

Pursue Contentment  
April 21, 2013

This series is about pursuing things of God that will contribute to your happiness. Everyone wants to be happy. Everyone wants to be very happy. But not everyone knows what will lead to a very happy life. This series is about pursuing things of God that will contribute to your happiness. Not all of them are obvious. In fact some of them may seem counterintuitive. They may appear to move you away from happiness.

I think this was true for Jesus' first disciples. I don't think they were very happy much of the time leading up to His death. Jesus had a habit of doing things and saying things that His own disciples didn't understand or always like.

- He spends time with the worst people in town.
- Jesus invited a tax collector, hated by the Jews, to become one of His followers.
- He had a meal at this guy's home, with other tax collectors.
- Jesus took His disciples through Samaria and stayed with the hated Samaritans.
- He made the religious leaders angry, a lot, and they wanted to kill Him.
- He gave too much attention to women, children, and non-Jews.
- He tells people they have to eat His flesh and drink His blood.

For most of the Jesus' teaching ministry, His disciples were not very happy. Jesus seemed to be stalling. He wasn't doing what a messiah should do. And they weren't seeing the results, the happiness, they had hoped so long for.

One of the things Jesus teaches us that seems that it will not lead to happiness concerns money and what it will buy. Jesus says it this way in the Sermon on the Mount.

**Matthew 6:19-21 (NIV)** *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

This is one of those things Jesus said that sounds counterintuitive to happiness. Happiness in America is practically defined by owning more and more and more of what can be purchased. We are bombarded with the message that we should be pursuing more and more of the things of the world. The world says, "Money brings happiness. And lot's of money will bring lots of happiness." "Money brings happiness" is only true to a point. Studies worldwide show that most people are more happy than unhappy (5 on the scale below) once their basic needs are met.

#### Happiness Scale:

7	I am very happy!
6	I am mostly happy.
5	I am more happy than unhappy.
4	I am about as happy as unhappy.
3	I am more unhappy than happy.
2	I am mostly unhappy.
1	I am very unhappy.

If they have adequate food, clothes, and shelter, most people are more happy than unhappy. Other things are involved. They need some security. If a person was hiding in the jungle from an invading army, having food, clothes, and shelter wouldn't be enough to be happy. People need some peace and security as well. But being at peace and having the basic necessities covered, most people rate themselves as more happy than unhappy.

As for the second part of what the world believes, "And lot's of money will bring lots of happiness," studies don't back that up. Beyond money for basic needs, more money does make people happier. Happiness doesn't increase in proportion to income. It is not true that the more you have, the happier you are. The reason this isn't true, is that money and possessions come with dangers.

### **Money and Possessions comes with dangers.**

Jesus told a story, a parable, that illustrated this. It is too long to read it all, so I'll summarize it for you. He tells of a farmer throwing seed out on the ground. It lands on soil that is in four different conditions. Jesus uses these conditions as parallels to the four human responses to His preaching of the Kingdom of God. It is the third soil type we need to see this morning. Jesus describes this soil as full of weeds, of thorns. The seed germinates, begins to grow, but doesn't get enough sun or rain to grow all the way to producing grain. Again, Jesus is talking about people's response to the good news. He says...

**Matthew 13:22 (NIV)** *"... the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful."*

The danger of pursuing stuff is that it rivals God's place in our hearts. A lack of contentment with what you own distracts you from serving God. It will keep you from bearing spiritual fruit in your life.

Wealth deceives us into thinking that we will be very happy once we are wealthy or have lots of stuff, or certain stuff. We think, "Oh, if I only had one of those, I'd be really happy."

One fascinating bit of information I discovered while doing research for this series, concerned two very different groups of people. Those studying happiness surveyed the groups. The first group was made up of lottery winners. These were people who had won millions of dollars in the lottery. They were surveyed a year after they won big in the lottery.

The other group surveyed were people who had lost the use of their legs and were now in wheelchairs. They surveyed these people after a year in a wheelchair. The survey answers were surprising. Both groups rated themselves the same on a happiness scale. They were both on the plus side, somewhere between 5 and 6 on our scale. The wheelchair folks had adapted well to their handicap and made the best of things. Most of the lottery winners, after a year, were deeper in debt than they were before they won, and had fewer friends.

Money is deceitful. We choose to believe that it will make us happier. But money does not equal happiness. There is much more going on in making a happy life than money or possessions.

Go back with me to the last part of what Jesus said in Sermon on the Mount.

**Matthew 6:21 (NIV)** *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

What this means is that your allegiance, what you are devoted to, controls your heart. And what controls your heart controls your life. If you are devoted to pursuing money and possessions, they will control your heart and lead you away from God.

Jesus goes on to say that you cannot be devoted to both God and money. You can only be devoted to one. Those two allegiances cannot co-exist in your heart. They will take you in opposite directions of living. You cannot be pledged to both God and money. You cannot give your heart to them both. Jesus says the same in this passage.

**Matthew 6:24 (NIV)** *No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.*

The danger of pursuing stuff is that it rivals God's place in our hearts. A lack of contentment with what you own distracts you from serving God. It will keep you from bearing spiritual fruit in your life.

Look again at what Jesus says.

**Matthew 6:19 (NIV)** *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth.*

This is a command of our Lord. It is as strong a command as "Do not murder", "Do not commit adultery", and "Make disciples of all peoples." Yet, how often do we read it and go right on, not giving it much thought? I preached on this passage just over a year ago. How much more stuff do you own today than the last time you read this command? You have disobeyed this command of Jesus. Are you even trying not to own more stuff?

