

Cultivating Contentment

Hebrews 13:5-11

Luke 12:15

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Centennial United Methodist Church

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We take what we see and our view of the world for granted. There are illusions in this world that trick our minds and our hearts. Today we're going to examine cultural illusions in light of our faith and take another look.

Watch this video (at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9PZizBDBZw>). Notice how even though we know it's an illusion our eyes still can be fooled? There are illusions in our culture that can fool our minds and our hearts as well.

Jesus tells us in Luke 12:15 that one's life does not consist of an abundance of possessions. Jesus is saying that your life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot. We *know* that's true, yet we live as if our value is determined by our possessions. It's an illusion that's projected all around us: A real estate company sells, "Quality living." We're told that "Every kiss begins with Kay (Diamonds)." Another ad says, "Just how much do you want someone to like you?" A car company says Drive = Love. They all imply that our worth is tied to our possessions, that we are what we buy. It's an illusion. That thinking actually cheapens our sense of our worth and leads to discontent. We say we know it's an illusion, that our possessions don't define us, yet we live as if they do. Jesus tells us to *look again*.

That struggle between what we say and what we do leads to what Adam Hamilton calls the Restless Heart Syndrome. It's primary symptom is discontent, a sense of never being satisfied with what we have, needing to have something more, something better. That kind of discontent can destroy us.

There are times when discontent is a virtue. We are created with a natural, healthy discontent that leads to the fullness of life. It's a longing for God, a desire to become closer to the only One who can fully satisfy our best and truest self. We were created with a longing to know God better, a desire to grow in our spiritual life and to love others better. This is a discontent with the injustice in the world which leads us to work for justice, healing and understanding between people. Pursuing these longings leads to deeper peace and true contentment.

But, often we are *too content* with the way we love God and others and we become self-satisfied. Often, we aren't too eager to grow spiritually and sometimes we're even self-righteous.

Instead, we are discontent with *what we have* in life. We are discontent with our possessions, wanting a bigger house, a remodeled kitchen, a newer car, the latest electronics. (I don't know what it is for you.) This is destructive discontent. We buy something new, experience buyer's rush which soon turns to buyer's boredom not long after we get home, leading to more discontent.

Now, I get hooked by a good sale. You, know, 30-40% off! I take the hook, buy it and think, "That was a good sale!" The marketer gets the real rush, thinking, "That was a *great* sale!" I get home and it's not so exciting. I have a shirt in my closet that I bought that way that I have never worn. But I got it 70% off! It's still got the tag attached to prove it. When have you seen someone go through that cycle? When has it happened to you? That cycle only leads to disappointment and discontent. That discontent is destructive.

That discontent with what we have can spread to the rest of our life. We can become discontent with other aspects of what we have in life: our job, or our neighbors, or our church, or our friends, or our family. We focus on what frustrates us at school, work or home, highlighting

the imperfections in others. A new job loses its luster when things get stressful. A person gets married and learns that their partner isn't as perfect as they once thought. That's about the same time the other person is discovering the same thing. Who's imperfections are glaring at you these days?

Scripture tells us to *look again*. Don't be fooled by the illusion. Jesus tells us (Matthew 7:5) to take the 2x4 out of our own eye before we try to take the speck out of someone else's.

There are several ways we can *look again* at our lives and find greater contentment:

1. Develop a Grateful Heart

Gratitude is one of the most important keys to contentment. Paul reminds us to "give thanks in all circumstances" (I Thessalonians 5:18). You want to really increase your contentment? Accept this challenge: Spend more of your time and energy being grateful than you do being grumpy. Focus on what you *have* more than on what you lack, on what's *right* in your life more than on what's wrong. *Look again* at your life. What's right with your life? What are you so thankful for? What's right about your job? What do you love about this church? What makes you grateful about your neighborhood? Then think about your family members and friends. Take each one. What do you appreciate most about your friend, your spouse, your child, your relative? Take each person. Say a prayer today, thanking God for each one and see how it improves your relationship and increases your contentment.

2. Ask yourself, "How Long Will What I Want to Buy Make Me Happy?"

Many of the things we buy don't live up to the hype. I remember when our kids were little, one of the boys saw a commercial for a toy race car track, with one of those loop-de-loops. He *really* wanted it. I can't remember if he received it for his birthday or Christmas. But I do

remember when he played with it for the first time he was disappointed. He asked, "How come this isn't as fun as it is on TV?" When have you been disappointed by something you spent your hard earned money on? Many of the things we buy aren't worth the cost and don't bring the long term satisfaction we expect. If you can, try it before you buy it. Rent the car first.

3. Look at Where Your Soul Finds True Satisfaction

Stop a moment and *look again* at your life. Don't get fooled by the illusion of stuff and status. Ask yourself what really brings your spirit greater peace and satisfaction. Our faith through the centuries points the way. Saint Augustine prays, "You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you." Psalm 63:1 echoes that prayer: "O God, I seek you, my soul thrusts for you." Jesus encourages us not to get trapped. He says, keep it simple: Love God with your whole self, heart, soul and mind, and love your neighbor like you love yourself (Matthew 22:37, 39). When we focus on these two things - love of God and each other - we find our lives filled with more love and contentment.

You are not equal to your possessions! The truth is, more and more possessions actually add stress and maintenance and confusion to our lives. When we simplify our living our contentment deepens. A few times in my life I have gone on retreat alone at a retreat center. I bring one small suitcase and stay in a simple room with only a single bed, a desk, and a small sink. Each time, the simplicity of the setting and the lack of clutter was very freeing, allowing me to focus on my relationship with God and what's most important in my life.

Greater and greater consumption also depletes the world's natural resources. You have probably heard that we make up 5% of the world's population, we use 20% of the world's energy and produce 40% of the world's waste.

Here are five steps that can help you decide how to simplify your life:

A. Set a Goal of Reducing Your Consumption, and Live Below Your Means.

You've heard lots of suggestions. You are probably following many. Set goals to reduce your own personal consumption and waste in your life. Use canvas bags for grocery shopping. Choose fuel saving cars. Turn the thermostat back a couple of degrees.

B. Before Making a Purchase, Ask Yourself,

Do I Really Need This? and, Why Do I Want This?

Look at why you want to buy something. Is it a need, something to do with your self image, or something else? You might change your mind about the purchase.

C. Use Something Up Before Buying Something New.

Use those things you have spent your money for until they are empty, broken, or worn out.

D. Plan Low-cost Entertainment That Enriches.

Can you guess what one activity has created the most fun for families and friends in the past few years? I heard in the news that the one game enjoyed most by family or friends is Charades! It doesn't cost a dime!

E. Ask Yourself, Are There Major Changes That Would Allow Me to Simplify My Life?

Are there big decisions about your residence, your car, your club membership which would reduce your stress, and simplify your life?

Look again at your life. Don't let society's illusion that you are valued by what you own ambush the contentment God wants for you. It doesn't mean we have to stop buying things. It does mean that you have the power to make choices out of love for God and others that make a difference today and into the future. It's your choice.

You get to choose which tent you will live in: dis-con- **tent** - ment or con- **tent** - ment.

Look again at your relationships. Begin from a place of gratitude. As you decide that your life doesn't "consist of the abundance of things" but the abundance of thanksgiving, as you decide that it's not about where you live but how deeply you love, the joy and contentment in your life will spring up. And *that's* no illusion. Amen.