



## Contentment or Covetousness

How we think affects the way we live our lives. That is a statement that seems so obvious that it doesn't need saying, and yet it is one we often forget. We can find ourselves in all sorts of strife because of the way we think and perceive things in life. As Christian women we easily find ourselves with wrong thought patterns which manifest themselves in our lives; and one of these is being discontent with our lot.

As a child I could never comprehend why "Do not covet" was one of the Ten Commandments. To me, it seemed at the time, coveting something wasn't that big a deal, not all that serious and certainly wasn't as bad as killing someone! After all, we have all admired things that our neighbours own (from their dolls and Lego collections to their new BBQ, newly decorated kitchen or their vast craft collection) and wished they were our own. However, as these desires possess our minds to the point where we can barely think of anything else, desire becomes coveting. When we covet something we create an idol in our hearts and minds, and we become discontented with what we have or who we are.

I have to confess that I am a bit of a petrol head, and recently, on the way to church no less, I spotted a red 1928 Ford Model A coupe hot-rod with a 327 Chev motor (I looked up the details purely as research for this article!). There would have been a time when I would have coveted such a car. I would have dreamed about it and made (very) strong suggestions to my husband (who is not interested in cars at all) to purchase one. Now, however, I can appreciate the beauty, work and power of such a car without having to own one and I am very thankful for the Toyota car/van thing the church has provided for us.

How does covetousness creep into our lives? We certainly don't walk around looking for it, and yet it steals into our hearts. We compare ourselves and our lives with others. House and garden type magazines, whilst good for ideas, can make us dissatisfied with our own homes and gardens. Junk mail and other advertising are designed to make us discontented with what we have, or look like, and the desire grows to buy whatever it is that they are selling, on special of course. Love stories (even Christian ones) can make us compare our husbands with the "hero" of the book or film and we can find our man lacking. Everywhere we look there are traps we can fall into. Being tempted in and of itself is not a sin, but allowing our desires to entice us and lure us, is. The desire becomes sin as we set an idol in our hearts.<sup>1</sup>

Paul says in 1 Timothy 6:6, *"Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment. For we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content."*

And in Philippians 4:11-12 ... *"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."*

And the secret to his learning contentment is? *"I can do all things through him who strengthens me."*

One of the things I love about Paul's writings is that he is so practical. And he doesn't leave us guessing or wondering how to achieve greater godliness. In this case, Paul learned contentment through depending on Jesus Christ and we, too, can rely on Him to strengthen us today.

We can learn contentment! It is something we can practice and learn, by capturing every thought<sup>2</sup> and relying on Christ for his strength.<sup>3</sup>

Everything we have comes from the hand of God. We are all blessed with many things that we can be thankful to God for.

For many years we lived in a small two-bedroomed wooden cottage. When we moved in, it only had an outside toilet (a long drop), two hopeless open fires and the bath would take about an hour to fill. When we finally moved out we had five children squeezed into the various rooms, a flushing toilet, a shower and a wood burner. We have many very happy memories of the time we lived there and I am still thankful for flushing toilets and a hot shower!

It isn't always easy being content, for example, when your husband has been laid off and can't find work, or when the pay check doesn't stretch to pay for a visit to the doctor or when you feel too embarrassed to invite people over because the house renovations aren't or can't get finished. But it can also be difficult to be content when you have a spacious house filled with fine furniture, you have a late model car (or a hot-rod) and expensive clothing. None of these things satisfy for long, so we continually look for the next thing that will give us that buzz that feels so good (for such a short time). That buzz is not contentment, it just masks the discontentment until something new comes along. However, we can learn to be content, whether in low circumstances or high, because Christ will strengthen us.

