

We sin when we love anything more than God. It's when we look to sex, marriage, children, and success to fulfill us. It's when we expect created things to give us what they were never created to give. God and God alone can satisfy the deepest longings of your heart. So we must love God first and foremost. Pursuing Christian contentment is not about not loving anything but about loving God *more* than anything. When we do, everything seems to fall into place, and, slowly but surely, contentment arrives. This is why Augustine famously said, "Our hearts are restless until they find rest in you." Loving God means loving him with your whole heart and loving him for him, not for what he can give you, but simply for who he is, for his glorious attributes and actions. Only when our hearts are transformed by God's love for us in Christ can we love him more than we love anything else.¹³

Sin is not just against God but also against our neighbor. Contentment derives from loving God more, but also by treating others better. We must love our neighbors as ourselves and fervently practice the golden rule (Matt. 7:12). So often in relationships we seek what we can get. We seek affirmation. We seek leveraging our networks to advance our career. We see others as primarily what they can do for us. Like Jesus who came to serve, and not to be served (Mark 10:45), we should take the posture of a servant in relationships. We'll enjoy our relationships more when we treat people with value and respect as opposed to treating people as a means to further our self-interests.

Counterfeit Contentment

As is often the case with big issues like discontentment, there are many proposed solutions to the problem.

1. The Tips and Tricks Approach. This kind of material appears in a "Ten Things Every Person in the World Should Know about Contentment (Especially #2)" article. The advice is pithy, tweetable, and immediately actionable. Those who advocate The Tips and

13. Tim Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018), 77-96.

Tricks Approach will tell you to choose your words wisely and to write down three blessings you're grateful for every day. Want to be content? Watch your diet. Learn to live with fewer choices. Shorten your commute, lower your stress, reduce your debt, spend more time with friends and family. Tips and Tricks evangelists love to tell people to cheer up and look on the bright side and remember that there's always tomorrow. If you desire contentment, what you really need to do is sit down in a scenic place, take a few deep breaths, quiet the noise in your mind, and listen. To what? Nobody knows, but you might hear a voice if you try hard enough. While you're sitting there, place your hand on your heart, take several deep breaths, and think of something touchy-feely. And as you sit there, remember: the grass is greener on the other side. Or better yet, where you water it.

God has given talent and wisdom to all people, so we can learn from everyone. Take, for example, the idea of writing down three things you're grateful for every day. This beloved habit is practiced daily by many Christians. Often, keeping a gratitude journal elevates the noticeability of God's mercies in your life. There is value in common sense advice like finding a shorter commute and reducing your debt.

But the problem with The Tips and Tricks Approach is that God is replaced with self. It assumes you can manufacture contentment through personal effort alone. But you can't. You can't experience contentment without God's help. Remove God and you have no chance of true, lasting contentment.

With The Tips and Tricks Approach, whatever amount of minimal contentment you get won't last. Making changes to your external environment to experience contentment only works temporarily. You might have a better day or two. Or maybe even a better month. The advice from The Tips and Tricks Approach temporarily provides a better outlook on life, but fails as a long-term solution. Not only is this method exhausting, but the rewards are minimal. Without grace-driven effort *in conjunction* with empowerment from God, attempts at contentment are in vain.

2. The Stoic Approach. Stoicism is “a real or pretended indifference to pleasure or pain.”¹⁴ Emotion is severely minimized. Stoics focus on controlling desires through logic, self-denial, and teeth-gritting effort. This method advocates detaching yourself emotionally from people or possessions to find resources within yourself to manage life with tranquility. Stoics fear being exposed or perceived as weak. To avoid unhappiness from changing circumstances, don’t love anything too much. Through self-mastery, you can achieve contentment. It’s a philosophy designed to increase resilience, happiness and virtue—all through independence.

Interestingly, stoicism is presently growing in popularity. The logic of stoicism is endorsed by widely recognized self-help gurus who morph stoicism with self-help advice with the aim of helping others take personal responsibility for their success.

As an independent person who is much more of a thinker than a feeler, stoicism seems appealing. The idea of gritting through life through sheer rationale intrigues me because I love the life of the mind. I bet I could get decently far as a stoic, say, for a year or two. But eventually, I would break down and fall apart. That’s because stoicism sets you up for a crushing blow. Stoicism dehumanizes the human soul because it undermines the fact that humans are made in God’s image (Gen. 1:27). It promotes self-restraint for self-exaltation. It connects your self-worth to your personal achievements. It doesn’t teach you to properly handle your emotions.

Humans are emotional beings. It’s not healthy to continually ignore your emotions to bear life. Part of living in the *imago dei* (Latin for “image of God”) is to be men and women who appropriately process and steward our emotions. God himself cannot change and will never feel a sinful emotion, but he is the origin and creator of emotions¹⁵—the one who loves, grieves, and rejoices.

