

STEWARDSHIP

November 16, 2014

Hebrews 13:5-6: ***“The Content of Contentment”***

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

On January 25, 2012, David McRaney published an article titled: *The Fascinating Scientific Reason Why "Money Doesn't Buy Happiness."* Underneath the title were these words: "No matter how you turn it, research says once your basic needs are taken care of, money and other rewards don't make you happier." In the article, McRaney writes:

Does money buy happiness? In 2010, scientists published the results of a study looking into that very question...The researchers discovered money is indeed a major factor in day-to-day happiness. No surprise there. You need to make a certain amount, on average, to be able to afford food, shelter, clothing, entertainment and the occasional Apple product, but what spun top hats around the country was their finding that beyond a certain point your happiness levels off. The happiness money offers doesn't keep getting more and more potent – it plateaus. The research showed that a lack of money brings unhappiness, but an overabundance does not have the opposite effect.

The article kind of reminds me of Goldilocks and the three bears - Porridge too hot, porridge too cold, porridge just right! The truth is that even when money is just right it really doesn't matter when other things in life go sour, and it certainly doesn't matter at the end of one's life. This is reflected in our first lesson: "As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand." When it all comes right down to it - too much money, not enough money, and money just right - really means nothing in a messed up world where everything finally ends in death and the grave.

This all raises an interesting question: Is it possible for a person to be happy and content in the face of a messed up world where everything finally ends in death and the grave? Paul writes in Philippians (1:21-24): "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain . . . I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account." Or, we could ask another question: Can a person be happy and content regardless of the circumstances - when there is too much money, not enough money, and money just right? Again, Paul writes in Philippians (4:11-13): "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."

Notice that **The Content of Contentment** for Paul is not about making money and investing it wisely to have financial security and a good retirement. You don't hear Paul saying something like this, "If only I could think more positively and improve my self-image, get control of my life, feel good about myself and achieve what I want, then I'll finally have it all." Nor do you hear Paul lamenting to himself about what could have been if he had just avoided his most recent missionary journey which was full of ups and downs. He doesn't moan about his life and stew to himself while thinking: "if only God would give me a better life - then I would finally be happy and content!"

I know that these words of Paul are hard words and extremely difficult for us to digest as we struggle with a sinful flesh that is immersed in a luxurious culture with movies and shows and social media that showcase what appears to be people who supposedly have it all without a care in the world. But think about it. Paul bids us to embrace every moment, regardless of how we might define the moment, and he bids us to give thanks to God while being convinced that all things are in squarely in his good hands.

Paul is content. He is able to say these things because he has the peace that passes all understanding. He is able to embrace any and every situation from God as a good gift that will ultimately lead him to a future that far outweighs everything down here. And where did the apostle Paul find this contentment? He found it in the fact that he was forgiven, justified by God because of Jesus Christ, who died on the cross to pay for all of his sins. It says in Romans 5:1, "since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

This peace is not just a mood or something we talk ourselves into. It is the forgiveness and reconciliation with God that Christ has provided at great cost. It is a peace with God as we consider our connection to him who promises all good things forever. This is a peace that *guards* the heart and mind. It protects us. It is not dependent upon circumstances. It is the peace that is beautifully expressed in our epistle lesson for this morning (Hebrews 13:5-6): "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"

Paul was content in the middle of all things because he believed in the sufficiency of God's grace, knowing the outcome at the end. In 2 Corinthians the Lord says to all of us, "My grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak." No one likes to be weak, but that is where the action is, for it is there that we are brought to the power of God and the future that is ours in him. To be weak means to understand that the self is helpless. It acknowledges that now is not as important as forever. It all boils down to this thought in Romans: "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all - how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"

If we really believe that we have all things, then that should change the way we see things and the way in which we live. It should change our understanding of how we use our time, talents and treasures. If all good things are really from God, and if God has given us his one and only Son - his everything - then how do we view life and things down here, even when life doesn't go according to plan? The sinful flesh will always rebel against this kind of thinking. But the flesh is always about a moment and fails to see that God's goal is different. The sinful flesh sees things one way, and the new creation has an entirely different perspective.

I read a story about the fury that was sparked at a stewardship conference at which a group of pastors gathered to discuss generosity. One of the presenters spoke about offering a gift directly to God, and the gathered clergy yawned. Then he pulled out a \$100.00 bill from his wallet, set it on fire and placed in an ashtray, and prayed, "Lord, I offer this gift to You, and You alone." That got their attention. The pastors began to fidget in their chairs, watching that \$100 bill go up in smoke. One whispered that he thought it

was illegal to burn currency, another was heard murmuring - "If he is just dying to burn money, I will take any extra he has." There was nervous laughter around the room. "Do you not understand?" asked the speaker, "I am offering it to God, and that means it is going to cease to be useful for the rest of us. It is His."

The whole story reminds me of the incident recorded in the gospel of St. John where Mary pours expensive perfume on the feet of Jesus and Judas vehemently objects, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."

Do you see the difference between the heart of Judas and Mary? Two different perspectives. The love of money leads to betrayal. In the case of Mary we learn that when individuals experience the reality of God's unconditional love in Jesus Christ, their hearts are cracked open, their lives are transformed, and they will go to any length to express their gratitude for God's amazing grace.

A contented heart is one that is contented in Jesus. A contented heart lets go of earthly treasure to have treasure that lasts forever. A contented heart is not full of selfishness, but gives the self. A contented heart does not seek to be served but to serve. We come before God this morning to burn up the \$100 bill, to pour the expensive perfume on his feet, to give our time, talents, and treasures - our very best - and we don't take it and bury it in the ground as the one servant did in our gospel lesson. Instead we use it for him and pray that we hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott