

## ***Contentment and Discontent***

Matthew 6:25-34, Philippians 3:12-13, 4:10-13

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“Do not worry,” Jesus says. Don’t worry about what you will eat or drink, or what you will wear—and in a broader command, don’t worry about tomorrow. Worry means your head not in the present but in the future. You’re letting the things that might happen tomorrow control you today; you’re missing this good day because of the bad that could come later. Corrie Ten Boom said, “Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow; it empties today of its strength.”

Jesus tells a group of peasants in the Sermon on the Mount that economic anxiety serves no purpose. He says to people who lived day to day that they ought not to worry about their lives or where the things that sustain life will come from. Instead, he says, look at the birds. Who takes care of them? It’s your heavenly Father. Instead, he says, look at the wildflowers. Who clothes them? Your heavenly Father. Aren’t you more important to God than birds and flowers? Can’t you trust God for tomorrow?

When we want to be free from economic anxiety, what do we do? The most common strategy for getting free from worry is to earn more money and save some of it. But is that the way to get free from it? Kierkegaard once said in a sermon, “Riches and abundance come hypocritically clad in sheep’s clothing pretending to be security against anxieties and they then become the object of anxiety... They secure a man against anxieties about as well as the wolf which is put to tending the sheep secures them... against the wolf” [*Christian Discourses*, p. 27] Jesus says, “If you’re worried about not having enough money, the thing to do is not to get more money. That just feeds the worry. It gives you more money to worry about. The answer to worry is to stop living in fear of the future and to begin to believe that God really is a great parent who wants to take care of you.”

The theme of our worship service today is living in the present rather than living in anxiety about the future or in regret about the past. But I want you to notice that Jesus is saying more than “Be Here Now,” as one guru put it. Jesus is saying that the reason we can be here now is that we trust God as the ground of our being and the source of all we are. It is not a philosophical decision, as in Zen and some forms of Indian meditation, to live as if only the present is real. It is living as if God is real.

But notice something else: Jesus says, “Do not live in a state of worry, and do not chase after material things, but rather”—what? Chill out? Just say ‘Om’? Jesus says, “Do not chase after those things like a pagan, but rather seek first the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness.” Christianity means living in the present, yes, but it also means living for this future reality of the kingdom that is breaking into the present. There is a tension in his teaching between the “don’t worry”—which we take to mean “relax”—and the seeking. We are not chasing *that*, but we *are* chasing this, the reality of God in the world.

It is popular in some Christian circles today, as well as in yoga and in other forms of meditation, to teach “mindfulness.” I’m all for mindfulness if it means paying attention to the world, stirring up gratitude and appreciation of beauty. I’m all for calling people to wake up and smell the coffee as well as the roses, rather than rolling through life in neutral. But sometimes mindfulness means more than that. It is a Buddhist term which is based on a worldview that says that the world is something we want to escape, because the material world with all its illusions is a source of pain. The key Buddhist value is detachment, which is close to the opposite of the Christian value of engagement with the world—compassion, mercy, and justice. The goal in learning to practice mindfulness in Buddhism is to move beyond the illusion of being a self and the illusion of there being a God. In Buddhist-influenced

meditation, you are disengaging your mind to move into another state. Mindfulness in that system is more like mindlessness, whereas the mindfulness Jesus is urging upon us is God-awareness. The Christian values the real world as the creation of a loving God which is full of his glory. If we pay attention to the world, we will see God in it. And if we learn to see God revealed all around us, we will live in the present tense with joy and have no anxiety about the future.

But maybe your problem isn't the temptation to disengage, but the temptation to live in fear of the future. I know something about dealing with anxiety, to the point of getting therapy when I used to have panic attacks. I'm all for medication to help you with anxiety if your brain is wired in such a way that you get a lot of false alarms and experience free-floating fear with no basis in a threat. But Jesus seems to be talking about fear that is based on economic reality, the kind of sensible worry most of us engage in every day. We certainly engage in it in church business meetings and town financial meetings. Sometimes we rename our worried attitude to make it sound like a virtue: prudence, caution, wisdom even. But Jesus calls us to a courage based on trust in God, a confidence rooted in our understanding of reality. The reality, Jesus says, is not that we are on our own. The reality is that God is at work all around us. His love surrounds us and supports us and provides for us.

One name for that reality is "the kingdom of God." Seek that reality, Jesus says. He doesn't say, "Take a deep breath. Stop doing anything. Just chill." He says, "Instead of chasing all the stuff that is controlling your life, chase after the reality of God's work in the world. Chase the awareness of another dimension, seek the mystery and focus on the generosity revealed in the way the world is. Seek to make God's way of peace and love real in the world, and all the other stuff in life will be provided for you by God." Hard to believe, maybe, but that's what the guy said. If you don't believe that, you don't believe Jesus.

If you see in Jesus' teaching a kind of tension between "living in the present" and "seeking the inbreaking of God's future," I want you to consider the tension in Paul's letter to the Philippians. We read one passage from chapter 4 that Paul has learned to be content in all circumstances. He knows what it's like to be poor and what it's like to be rich, and he's learned the secret of being content in every situation. He can get through any situation through Christ who gives him strength. So here is Mr. Contentment, and we imagine him with a Buddha-like enigmatic smile and a fat belly. But the other passage we read, from chapter 3, shows a man who is all about striving: "Not that I have already obtained all of this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" [3:12-14 NIV].

