

## Authentic Stewardship Produces Contentment

Buddy Post is living proof that money cannot buy happiness. He is a 58-year-old former carnival worker and cook. In 1988, he won \$16.2 million in the Pennsylvania Lottery. Since his “lucky day,” Buddy has been convicted of assault, his sixth wife left him, his brother in law is in jail for trying to kill him, and his landlady successfully sued him for one-third of the jackpot.

“Money didn’t change me,” said Post, “it changed people around me that I knew, that I thought cared a little bit about me. But they only cared about the money.”

Buddy is trying to auction off the future payments, valued at nearly \$5 million, in order to pay off taxes, legal fees, and a number of failed business ventures. He plans to spend his life pursuing lawsuits that he has filed against police, judges, and lawyers who he says conspired to take his money. “I’m just going to stay at home and mind my p’s and q’s,” he said. “Money draws flies.”

Although Buddy Post may not be a philosopher or a theologian, he made a very profound observation. Money not only draws flies, it also has an enormous attraction for people.

State-run lotteries have become billion dollar bonanzas. The vast majority of people in this country have purchased lotto tickets, or at least dreamed of what it would be like to win the big jackpot. Perhaps you are waiting for Ed McMahon to knock on your door with a \$10 million check. Casinos are packed with people 24 hours a day, all of them hoping to win big so they can fulfill all their dreams.

Attention to the stock market is at an unprecedented peak. There are men and women who spend more time with Wall Street numbers than they do with their children. There is even a cable television channel devoted to helping us track our earnings.

A recent poll revealed that 75% of Americans believe the American Dream is “harder to attain” than a generation ago. Sixty percent say achieving the dream requires more financial risk than it did for their parents. Americans with household incomes under \$25,000 believe it would take \$54,000 a year to fulfill the American dream. Those who make \$100,000 crave to have an average of \$192,000. In other words, the American Dream usually requires twice as much as we have.

Money is certainly a major player in our lives. One of the reasons we have such a difficult time with money is that have never answered the question – “How much is enough?” Perhaps we can discover the answer from Paul’s very familiar words.

*I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for 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 everything through him who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:10-13)*

The Apostle Paul was not only one of the very first missionaries for the church; he was also one of the most effective. He established several strong churches that have had an influence on our thinking for nearly 2,000 years. However, in spite of the fact that he had a close relationship with many churches, only one of those churches ever provided financial support for his work.

The Christians at Philippi had given an offering to Paul on more than one occasion. This was in spite of the fact that they were a very poor congregation. This church had a special place in Paul's heart, which is very apparent from reading the book of Philippians.

After he received their gift, he wrote a note at the end of Philippians to thank them for their generosity. As he expresses appreciation, Paul was very quick to add a word about his needs. He was emphatic that he was not rejoicing over the gift but that he was celebrating the giver. As he thanked them for their gift, Paul explained how he is not motivated by financial considerations.

In teaching us about contentment, Paul answers the question – “How much is enough?” Therefore, we would be well served to listen to these words about contentment.

Contentment is a spiritual, not a material accomplishment. Without learning the secret of contentment, no amount of money is enough. If you ever want to have enough, here is how it is attained.

### **The Process of Contentment**

The word translated “contentment” has an interesting origin. It literally means “self-sufficient.” It was used in some ancient writings to describe a country that was totally independent. In other words, there was no need for trade, supplies, protection or anything from another nation. It means to have everything that you need.

By using this word, Paul is not bragging on himself. This is not an arrogant boast that he does not need anything or anyone else, that he is self-sufficient within himself. His claim is that what he has is enough. There is no need for anything else, he is content.

It is like a family sitting down for a holiday meal when the table is laden with food. There are enormous quantities of great food, far more than can be consumed in one meal.

As Paul surveyed his situation, considered what he had and did not have, he was able to say that it was enough. He was content. There was no need for anyone to give him anything else. The external situation did not effect his contentment because it was there in both hunger and plenty.

Paul also tells us how this kind of contentment is attained – *“I have learned to be content.”* Contentment is not a gift from God, nor is it a talent like painting or singing that can only be possessed by a few. It is a skill that can be learned by everyone.

The word chosen by Paul is the same word that is used to designate a disciple. A disciple is a learner. The twelve were chosen by Jesus to be with Him so they could learn. That is why they were called disciples. Paul says that he has been discipled in the school of contentment.

Contentment can be learned. This fact is good news for all of us. It means that it is available to everyone who is willing to become a student. Contentment is not just for the wealthy but it is obtainable by anyone who is willing to learn.

Paul said that he had learned contentment: , “. . . for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.” His financial, physical or social situation did not effect his contentment. Therefore, contentment is a condition you choose, regardless of your circumstances.

### **The Power of Contentment**

Contentment is a very powerful quality to possess. Paul states, *“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.”*

Perhaps the two most difficult times to experience contentment are in poverty and prosperity. Note the prayer for possessions as stated in Proverbs:

*“Keep falsehood and lies far from me;  
give me neither poverty nor riches,  
but give me only my daily bread.  
Otherwise, i may have too much and disown you  
and say, Who is the Lord.’  
Or I may become poor and steal,  
and so dishonor the name of my God.”* (Proverbs 30:8-9)

Obviously Paul had learned the secret of this prayer. He testifies that he has learned how to experience contentment in the midst of plenty or on the verge of deprivation.

Contentment give us power over material greed. It means that we are removed from the vicious cycle of accumulating material possessions. One of the primary reasons that families have financial problems is the lack of contentment. Even Christians have bought into the philosophy that more is better.