14. *American Dictionary of the English Language*, 82.

15. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine, first edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 166.

“Only love of the immutable brings tranquility,”¹⁶ says Augustine. Contentment, or tranquility, doesn’t come through intentionally ignoring your feelings through life’s many changes, but in loving the God who never changes. In the end, stoicism fails to provide lasting contentment and will harden your heart, leading to bitterness, cynicism and self-righteousness.

3. The Never Enough Approach. I remember a time during college when I was sitting around a table with a bunch of football players eating lunch and talking about future life accomplishments. One player in particular was adamant about accomplishing several goals. After giving his mini-motivational speech about why we should never settle, he looked me dead in the eye and said, “We should never be content in life, right, David?”

The Never Enough Approach views contentment as a weakness, and this attitude toward contentment is fairly new. Before the twentieth century’s technological advances that led to unprecedented prosperity in the world, contentment was esteemed highly in culture, literature, arts, technology, theology and especially, philosophy.¹⁷ For most of the history of the world, life was cruel, characterized by tragedy and sorrow, so pursuing contentment made sense to navigate through life. But now? With the life expectancy drastically higher than it’s ever been and with more opportunities for fortune and fame than ever, contentment has been trivialized, now seen as something to avoid. Contentment is overlooked, underappreciated, and countercultural.

No people group exemplifies a distaste for contentment more than Never Enough advocates. They believe contentment is a sign you’re not maximizing your potential. It’s impossible to have too much money and success. You can always be working harder, always accomplishing more goals. Their lives are defined by phrases like “Never Settle” and “No Days Off” and “Whatever it Takes.” Ambitious people are

16. Quoted in Tim Keller, *Walking with God in Pain and Suffering* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2015), 387.

17. Richard Swenson, *Contentment: The Secret to Lasting Calm* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2013), 75.

particularly prone to adopt this method. They are hungry, restless and driven.

Those who embrace the Never Enough Approach are the hardest working people you'll ever find. They rightly understand that life is short and they try to make every day count. Usually, those who adopt The Never Enough Approach are the ones who soar in their occupations and leave a dent in this world.

They also leave dents in their souls. They avoid life's two biggest questions: (1) Why am I here? (2) What happens to me after I die? That's because they ignore their conscience. They keep themselves busy and full of goals and distractions to spare themselves from thinking about questions pertaining to the meaning of life. History is not short of examples of people who tried filling their lives with an endless amount of pleasure, only to leave them feeling emptier than when their original quest for world dominance began.

The Bible not only encourages contentment but *commands* it (Heb. 13:5). To speak poorly about contentment is to go against Scripture and ultimately against God. If you ignore God's wisdom and try to live life through self-made rules, you may feel autonomous and happy at first, but in due time you'll ruin your life trying to find joy in worldly achievements alone. For apart from God, who can find contentment?

Think about King Solomon from Ecclesiastes. He built great works and houses and vineyards and gardens and parks and fruit trees and pools (Eccles. 2:4-6). He had servants and more possessions and herds than anyone who ever lived in his country, surpassing them all in greatness (Eccles. 2:7-9). He was mega-rich (Eccles. 2:8). He hired people to sing to him (Eccles. 2:8). He had lots of concubines (Eccles. 2:8). He got whatever he wanted with zero restraint (Eccles. 2:10). His conclusion to his efforts? "Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind . . ." (Eccles. 2:11). His conclusion on the meaning of life? "The end of the

matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Eccles. 12:13).

We don’t need to test the waters of sinful pleasure to see if they produce contentment or not. We have a million examples in history and a few dozen in Scripture that show us they won’t. No Christ-follower should ever feel like an unrepentant sinful lifestyle is better than the Christian one. You can take it from Solomon, or you can take it from former NFL Quarterback Tom Brady who, after winning his third Super Bowl ring, infamously said, “Why do I have three Super Bowl rings, and still think there’s something greater out there for me?”¹⁸ Never Enough people are always striving but never satisfied.

4. The Hyper-Spiritual Approach. You pretend that you’re content when you’re not and you masquerade your discontent through hyper-spiritual God-talk. This approach is keen on reflexively using expressions like “I’m content in all circumstances” or “I’m just waiting on the Lord” when trusted friends and family inquire about an area of particular pain. It’s obviously good to wait on the Lord. Some people who use these statements in response to questions about an enduring trial are being genuine. But some Christians use spiritual language to hide their discontent. We feel bad for struggling with discontentment and we don’t know how to process or talk about our emotions. We want to seem further along in our spiritual journey than we are.