So which is Paul—a Type A personality or a Type B? Is he driven or laid-back, content or discontented? He has learned to be content with his economic circumstances, but he has learned to be discontented with his spiritual development. Here's the advice I have taken from Paul: *Be content with what you have, but discontented with what you are.* Let me repeat that: *Be content with what you have, but discontented with what you are.*

I got into an argument with one church member who thought that we had no business telling anyone that they needed to grow spiritually. He said he was perfectly content with his spiritual life. I wonder if my friend was confused about what Jesus meant by peace and contentment. When Jesus told us not to worry, he wasn't telling us not to worry about becoming like him. He wanted us to be content, as Paul was, with the things we have and the world God has given us, but he wanted us to be discontented with the way we are naturally. He wanted us to seek God's rule over our lives and to seek God's righteousness, an inward righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees. Years ago I saved a fortune from a fortune cookie—one of those, as Nathan complains to me, isn't actually a fortune but a

kind of proverb. It said “Discontent is the first step in change.” I taped that to my computer monitor in the church office, so every time I read an email expressing discontent I could remind myself that it is the first step in change. And the Christian life is, after all, about change, about transformation from who we are into the person we are called to be.

The Christian life is both inner peace and constant striving. It is living in the present as the place where we experience the sufficiency of grace and as the place where we meet our need to grow in our ability to extend grace. We don’t worry about tomorrow, but we hope in God for tomorrow, and we hope that we ourselves are being transformed into the likeness of his Son.

In the later part of his life, the novelist Leo Tolstoy became a radical follower of Jesus and strove to live by the Sermon on the Mount. He wrote one short story—a parable, really—called “The Three Questions.” There was once a king to whom it occurred that he would never fail if he knew the answer to three questions:

1. When is the right time to begin everything?
2. Who are the right people to pay attention to?
3. What is the most important thing to do?

He promised a great reward to anyone who could tell him the answer to those questions, and so of course wise men came from all over the kingdom with their answers, but none of them was satisfactory. This being a Russian story, the king decided to consult with a hermit who lived in the woods and was said to be very wise.

The king had to dress like a peasant for the hermit to even see him. When he got to the hermit’s cell, the hermit was out in the yard digging. He seemed frail and weak as the king asked him the three questions, but the hermit just went on digging. The King said, “You are tired. Let me take the spade and work awhile for you.”

“Thanks,” said the hermit, and sat down. After the king had dug two beds, he asked the three questions again. But again the hermit gave no answer but asked to take his spade back so he could dig. The king insisted on digging, and he kept going until it was almost dark.

The king said, “I came to you, wise man, for answers to my questions. If you can’t give me any, tell me now and I will go home.”

“Here comes someone running,” said the hermit. “Let’s see who it is.”

A bearded man came running out of the woods. His hands were pressed against his stomach and blood was flowing. He fell down in front of the king. The king and the hermit took the man’s shirt off and saw a large wound. The king washed it and bandaged it the best he could. He took off the bandage when it was soaked with blood and put on a fresh one. When the man asked for water, he brought it to him. It was getting cool after dark, so the king and the hermit carried the man inside.

When the king woke up the next morning, he could hardly remember where he was or why he was in a bed next to a bearded man who was staring at him. “Forgive me!” said the bearded man with a weak voice.

“I don’t know you,” the king said. “I have nothing to forgive you for.”

“No, but I know you. I am an enemy of yours. I swore to get revenge because you executed my brother and seized his property. I knew you had come to see the hermit, so I came here to kill you. Your bodyguards met me in the woods and stabbed me, but I escaped. I would have bled to death if you had not cared for me. I wanted to kill you and you saved my life. Now, if you wish, I will be your faithful slave. Forgive me!”

The king was very glad to have made peace with his enemy so easily and to have gained him as a friend, so he not only forgave him, he said that he would send his own physician to him and promised to restore his property.

The king went outside to look for the hermit. Before he left he wanted to ask the three questions again. He found the hermit on his knees planting seeds in the ground that had been dug up the day before.

The king approached him and said, "For the last time, I beg you to answer my questions, wise man."

"You have already been answered!" said the hermit, still crouching on his thin legs, and looking up at the King.

"Answered? What do you mean?" asked the King.

"Do you not see," replied the hermit. "If you had not pitied my weakness yesterday, and had not dug those beds for me, but had gone your way, that man would have attacked you, and you would have repented of not having stayed with me. So the most important time was when you were digging the beds; and I was the most important man; and to do me good was your most important business.

"Afterwards when that man ran to us, the most important time was when you were attending to him, for if you had not bound up his wounds he would have died without having made peace with you. So he was the most important man, and what you did for him was your most important business.

"Remember then: there is only one time that is important--Now! It is the most important time because it is the only time when we have any power. The most important man is the one you are with... and the most important affair is, to do him good, because for that purpose alone you were sent into this life!"