

# 2nd Opinion: Being content in an age of 'more'

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Have you ever been in a place where you were totally content? That's a hard place to be. It goes against our natural inclinations. Our natural lean is to reach and strive for the next best thing.

✘ Jonathan Waits A lot of companies' bottom line depends on this. How many times have you watched people lined up to get the newest cell phone? (How many times have you been in one of those lines?) The kick is 99 percent of the people in line already have a perfectly good cell phone. It's just not the latest and greatest.

About a year and a half ago, we bought a new van. While it's not over-the-top loaded with features, it does have a lot more bells and whistles than any vehicle we've owned. We should have been content with our new toy. And we were—for a little while. But then we started thinking about how nice it would have been to get the next van up in terms of features. We could have had two DVD players, and there would be no more fighting over movies. In other words, we weren't totally content any longer. I'll bet you can think of more times than you have fingers when you have done the same thing.

## **Our tendency toward discontentment**

This tendency toward discontentment always has been a part of us. In the Garden of Eden, the serpent sowed seeds of discontentment in Adam and Eve. Remember Genesis 3:6? "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave

some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.” When they saw all these things specifically through the lens with which the serpent fitted them, they went beyond what they currently had from God—which was the whole garden, by the way—and gave in to their desire and ate.

This tendency toward discontentment is not limited to individuals, either. It can affect whole cultures and nations. Consider how Israel responded to God’s miraculous delivery after 400 years of slavery in Egypt. They almost immediately complained Moses had led them out in the desert to starve to death and wanted to go back to Egypt and into slavery. Then, when they got tired of the miraculous food God provided for them every single day, they complained again and wanted to go back to Egypt—and slavery—where at least they had good food to eat. They should have been perfectly content in light of all God had done for them, and yet the first place they went time and time again was to discontentment.

Maybe you aren’t quite so melodramatic when your fits of discontentment strike, but I have a suspicion you have them all the same. I know, by the way, because I do. But come on: We both know this is no way to live. When discontentment rises, happiness vanishes. And who wants to go through life unhappy all the time? Wouldn’t it be better to live so what you really want is what you already have? Wouldn’t it be better to live with deep-seated contentment?

### **What’s the secret?**

The best question to ask at this time of year is this: What’s the secret of being content?

The answer is found near the end of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Philippians. In chapter 4, he lands on a word of thanks to the church for their care for him while he was sitting in prison awaiting his trial and probable execution. In other words, he wasn’t exactly in the most desirable

place in the world. Yet after thanking them for their willingness to help meet his needs, he writes: “Not that I am speaking of being in need ....”

Not in need? He was in prison awaiting an unjust trial and execution. We can conclude he needed a few things. Given the context, a somewhat more interpretive translation might be: “Not that I am speaking of being discontent ....” You see that, right? Discontentment comes when we move a want over into the category of need. Those two are not interchangeable, and our list of genuine needs is much, much smaller than most of us would image. In this country, we are trained to think that we need a car, and we need air conditioning, and we need a TV, and we need a phone, and we need the Internet. Wrong. We need food, water, air and shelter. Everything else is luxury.

No, Paul wasn’t in need. Nor was he discontent. But why? Because he discovered the secret of being content. “For I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.” Fantastic. What is it?

### **Philippians 4:13**

The answer is a verse that is both incredibly familiar and wildly misapplied. “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13). But wait! Isn’t that an athletic rallying cry? No, nor is it a blank check to do whatever we want as long as we’re “doing it with God’s strength.” This verse is really the secret of contentment. OK, but what exactly is the secret?

The answer comes just a bit earlier in the text. Paul commands his readers not to be anxious about anything. He could just as easily have said: Don’t be discontent. Well, what are we to do instead? In everything—that means everything—let your requests be made known to God by prayer and

supplication. So the secret of contentment is to pray? Not exactly. What comes next? Paul tells us how we should approach God—with thanksgiving. This is the heart of the secret. We bring our hearts to God with thanksgiving. We go to God with grateful hearts—which, looking back even a bit further in the text, we are able to do because of our constant rejoicing in him—and we come away with his peace that leads to contentment.

Fine, but why go to God for this? Well, because we trust him. We trust him because he's proven himself trustworthy over and over and over again. As we learn to trust him with gratitude for the things he's done and will yet do, we develop the spiritual muscle of being content, of being at peace, of experiencing joy, of being deeply grateful to God regardless of our circumstances. Or to put that all a bit more succinctly: The secret of contentment is grateful trust in God.

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