

The Five “D’s” of Contentment

As Presented by Lisa Bishop

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Day One

Are you content with your job, your relationships, your living circumstances, your life?

I recently read an article in *Psychology Today* entitled, “The Secret to a Contented Life.” In a nutshell it said that contentment comes from unconditional self-acceptance. As a follower of Jesus, you and I know the secret is not to “love yourself more.” We share with the Apostle Paul in having the true secret to contentment and that’s why we’ll look at what I call the four D’s of living a contented life. But before we do, let’s remind ourselves of Paul’s profound words in Philippians:

...I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength (Philippians 4:11b-13).

When I studied this passage several years ago the word that stood out to me was, “learned.” Whenever you read Scripture, look for repeated words. That means the author is trying to get your attention and make a point. Here Paul uses the word “learned” two times. In the Greek it means, “to learn by use and practice, to be in the habit of, accustomed to.”

I think this is where a lot of us can get tripped up and discouraged. We want contentment just to come, when in fact it is hard work and something we often have to practice over and over again and fight for. Which seems counterintuitive, but we live in a world where we are bombarded with messages that this car, that job, that outfit, that spouse will make you happy. And while we ultimately know it’s not true, we can fall into the fleeting trap of believing contentment can be found “out there somewhere.” With some particular need or desire being met, when really it is a state of mind and a state of being satisfied in Christ. Contentment is not a quick fix, it’s learned. Where are you lacking contentment?

Day Two

Denying yourself is a gateway to a contented life.

The Apostle Paul says this, *“I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want” (Philippians 4:12).*

When Paul uses the word “know” he means, “to know how, to be skilled in.” Paul had more than head knowledge of what contentment meant. He felt the pain and the reward of practicing contentment. As a reminder, Paul was writing this letter to the church while he was in prison and you can assume the circumstances were not pretty. Paul could not come and go as he pleased, order Chinese food and have it delivered through Grub Hub or get his favorite movies on demand. When Paul says he has learned contentment, in the middle of a prison cell, in the midst of lack and plenty, I think it had something to do with the discipline of denying himself. Not having what he wanted when he wanted it.

If you are so accustomed to having your way you will be hard pressed to maintain inward satisfaction when your circumstances are less than desirable. I feel entitled to a comfortable life sometimes. A life free of hardship, difficult coworkers, drained finances, and messy relationships. How about you? This is where Paul's example of knowing contentment whether in need or in plenty is so important for you to embrace in your own life and this is where denying yourself comes in. Knowing what it feels like to be in want and be okay!

One way of denying yourself is through practicing the spiritual discipline of fasting. Typically, it is fasting from food for a day, or two, or three. Or, fasting from a meal on any given day. Denying ourselves of food, the source of comfort and pleasure can be the fastest way to experience self-denial. When that "hangry" state or those hunger pains kick in, we direct our attention to Jesus, the only one who satisfies and we begin to experience Paul's teaching for ourselves.

"I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (Philippians 4:12b).

Our appetites for more are what lead to disgruntlement and dissatisfaction. Learn to discipline yourself with self-denial. Embrace your circumstances and trust God to provide in them.

Day Three

Would you say you gravitate towards grumbling or gratitude?

We don't have to read very far in the Bible to see numerous examples in the Old Testament where grumbling was rampant, and gratitude was severely lacking. The Israelites rarely seemed to be content and when they were it lasted a hot minute before they were back to their complaining ways. They give examples of what it looks like and sounds like to forget God's faithfulness. To fail to remember all of the ways he has, is and will provide for your daily needs. All too often it's easy to be tempted to measure your gratitude against the backdrop of what you want rather than trusting God sees the bigger picture and will never deny you of what you actually need.