One of the biggest shopping days of the year is not the day before Christmas, but the day after Christmas. Once we have unwrapped our gifts and surrounded ourselves with more stuff than we have ever had, the very next day we go shopping. The adage that defines the American life as buying things we do not need, with money we do not have, in order to impress people we do not like, is quite true. These are simply signs of discontentment.

Paul said that contentment is the ability to understand that neither having a lot nor having a little defines sufficiency. All of us would be better off financially

if we were content with what we already possess. Most of our financial problems stem from wanting more. Contentment is the first step toward financial freedom.

Contentment also provides power over physical dissatisfaction. People in our society are consumed with physical appearance and health. It seems that we always want to look or feel like someone else. We buy clothes based upon how they look on models and movie stars. There is an unhealthy desire to look or feel different. How much money do we spend each year on fad diets, hair replacement, cosmetic surgery and other techniques to change our appearance? Once again, these are symptoms of discontentment.

Contentment means that you not only accept your financial situation, but that you also find sufficiency with your appearance. In other words, you are not a better person because you have covered up a bald spot or reduced a dress size. There is nothing wrong with being healthier and striving for self-improvement, but you must approach life with a healthy attitude about yourself. Healthy living choices begin with the realization that who you are is sufficient.

A wealthy businessman was disturbed to find a fisherman sitting lazily beside his boat. "Why aren't you out there fishing?" he asked.

"Because I've caught enough fish for today," said the fisherman.

"Why don't you catch more fish than you need?" the rich man asked.

"Why would I do then?"

"You could earn more money," came the impatient reply, "and buy a better boat so you could go deeper and catch more fish. You could purchase nylon nets, catch even more fish, and make more money. Soon you'd have a fleet of boats and be rich like me."

The fisherman asked, "Then what would I do?"

"You could sit down and enjoy life," said the businessman.

The fisherman looked peacefully across the water and replied, "What do you think I'm doing now?"

Once you experience contentment, you will be free from the nagging compulsion to always have something else. How much time and energy do you expend worrying about what others think about you? How often are you distracted by things you really do not need? How many hours do you waste rearranging your stuff?

Contentment is powerful because it gives you freedom from all these concerns. Contentment means that you do not strive to impress your neighbors and friends; expend your energy trying to accumulate more stuff or improve your appearance; experience discouragement because others seem to have more wealth, health, or prestige. If you want to experience freedom from the tyranny of things, learn the power of contentment.

## **The Possibility of Contentment**

We might be tempted to say that Paul had mastered contentment because of the strength of his character. It is easy to say that a man with Paul's resolve and determination would have contentment. However, the possibility of contentment did not rest in the ability of Paul – it was in Christ. "*I can do*

*everything through him who gives me strength.*” Paul was not “self-sufficient,” he was “Christ-sufficient.” Once again we learn good news. Since our sufficiency is in Christ, then it is available to all who are in Christ.

Some have mistakenly lifted this verse out of context and taught that as Christians we can do anything. However, as we read it within context it is clear that this is not a promise to make us some type of spiritual superman. Paul is teaching that Christ is sufficient to make him content, regardless of the circumstances. Christ is enough for every situation.

You must not think that contentment is found in something that you do not possess. In reality, contentment is within your possession if you look for it in Christ. It is Christ who makes you sufficient for every situation. When you have a financial need, you must depend on the sufficiency of Christ. When you encounter a health need, you must rest in the sufficiency of Christ. When you find yourself in an impossible situation, you must rely on the sufficiency of Christ.

There is a legend of an ancient Persian named Ali Hafed who owned a very large farm, filled with orchards, grain fields and gardens. He was a wealthy, contented man. One day a wise man from the east told the farmer all about diamonds and how wealthy he would be if he owned a diamond mine. Ali Hafed went to bed that night a poor man. He was poor because he was discontent.

Craving a mine of diamonds, he sold his farm to search for the rare stones. He traveled the world over, finally becoming so poor, broken, and defeated that he committed suicide.

One day the man who purchased Ali Hafed’s farm led his camel into the garden to drink. As his camel put his nose into the brook, the man saw a flash of light from the sands of the stream. He pulled out a stone that reflected all the colors of the rainbow. The man had discovered the diamond mine of Golconda, the most magnificent mine in all history. Had Ali Hafed remained at home and dug in his own garden, instead of death in a strange land, he would have had the diamonds he searched for.

What is it that you are searching for? It may not be a diamond mine like Ali Hafed but it can be just as destructive. Perhaps it is money. A reporter asked the elder Rockefeller, “How much money is enough?”

His reply was very insightful, “Just a little bit more.”

We might scoff at the rich because we think all they want is more money, but what about you. Remember the last time your income increased and you thought you finally had enough, everything was in good shape. Then you found yourself four or six months later anxiously waiting for the next raise. Until you find contentment in Christ, you will never have enough money.

Perhaps your passion is to change the way that you look. You intend to eat better, dress nicer, color your hair or plug in some new hair. If you have not figured it out yet, you cannot stop the aging process. Until you find contentment in Christ, you will never look good enough.

It might be that you do not feel loved and appreciated. Perhaps your family has fallen apart or you have never known unconditional love from another person. You may be spending energy trying to get it right so that you will finally be accepted. You think that if you can just say the right words, perform the right

deeds, or be the right person, then you will finally be accepted. The truth is that you can never earn unconditional love. If you are searching for contentment from another person you are destined for disappointment. Until you find contentment in Christ, you will never be satisfied.

Acquiring more, doing more, or being more is the not the road to contentment. The answer to the question – “How much is enough?” is Christ. He is sufficient for all of your needs.