Spiritually “faking it” is exhausting. It’s okay to have doubts, fears, struggles and questions; we should share them with the Lord in prayer and selectively share them with trusted Christian friends. We should ask God to surround us with godly mentors and friends with whom we can share the messy parts of our lives. As you grow in Christ, you’ll eventually accept that uncomfortable feeling of exposure when sharing your life with trusted friends, knowing that the people you open up to genuinely love you and are ready to help

18. Daniel Schorn, “Transcript: Tom Brady, Part 3,” November 4th, 2005, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-tom-brady-part-3/>

bear your burdens (Gal. 6:2). Every Christian should have at least one person in their life with whom they can share anything.

The four commonly suggested solutions mentioned above don't solve the problem of discontentment but only raise it. We still need a better, more reliable remedy for our discontentment.

Where do we turn?

What Contentment Doesn't Mean

Troubled. That's how Jesus felt on a few occasions during his earthly ministry: "Now is my soul troubled" (John 12:27). And again, "After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit" (John 13:21). The word "troubled" means to be unsettled, stirred up, full of inward turmoil. It conveys horror and revulsion,¹⁹ and is "a word that is often used of people when they are anxious or suddenly very surprised by danger."²⁰ A similar usage of the word is found in Psalm 6:3 when the psalmist says: "My soul is in deep *anguish*. How long, Lord, how long?" (NIV). And again in Psalm 42:5: "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in *turmoil* within me?" Jesus, the God-man, the only person in the history of the world who never sinned and was perfectly content, felt troubled.

Jesus was troubled because it was the last week of his life and he knew that he would soon be beaten beyond recognition, bear the wrath of God, and die a brutal death on a blood-stained tree. This is similar to what he felt in the Garden of Gethsemane where he was in such anguish that his sweat became like drops of blood (Luke 22:44). The full humanity of Jesus is on display. He has emotions. He feels deeply. Sorrow and contentment are not incompatible. It's possible to be simultaneously troubled and content.

A quick glance at the life and ministry of Jesus shows he got angry (John 2:13-17), annoyed with people (Matt. 17:17), rebuked

19. D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 440.

20. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology, Second Edition, An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 667.

the religious leaders (Matt. 23:1-36), and even made a request to his Father to remove the cup of wrath (Luke 22:42), a way of asking if there could be another way for God's wrath to be satisfied. Anger, annoyance, a rebuke, a request. All emotions or actions that are not incongruent with contentment.

Contentment doesn't mean passivity or laziness. It doesn't mean inactivity or emotionally checking out. We tend to chalk up people who are laid back and mellow as models of contentment. Maybe they are, or perhaps they are people who neglect responsibility. Contentment doesn't mean complacency. Our work should be defined by excellence since we want to do everything for God's glory (1 Cor. 10:31). Contentment is also not masochism (deriving pleasure from pain) or fatalism (withdrawing because everything is determined by fate). The contented life is not incompatible with dreams, goals, and desires.

You can be loud and outgoing and a bit dramatic and still be content. Although some people will find contentment more difficult because of genetics or difficult circumstances or personal trauma, Christian contentment is not a personality trait; it's not something determined by your natural temperament or wiring.

Okay, then *what* is contentment?

Defining Contentment

The word "content" appears six times²¹ in the New Testament, and the word "contentment," once.²² It's used as a noun (1 Tim. 6:6), an adjective (Phil. 4:11), and a verb (Luke 3:14). In the New Testament original language, the word for contentment is *autárkeia* ("ar-tar-kay-ah"). Strictly speaking, it means "self-

21. Luke 3:14, 1 Timothy 6:8, Hebrews 13:5, 3 John 1:10, 2 Corinthians 12:10, Philippians 4:11.

22. 1 Timothy 6:6. However, the same Greek word that Paul uses for "contentment" in 1 Timothy 6:6 is also the same word for "sufficiency" in 2 Corinthians 9:8 where Paul writes, "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all *sufficiency* in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work." Contentment and a sense of sufficiency go together.

sufficiency.”²³ Christian contentment means you feel a sense of sufficiency. It means you have what you need and more: you have more than enough. Appropriate synonyms for contentment are happiness, fulfillment and satisfaction.

A leading English dictionary says contentment is “rest or quietness of the mind in the present condition; satisfaction which holds the mind in peace, restraining complaint, opposition, or further desire, and often implying a moderate degree of happiness.”²⁴ Good start. But not distinctly Christian.

Probably the best definition of Christian contentment comes from Jeremiah Burroughs. In his book, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, Burroughs says “Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.”²⁵

Let’s define Christian contentment as follows:

Christian contentment: the freedom from dependence on desired circumstances that comes from God’s empowering grace to endure everything with rejoicing.