In Exodus 16 we see the Israelites are in their sixth week of wandering in the wilderness after the Lord has just delivered them from over 400 years of slavery. As they enter the wilderness it also begins a cycle of crisis, grumbling, God's provision, gratitude. Now let's be honest, I don't know if you or I would have acted much differently with our lack of gratitude but what I don't want us to miss is that the wilderness is a training ground to mature in Christ, to grow in our ability to see God's provision even in hard circumstances and to learn to trust him.

In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death" (Exodus 16:2-3).

After they complain, God responds by providing for their needs. They are grateful for a short time but quickly have gratitude amnesia and the cycle of grumbling begins again. It's a recurring pattern not only for the Israelites, but for our spiritual lives as well.

When you are facing challenging circumstances, it can be easy to focus on what you do not have and to forget what there is to be grateful for. Here's a challenge for you. Write a list of ten things you are grateful for. Nothing is too small. Thank God for them. Learn to be content as you practice turning your grumbling into gratitude.

Day Four

What do you do when life is not going the way you planned? When you feel disappointed, uncertain, or unsettled?

We are taking a deep dive into contentment and how you can have more of it in your life, no matter your circumstances. If I have learned anything about contentment, cultivating it takes effort and it is something that you learn by intentionally pursuing it, consistently over time. It's an inward state of satisfaction that comes from trusting God with your life even when circumstances look dim.

If I am not careful, I can quickly find myself in a state of discontentment when my life is not going the way I envisioned. When a prayer I feel like I have prayed for years still goes unanswered. When I am uncertain, fearful and anxious about what the future holds, my emotions can be easily swayed to dissatisfaction and can drive me to seek fulfillment in ways that are not healthy or helpful.

Where are you finding it difficult to be content? Think about it. What area of your life has not gone the way that you dreamed? When you come face to face with life's disappointments, detours, or delays, where or what do you turn to?

We can be tempted to try and numb ourselves and dull the discontent. You may turn to food, busyness, binging on Netflix. Maybe you turn to sex, pornography, alcohol or marijuana and other drugs. In an effort to dismiss the ache of an unmet longing we turn to idols to give us comfort even though we know that our idols never satisfy. Yet in the long moments of our lack of contentment, our flesh, our compulsion leads us to chase after worthless things.

In Psalm 119:37, David knew his tendency to let his flesh rule in challenging circumstances. And when tempted and pressed in on every side, he cries out to the Lord, "*Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word.*" The Passion Translation says, "*Help me turn my eyes away from illusions.*"

Idols are illusions. The things you turn to in your impatience or frustration may give a sense of temporary relief but will ultimately wreck you.

When you are tempted to seek idols for comfort, turn. Turn your eyes away from the idol and towards God and ask him to help you. You need to override your desire to self-medicate and turn your eyes to Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith.

Ditch your idols, make a habit of turning to God, and contentment will be produced in you.

Day Five

The Apostle Paul penned in Philippians this about contentment: "*I can do all things through him who gives me strength*" (Philippians 4:13).

To achieve contentment Paul knew he needed the strength of Christ. To achieve contentment, you and I need the strength of Christ. But our natural inclination is often not to make Jesus our go to. In our humanness we forget we have God's strength and the power of his Holy Spirit to help us. We neglect to delight ourselves in the Lord.

The concept of delighting in God is closely connected with intimacy with God. A desire for more of his presence. A depth of relationship where we want to know Jesus more, experience him more, worship him more, converse with him more, and find growing freedom in him. This requires making time to be with God. Daily being in his Word, in prayer and simply being still and delighting in his presence. This also reminds me of John 15:5,

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

Remain in God. Abide in Jesus. And in every situation believe and remember that your secret to contentment is calling on Jesus who gives you the strength to be content and to be truly satisfied in him.

This side of heaven you will battle with discontentment. It will never go away, and you will never be fully satisfied until you are in heaven with Jesus. But it is possible and a necessity that you pursue contentment in Jesus while on earth. There is great satisfaction to be found in Christ. God wants you to experience joy, gratitude and inner peace in the here and now. Just remember, it will take an earnest attempt on your part, and intention to delight yourself in him.