

First Presbyterian Church, Sylacauga, AL
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Hebrews 13:1-8
“Understanding the Sufficiency of God”

Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have: for He has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” So we can say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper. I will not be afraid.” (Hebrews 13:5-6)

We all experience restlessness in our lives. Sometimes we get restless waiting in line at the grocery store or the fast food drive-in. Or we get restless when we’ve had an appointment and are kept waiting ... or when the internet is too slow ... or when important college football games that should be played on Saturday afternoons begin at 6 p.m. Sometimes our restlessness is with something we have put off doing, and we just can’t stop thinking about it.

Remember the story about the rich, young entrepreneur who was opening the door of his sleek new Mercedes, when a truck roared by ... hit it ... and ripped the door off its hinges? The police quickly arrived and found the man jumping up and down, shrieking at anyone and everyone about the horrible damage done to his precious automobile. The policeman looked stunned and, shaking his head in bewilderment, said to the man, “You wheeler-dealers are all so materialistic. You make me sick!” “What’s your problem?” the driver quickly snapped back. The cop answered, “You’re so worried about your precious car that you haven’t even noticed that your left arm was ripped off!” As he looked down at where his arm had been a few minutes ago, the man bellowed, “Oh, no! Where’s my Rolex?”

Too often we get so caught up in the mundane and the materialistic that we miss “the big picture.” That’s why Jesus tells us to “Take care! ... For one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Despite the fact that we believe and trust in Jesus and know His words to be true, there is restlessness in our hearts. St. Augustine’s words ring true: “Our hearts are restless until they find rest in God.” Oh, we say that our lives don’t consist in the abundance of our possessions, but we live as if they do.

I. Restless Heart Syndrome: Struggling With Discontent

You’ve probably seen the commercials on TV, usually showing a young person at a computer, calling out to a parent and saying, “Hey, come look at this. It tells about a condition where you have twitching and cramping in the legs ... sometimes to the point that it becomes disruptive to sleep. The child tells the parent: That’s what you have. It’s called “RLS --- Restless Leg Syndrome”.

There’s a similar terrible illness called “RHS --- Restless Heart Syndrome” that works in much the same way. The primary symptom of RHS, however, is restlessness or being discontent ... even a complete dissatisfaction. We’re never really happy with anything. The moment we

acquire something, we barely take time to enjoy it ... before we want something else. It reminds me of children on Christmas Day, who open their presents early Christmas morning but by Christmas afternoon they are bored and don't know what to do.

This is why the writer of Hebrews warns us to keep our lives free from the love of money, and encourages us to be content with what we have. As believers, trust in material possessions is misplaced. Investing our hearts in the temporary is a contradiction of faith.

We need to let God's story of sufficiency re-shape and re-frame our views of scarcity and need. We need to allow the biblical stories of God's sufficiency to shape how we see things ... to see how different the world is when seen through the lens of our faith. The Jewish Passover has a response that celebrates God's glorious provision.

I adapted it, and we used it as our Call to Worship this morning. Notice the progression of God's blessings, but notice also the believers' response at any point that God's gift was sufficient:

If God divided the sea for us, and had not made us pass through on dry land ... that would have been sufficient.

If God made us pass through its midst on dry land, and had not drowned our oppressors in the sea ... that would have been sufficient.

And so it continues down to:

If God gave us the Law, and had not led us into the land of Israel ... that would have been sufficient.

Finally, the question is asked:

How much more are we indebted for the manifold sufficiencies that God hath bestowed on us?

To focus on the sufficiency of God must shape our lives ... our choices ... and our gratitude.

II. Four Keys to Cultivating Contentment

Discontent almost seems to be one of the hallmarks of humanity. In Philippians 4:18 Paul makes this amazing claim: "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation ... whether well fed or hunger ... whether living in plenty or in want." For well over two thousand years nothing has changed substantially about the human condition since Paul first penned those words from prison. Could any secret be more valuable or desirable than the secret of contentment?

Like Paul we can learn to be content in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. When we find ourselves “dis-contented”, it would certainly help if we learned to say: “It could be worse.” This is looking for the bright side ... finding something good to focus on.

Many of the things we buy are simply not worth the expense. So maybe it would help if we always asked the question: “For how long will this make me happy?”

Gratitude is essential to contentment. A grateful heart recognizes that all of life is a gift ... not an entitlement ... but a gift! We develop a grateful heart when we spend more time giving thanks for what we have ... than thinking about what’s missing in our lives.

So, where does our soul find true satisfaction? From Genesis to Revelation the Bible tells us that we find our satisfaction in God alone.

