silent before the Lord, but his soul. It is possible to not complain yet be gripped by deep dissatisfaction. We keep silent because we do not want to embarrass ourselves in front of others – or perhaps we are known as such a grumbler that no-one will stay around long enough to listen to us complain!

It is easy to think we are submitting to God when we are harbouring deep discontentment in our hearts. Contentment, however, is about freely submitting yourself in any and every situation to what the Lord brings about. This is more than simply resigning yourself when you realise there is nothing you can do to change the situation. It is about acknowledging God’s goodness in bringing it about. When Samuel tells Eli the priest that God will punish his house forever, Eli says: ‘*It is the LORD. Let him do what seems good to him*’ (1 Sam 3.18). We need to ask ourselves, if we were offered the chance to run the universe for a day, to alter the course of human history so that our difficulty disappeared, would we take it? Or would we say, ‘the Lord knows best – he is wiser than me and he is more loving than me’?

After all, Paul says that he has learned in whatever situation to be content. We usually think any situation would be better than the one we are in right now – if only he had struck me in my possessions and not in my child – then I could bear it. If only he had afflicted my health and not my marriage – then I could still rejoice in him. But contentment is not simply a matter of being happy when God's ways coincide with what we desire. Contentment is about the transformation of our desires so they match with God's desires, so that we are prepared not to grumble even when it really hurts.

But it is important to not confuse contentment with stoic indifference to suffering. One theme of the book of Psalms is that of the righteous sufferer who is honest with the Lord about his anguish. And when Christ said 'take up your cross', he expected his disciples to understand what a 'cross' was.

Why is contentment so good?

Contentment gives glory to God because it shows we trust Him to run the universe. We show ourselves satisfied with his wisdom and goodness.

Contentment also rescues us from many burdens. It is a Biblical principle that God requires more from those who have been given more. So having less can lift a great burden from our shoulders. Burroughs tells us, *'You are ready to be discontented because you have not got such gifts and abilities as others have, but God requires more of those who have greater wealth'*.

Contentment also rescues us from many temptations. Burroughs reminds us that *'the devil loves to fish in troubled waters'*. Discontentment (for example with our wealth) is a great trap in the devil's hands to lead us away from Christ. When we are discontented we are more open to using sinful methods to relieve our distress, and we are more open to the devil's suggestions, as Eve was in the garden.

How do we get contentment?

How do we begin to learn this secret of contentment? We need to start by repenting. As with any sin we must confess it before we can change. We sometimes think of grumbling as a light sin, but in 1 Corinthians 10 it is placed alongside idolatry and sexual immorality, and Paul says those who complained were destroyed. Discontentment is deadly serious, and needs to be repented of.

We must be ready to deny ourselves. If the only thing we deserve is hell, why are we upset if life is not so comfortable now? Burroughs tells us that *'the way to bear anything is to know you are nothing'*, and *'we need to focus a lot less on providing for ourselves, and a lot more on humbling ourselves'*.

We must avoid excuses to grumble. Burroughs has an excellent section dealing with different excuses that are used to justify complaining. One temptation we can be prone to is to be discontent when we cannot serve the Lord as we would like, for example, because of the responsibility of caring for an elderly relative or young children. But Burroughs reminds us that one sign of not being content is to shirk the normal duties we have been given.

We must read providence positively. God's providence is his sovereign control over every detail of our lives. When viewed in isolation the events in our lives it is easy to wonder what is going on, why has the Lord brought that suffering into our lives? We need to see the 'big picture'; that everything the Lord brings about is working to his glory and our salvation. We must believe that the Lord intends good towards us. Imagine you had a friend who was always assuming the worst about your motives. Would your friendship not suffer? But are we not often tempted to question

the Lord's providence? We need to say to ourselves: if we lose our earthly riches, perhaps He prevented our wealth causing us to fall into sin. If our car does not start in the morning, perhaps the Lord has kept us from a fatal crash.

Finally, we must remember God is the most contented being in the universe. He had no need to create the universe. If God the greatest being in the universe is contented with himself, why can't we be satisfied with Him?

Burroughs ends by saying that if a preacher was to claim there was a way to never to be in want of anything many would flock to hear him (something surely not unique to his day)! But the secret of contentment is much the same as to never want anything. One who is never without a contented spirit can never be said to want much. So rather than striving to change our circumstances to match our desires (discontentment), our contentment consists not in getting what we desire but in the Lord changing our spirits to match our conditions.

As Burroughs finishes, *'Oh the Word holds forth a way full of comfort and peace to the people of God even in this world. No men in the world may live such comfortable, cheerful and contented lives as the saints of God. Oh, that we had learned this lesson.'*

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Endnotes:

- 1) news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/happiness_formula/4771908.stm