The solution to obeying this command of Jesus is to call a halt to the pursuit of more stuff.

**Hebrews 13:5 (NIV)** *Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."*

The secret to doing what Jesus said, and part of what will lead to our happiness, is to choose to be content with what we have. Put the brakes on your wanting. Put the brakes on your collecting. Put the breaks on pursuing the things of the world. The path to happiness isn't stuff.

Jesus doesn't say to simplify, to give up more and more of what you already have. Some have interpreted His words that way, and have found great freedom in getting rid of their stuff. They have learned that our stuff controls our hearts.

Last week several of us were talking about the stuff we own. I admitted that I have stuff in my house that I figure I'll probably never use again. And someone else agreed and said, "And we still can't get rid of it." And he was right. We keep it stored, just in case, even though we never use it. It has a hold on our hearts.

Jesus doesn't say to get rid of what you already have, but if you find it nearly impossible to get rid of the stuff you have and never use, that is a wakeup call to the control of your heart by your stuff. You don't control it. It controls you. Danger! Heed the danger.

Do you find yourself worrying about your finances, about your retirement savings, pension, investments? Do you check the stock market everyday and find you feel happy when it goes up and sad when it goes down? In-other-words, is your daily mood dependent on the financial markets? If any of these are true of you, money has your heart. Money is your security.

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have. Why? Because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." If you have Jesus you have all you really need. Believe it. Believe it and live it. Choose to be content with what you have.

So what is contentment and how do we go about adopting it for ourselves? **Contentment is choosing to be happy with what you already have.**

What is the next thing you have been wanting to buy? What is the next thing you've been tempted to purchase? What is that thing that keeps catching your eye and you think, "Oh, yeah, it would be great to have one of those." When you get to the point of telling yourself you need one of those, you are in great danger. When you turn wants into needs your heart is lost to money. You have crossed over the line of temptation described in James, chapter one.

Pursue contentment. Pursue contentment. Here's how.

### **Cultivate Gratitude.**

Count your many blessings, what you already have. How much do you take for granted the riches you already have, things consider necessities that are riches that many people do not have. Dependable electric power. Indoor plumbing. A refrigerator. Central heat and air conditioning. Think about these, everyday and give God thanks for them.

### **Enjoy what you already have.**

Stop and really enjoy what you already have. When you first got it you thought it was great. What happened? You expected more of it than it can give. You expected it to make you very happy. But it did not. It assuaged your discontent for a short period of time, but because you are focused on things for happiness, you need new things, more things all the time, like a drug addict is never satisfied with the current high. It must be repeated over and over. You keep desiring new stuff. You like the pursuit of new stuff.

To get off this never-ending-cycle, you have to choose to pursue different things, like contentment. Contentment is a choice to settle for what you have, and to enjoy it. If you choose to be discontent, nothing will satisfy you very long.

### **Lower your expectations.**

Psychologist Barry Swartz wears primarily jeans. He is a college professor and can get away with that. When he started wearing jeans they only came in one kind. They fit awful, were a bit uncomfortable and took a long time to break them in.

He finally went to buy a new pair, told the salesman his size, and expected to be handed a pair of jeans like all the other pairs he had owned. Instead the man listed all the different styles, cuts, etc., and asked which one he wanted.

Swartz said, "Give me the kind you could only get when there was only one choice." The salesman didn't know what that was.

So Swartz spent an hour trying on jeans and left with a better pair of jeans than he had ever owned, but was disappointed. He couldn't figure out why he was disappointed. As he eventually figured it out he wrote a book on the experience. (The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less, Ecco, 2004.)

This is what he figured out. When told how many kinds of jeans there were his expectations went sky high. He expected to get a perfect pair of jeans. But while the new pair were the best he'd ever had, they were not perfect, so he left the store disappointed.

Isn't your life now better and richer than it has ever been before? Then why are you so discontented? What is it that you think you have to own in order to be happy? Don't you know yet, by experience, that getting it won't make you happier? It will just make you a little less discontent for a limited time, until the next thing comes up on your wish list. And meanwhile you have all this stuff you can't get rid of.

Lower your expectations of money and possessions. Don't allow yourself to think that they will make you happy. Lower your expectations of what you think you deserve. This is the attitude of humility that I spoke about last week. You don't deserve the things of the world, nor will they create deep and permanent happiness. So quit pursuing them as if they will. Choose to be content.

Free yourself today. Free yourself from the love of money and possessions. Instead of making you happier, they are limiting the happiness you can find in Jesus. Your heart is not big enough to be centered on both things and on Him. The two loyalties fight against each other. They do. We don't want to admit it. That is why we keep getting more and more of the stuff of the world in our homes and not growing more mature as Christians.

Jesus knows what He's talking about. We have to take Him seriously on this command and stop ignoring it.

Invitation: Today if you are ready to get off the treadmill of pursuing the things of the world, if you are ready to pursue the things of God, then start at the beginning. Receive Jesus as your Savior from sin and turn your life over to Him as your Lord.

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Verses about being content:

Hebrews 13:5; Philippians 4:11-12, 19; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Matthew 6:19-24, 33; 1 Corinthians 7:17, 24; Luke 12:15; 2 Corinthians 12:10; Proverbs 30:7-9; James 4:1-2; Proverbs 28:25; Ecclesiastes 6:7-9; 8:13, 15; Luke 3:14; Psalm 37:16; Proverbs 15:16; 17:1; Mark 4:19;