Most people assume that it is outward circumstances that bring us contentment and that make our life complete. Contentment is equated with acquiring, yet each new source of contentment is sadly short-lived. The world and our culture encourage us to believe that personal contentment is found in the acquisition of some ‘thing’ we do not currently possess ... or in the attainment of some goal we have not yet achieved. A colleague of mine, who is my contemporary in age, tells about watching the “Howdy Doody Show” when he was five, and how he listened to Buffalo Bob explain that if you really wanted to be somebody special you had to wear Blue Bell blue jeans. Nothing would do but for him to get a pair of Blue Bells. He says that he’ll never forget putting them on ... and how surprised he was that he really didn’t feel that much different than before. When you think of all the jeans that have been popular since the 1950’s and all of the young people who were convinced that those jeans would make a difference, it makes you wonder why we let the world dictate to us what we must wear and how we must feel.

Paul seems to suggest that true personal contentment has absolutely nothing to do with outward circumstances or personal comforts ... pleasures ... or things. We don’t need to live our lives thinking that we’ll be content ... when we graduate ... or when we go off to college ... or when we get married ... or when we buy a house ... or when we get a better job ... etc ... etc ... etc.

A TV preacher reported one day that his wife went to the beauty parlor every three months to get a permanent. But then he said if what she was getting was really a permanent she would not be returning every few months. No, what she was getting was a “temporary”!

Most of us have to discover for ourselves the futility of finding contentment in the things of the world ... before we can open ourselves to finding contentment in the things of the Spirit. Why? Because that is counter-intuitive to the ways of this world ... and because it violates what we have been taught and encouraged to believe about contentment.

III. Five Steps For Simplifying Our Lives

There are some positive steps we can take to move toward contentment ... and to appreciate the sufficiency of God. One is to set a goal for reducing our consumption ... for living below our means. Another is to ask one's self before making a purchase: "Do I really need this? And why do I want this?" Then, re-consider using something up before buying something new. Jeremy and I have this thing about cheese. If it has a little mold on it, he wants to throw it out, while I see no reason not to just slice off that portion and use the rest. How about planning and using low-cost entertainment that enriches your life as a family? You'll be amazed at how much pleasure you derive from simple activities. Both Jeremy and Tre and their girlfriends have discovered "dominoes," and when we all gather at the Manse, you will usually find us around the kitchen table playing dominoes together.

Just think: In two weeks our kids will have enough Halloween candy to send the whole population of Sylacauga into sugar overload. But will they be content? I can almost guarantee you that they'll be arguing over their candy. It doesn't matter how much they have; they want more ... or they want what someone else has.

Let me close with a story about a Roman Catholic priest, who was interned by the Russians after World War II, because he failed to support the Communist Regime. During his internment in the gulag what he missed most was the ability to celebrate Mass and the Eucharist. He was a priest, so he knew there were four things required for the sacrament: a priest, the liturgy, the bread, and the wine. He only had one of the four: his priesthood.

One day, a fellow prisoner was put into solitary confinement in a totally dark cell. As he was trying to feel around and get oriented to where he was, he felt something stuck between the stones and pulled it out. Believe it or not, it was a copy of the Catholic Mass that some prisoner before him had hidden in the wall. When he was released from solitary, he delivered it to the priest, who now had two of the four things needed.

Just prior to his imprisonment, the Pope had issued a decree that, under exceptional circumstances, grape juice could be used at the Mass. So the priest and his friends persuaded a guard to smuggle in a few grapes, which they mixed with water. The fourth and final piece needed happened when a Jewish prisoner received a care package from his family in Moscow. It contained matzo bread, and he shared a portion with the good priest.

This Roman Catholic priest writes: "There I was ... a Hungarian Catholic ... serving time in Russia ... receiving unleavened bread from Jews in Moscow ... to serve Holy Communion."

This morning, we began with words from the Jewish Passover liturgy about God's sufficiency ... and now, we end with the words of a Roman Catholic priest about that same sufficiency. Somewhere between the two, you and I ought to be able to discern and understand the sufficiency of God.

You were given a key tag when you came to worship this morning. It is like those you get from the drug store or the grocery store to keep on your key ring so that it can be scanned for a discount. Only ... this one says "CONTENTMENT" on one side and has a prayer on the back. Please join me in the prayer.

Prayer

Lord, help me to be grateful for what I have, to remember that I don't need most of what I want, and that joy is found in simplicity and generosity. Amen.

Resources

Joanna M. Adams, "On a Prayer and a Shoestring," Morningside Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA, November 2, 2008.

Scott Campbell, "Father Olafsson's Secrets of Survival," THE PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN, volume 181, issue 4.

Adam Hamilton, "Cultivating Contentment," ENOUGH STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM GUIDE.

Larry R. Hayward, "A Word About An Offering," Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, June 28, 2009.

Daniel W. Massie, "Learned Contentment," First Scots Presbyterian Church, Charleston, SC, June 17, 2007.

Author Unknown, "Sowing Seeds of Satisfaction," sermoncentral.com

Jon M. Walton, "Entitlement and Thankfulness," First Presbyterian Church, New York City, NY, February 8, 2009.