In Linda Dillow's book, *Calm My Anxious Heart*, she tells the story of the mother of a friend:

*"Ella (the mother) worked as a missionary with the pygmies in Africa for fifty-two years. She had left her country, her family and all that was familiar. Primitive doesn't even begin to describe her living conditions in the scorching heat and humidity of the African bush. But Ella found no relief because electricity, air conditioning, and other modern conveniences were only a dream. Some days it was so unbearably hot that she had to bring the thermometer inside because it couldn't register past 120 degrees F (48.8 degrees C) without breaking."*

In Ella's diary her daughter discovered her mother's prescription for contentment:

- Never allow yourself to complain about anything – not even the weather
- Never picture yourself in any other circumstance or someplace else
- Never compare your lot with another's
- Never allow yourself to wish this or that had been otherwise
- Never dwell on tomorrow – remember that tomorrow is God's, not ours. How challenging is this? Not even the weather? But as we practice these things, they will help us to learn to be content in whatever situation we find ourselves.

I would add one more thing.

- Be thankful in every circumstance! Throughout the Bible, we are exhorted to be thankful<sup>4</sup> in all circumstances and to make God's deeds and goodness known to others. If we are thankful, instead of complaining, about the weather (have to work on that one) or the house we live in or the clothes we wear or our poor health, we will become more and more content.

All things come from God and when we complain, we are complaining about God's provision for us. Instead we should be thankful for God's abundant supply and his many, many blessings to us. This has many ramifications for our lives. Not only will this affect how we live today, but it also will affect how we are in old age when our patterns of living and thinking become more and more obvious. If we have lived a life of thankfulness and contentment, our older years will reflect that but if we have lived a life of complaining and being discontent, we will reap a harvest of bitterness and loneliness in our latter years.

Many years ago I met a lady, Mary, (not her real name). She had been brought up in Zimbabwe and had come to live in NZ with her husband, mother and only son. She was beautiful, intelligent,

hard-working and articulate. However, her ungrateful attitude began early in life. She was bitter about the fact that her sister had an English education while, due to financial constraints, she had been educated in Africa. Mary's move to NZ was not her first choice, and her home was never as grand as she would have liked it to be. Nothing seemed to satisfy. When her husband left her when their son was 3, she had to go out to work to support her son and mother and she certainly had not planned on that. As the years passed she became more and more bitter about life. Sadly, to date, Mary doesn't know God and the comfort He could bring. Instead, she has nurtured her hurts and griefs, and now lives a lonely existence craving close relationships with those around her, and yet bewildered as to why her son and his family don't want to spend time with her.

Learn to be content, now, before you find yourself lonely and bitter in your old age.

But, you may ask, how can I be content when ... my child turns away from the Lord? Or my husband has died and left me all alone? Or I haven't been able to find a husband or now that I am married we haven't been able to have a baby? And the list goes on. These can be hard providences indeed and yet, even in the times of great difficulty, we can trust the Lord. There is a place for grief and sadness in these very difficult circumstances and, as Christians, it is often at times like these that our faith is tested to the max – yet our Lord has promised to never leave us nor forsake us. We can be either built up and strengthened in our walk with the Lord or we become discontented and put all sorts of idols (including family, husbands or houses) in our hearts in place of our God. Perhaps we can ask ourselves these questions;

- a) "Do we really believe that God is in control of everything?"
- b) "Do all things work together for good to those who believe in Christ Jesus?" and
- c) "What is it that I can be thankful for in this particular circumstance?"

As we practice being thankful, telling others of God's goodness to us, praying that the Lord would strengthen us and help us not to covet, we will become more and more content in every circumstance and situation, gaining greater godliness.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James 1:13-17

<sup>2</sup> Romans 12:2

<sup>3</sup> Phil 4:12

<sup>4</sup> e.g. 1 Chr 16:8, 1 Thess 5:18

<sup>5</sup> Recommended Reading:

- *Calm My Anxious Heart* by Linda Dillow
- *Compared to Her ... How To Experience True Contentment* by Sophie de Witt
- *Lies Women Believe* by Nancy Leigh de Moss