In other words:

- **The freedom from dependence on desired circumstances.** You may desire a change of circumstances, but you’re not dependent on them. Your happiness doesn’t derive from external sources. A change of circumstances doesn’t sway you either too greatly up or down. You’re level-headed, even-keeled, and not continually dominated by emotions.
- **God’s empowering grace.** You can’t experience true, lasting contentment through your own strength. What separates a Christian understanding of contentment from a secular one is the emphasis on God’s grace as both empowering (Phil. 4:13)

23. Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press., 2000), 152.

24. *American Dictionary of the English Language*, 47.

25. Burroughs, *Rare Jewel*, 19.

and sufficient (2 Cor. 12:9) to endure any situation. You're not dependent on your circumstances, but you are dependent on God.

- **Rejoicing.** The Apostle Paul commands us to “Rejoice in the Lord always . . .” (Phil. 4:4). I take the word “rejoice” and “always” to mean in every situation of life. Rejoicing is not restricted to a feeling. It doesn't mean you'll constantly feel an emotional high. Rejoicing, instead, means to make yourself glad in God, leading to an inward confidence of God's sovereignty and goodness in all situations.

My definition of contentment derives in part from a Bible dictionary, where the editors say that contentment:

“. . . denotes freedom from reliance upon others, whether other persons or other things; hence the satisfaction of one's needs (2 Cor. 9:8), or the control of one's desires (1 Tim. 6:6, 8). It is not a passive acceptance of the *status quo*, but the positive assurance that God has supplied one's needs, and the consequent release from unnecessary desire. The Christian can be 'self-contained' because he has been satisfied by the grace of God (2 Cor. 12:9). The Christian Spirit of contentment follows . . . supremely the example and teaching of Jesus, who rebuked the discontent which grasps at material possessions to neglect of God (Lk. 12:13-21) and who commended such confidence in our father in heaven as will dispel all anxiety concerning physical supplies.”²⁶

Understanding Contentment

Discontentment is not all bad. There is a right kind of discontentment, what you might call a holy discontent. It is right to feel frustration when God's glory is minimized. It is right to continually pursue knowledge of God, not being satisfied with the knowledge you already have. It is right to feel a burning desire for lost people to come to Christ. Holy discontent is a sign of a healthy Christian. By

26. I. Howard Marshall, A. R. Millard, J.I. Packer, and D.J. Wiseman, eds., *New Bible Dictionary* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1996), 222.

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contrast, the sin of discontentment—not being satisfied in God—is the cause of many issues in our personal lives and society today.

What else is there to say about contentment? Contentment is “*being satisfied and at peace with God’s will in all situations.*”²⁷ It’s an inward state of satisfaction regardless of circumstances. It’s characterized by inward peace and joy. Contentment is not about what happens to you, but what’s going on inside of you. The quality of our lives is less about what happens to us and more about how we *respond* to what happens to us, and you won’t respond well if you’re not content. Contentment is a skill, like a jump shot in basketball. It requires practice and effort. It doesn’t stick like glue; it builds like knowledge. It’s something you can improve. And although contentment is attainable, it’s slippery. You may think contentment is firm in your grasp, and then suddenly it diminishes, or even vanishes. It’s something you must continually pursue and protect.

In theology talk, the aseity of God refers to God’s self-sufficiency. God is not dependent on creation and did not create the world for personal need. Jonathan Edwards states, “It is evident, by both Scripture and reason, that God is infinitely, eternally, unchangeably, and independently glorious and happy.”²⁸ Although we cannot reflect God’s aseity since we are by nature dependent creatures, spiritual flourishing derives from reflecting God’s character. Contentment, then, is also a virtue. It’s a character trait to cultivate godliness. For when you are content in God, you mirror the God who himself is always perfectly content. Few characteristics oppose God’s character more than discontentment.

You have to see the value of contentment. Typically, if we think something is valuable, we are willing to sacrifice to obtain it. Learning contentment will alleviate anxiety, satisfy your soul, remove impatience, improve your well-being, and give you a deep inner sense of peace and joy. Contentment makes you calm, cool and collected on the inside, even if there are raging storms of trials in

27. Dave Harvey, *Rescuing Ambition*, 123.

28. Quoted in Jonathan Edwards’s essay, *A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*.

A Call to Contentment

your life on the outside. It will give you a sense of stability through the ups and downs of life. It's also evangelistic. Christians who are content amid suffering or prosperity set a good example for the watching world. You'll also be edifying your Christian friends because godliness is attractive.

Contentment is simple to understand but hard to live out.²⁹ Knowing that contentment is possible and valuable, well, that's the easy part. Living it out? Not so much. Contentment is a lifelong process, a long-term and long haul investment. Through knowledge and practice and effort and God's supernatural power, you can grow in contentment over time. Any effort to pursue contentment is worth it.

But how? I'll tell you. But first, let me ask you some questions.

29. Megan Hill, *Contentment: Seeing God's Goodness* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2018), 11.