



THE  
MENTORING  
PROJECT

GREED IN  
THE BIBLE:  
CONTENTMENT  
IN A MATERIAL  
WORLD



JOHN SARVER

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# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	4
PART I: THE UNIVERSAL QUEST.....	6
PART II: OUT OF PLACE AND TIME.....	9
PART III: INCREASED CRAVINGS .....	15
PART IV: DISCONTENT WITH A LITTLE AND DISCONTENT WITH A LOT.....	18
PART V: SAMPLES FROM HEAVEN .....	21
PART VI: EMPTY HANDS, FULL HEARTS .....	24
PART VII: EAT AND DRINK FOR TOMORROW WE DIE.....	28
CONCLUSION .....	31
END NOTES .....	33



# INTRODUCTION

Are you happy?

This is a life skill guide about contentment, but I'm mostly going to use the word happiness instead. Contentment feels harder to pin down. And all contentment really is, is happiness with one's state or situation. So, let me ask you: are you happy? More specifically, are you happy with your life the way it is right now? This is the starting point for finding contentment in a consumer culture christian.

Now, let me ask you another question: if you gained all that you lacked (a higher-paying job, a bigger house, a loving spouse, a compliant child, a loyal friend—you name it), would it guarantee your happiness? Is the recipe for happiness you + what you lack?

Put differently, is all that is standing between you and happiness is a change in circumstances?

Bobby Jamieson, a pastor, scholar, and author known for his work in pastoral ministry and theological writing, perceptively notes that you can be unhappy for one of two reasons—either because you don't have something you want or, get this, because you have everything and find out it's not enough.<sup>1</sup>

I want to convince you from the book of Ecclesiastes that happiness is not a circumstantial thing. I especially want to help you untether happiness from your material wealth. You can be rich or poor and be miserable. You can also be rich or poor and be happy. Simply, happiness (or life more generally) is not something to be gained; it's a gift from God.

## **FIELD GUIDE**

The key to being content is lowering your expectations of the world and increasing them in God.

But first, let's consider why you're discontent.

# 1

## THE UNIVERSAL QUEST

It's no surprise you're unhappy. Less surprising still that you want to be happy. Let me explain why. The author of Ecclesiastes (the Teacher, as he calls himself) set out to find "what is good for people to do under heaven during the few days of their lives" (Eccl. 2:3). But the Teacher isn't the only one on such a journey to find happiness. God has given all people the same undertaking to find life or happiness (Eccl. 1:13). You could think of it as a quest.

One of the most common aspects of fantasy or myth is the quest. There's some kind of problem that can only be resolved by means of a mission. A council is held in Rivendell to determine the fate of the Ring. Elrond rightly declares it must be destroyed in Mount Doom. Little Frodo bravely volunteers to take it, and the rest of the trilogy is that: a quest against the Nazgul and Orcs, temptation, and physical trial, all to save Middle-Earth.<sup>2</sup>

The first half of Ecclesiastes is basically the Teacher's quest. He's not out to destroy a ring or recover lost treasure, though. More significant than these, his is a quest for meaning and happiness in life. And the primary tool the Teacher utilizes is wisdom. The book of Ecclesiastes is all about his attempt to experience and then to weigh, consider, and tell us what he found.

He sought happiness by pursuing and enjoying all of the same things you're inclined to try (Eccl. 2:1-11). He amassed wealth and properties. He tried wine, wisdom, folly, and sex. He threw parties. He employed masses. He grew in reputation and standing.

You name it, he had it. He saw, desired it, and acquired it (Eccl. 2:10). He didn't withhold from himself anything. And when it was all said and done,

## FIELD GUIDE

he considered all that he had accomplished, and he found that it was “futile and a pursuit of the wind” (Eccl. 2:11). Your translation may say vain or meaningless. The point is, it left him frustrated.

In fact, if you study the text, you'll find that it's loaded with language from Genesis 1 and 2. In a world marked by death, injustice, oppression, loneliness, monotony, and heartache, he walled himself inside of paradise. He tried to recreate Eden without prohibitions like “but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat” (Gen. 2:17). But unlike God, who surveyed his creation and called it very good, the Teacher looked at his garden and called it bad: futile and a pursuit of the wind.

Note: he acquired all that you probably desire and more. It was not enough. The reason we're often so frustrated is that we're trying to live Genesis 1 in a Genesis 3 world. Trying to gain life in the things of the world is a bit like trying to catch the wind. The second you grasp it; you open your hands to find it as empty as your heart. The pursuit of life is elusive and fleeting; it's like trying to catch and cling to smoke.

And so, why are you discontent? On some level, you're trying to find happiness, life, meaning, and value in the world. And so, you're always pursuing but never arriving.

The Teacher wants you to learn from his experience. Of course, you're tempted to think the payout will be different for you. But the only reason you've not drawn the same conclusion as him is that you've not had the same experience as him. To be frank, you're probably not at the apex of anything. You're inclined to think you'll finally be happy if you get that raise, if you get that degree, if you get that house, because you still stand to gain so much. The Teacher didn't have that excuse, and that's why he's the perfect guinea pig in the quest for happiness.

All your life's pursuits can be likened to walking up a winding stairwell—there are people ahead of you in all of them, the work is exhausting, and because the stairwell twists, you can't see when you'll make it to the end. There's always more money to be made. More followers to be gained. More sex to be had. Newer tech to buy. You follow those ahead of you, thinking, like them, that soon you'll make it to the top, but you never do.

## GREED IN THE BIBLE: CONTENTMENT IN A MATERIAL WORLD

The Teacher didn't have your problem. He led in every stairwell, and with such a great distance between him and the closest follower that he could see he was nowhere nearer the end. He was able to reflect on his experience in a way so few can: will one more property do what the last 30 didn't? Am I really just one party away from being satisfied? One concubine. One more household servant. He began to see that the math wasn't adding up.

Blaise Pascal says that this always-striving-never-reaching experience is "so uniform it should certainly convince us of our inability to reach the good by our own efforts. But example teaches us little. . . And thus, while the present never satisfies us, experience dupes us, and from misfortune to misfortune leads us to death."<sup>3</sup>

You just keep climbing the stairs, going nowhere until you die. Like the Sun, every day you return to your starting place, out of breath, but never stopping to ask if you've made it anywhere (Eccl. 1:5). You haven't.

So, let me ask you, if you gained all you wanted, would it guarantee your happiness?

It won't. It can't.

The Teacher had it all (all that you want) and found it wasn't enough.

### ***Reflection Questions:***

1. Have you ever gained what you most wanted only to find it was never enough? What did that feel like?
2. What does it look like for you to be cultivating contentment in this season of your life?

## 2

# OUT OF PLACE AND TIME

So it's clear that God has assigned this universal quest for happiness, but how? I, for one, don't recall sitting down with the Human Resources of Heaven for this job assignment.

God has hardwired it into us. It's how he made you.

After delivering a poem on the seasons of life (made famous by funerals and Turn! Turn! Turn! by The Byrds), the Teacher explains why we find life in time so frustrating.

First, he repeats that God has given the children of Adam this task (of finding what's good to do) to keep them occupied (Eccl. 3:10). It's an inherently frustrating task because, as his list of seasons demonstrates, life begins at birth and ends at death. More than that, everything in between feels like an oscillation between the two. Life is made up of planting and uprooting, of killing and healing, of tearing down and building, of weeping and laughing, of mourning and dancing, of embracing and estrangement, and more (Eccl. 3:1-8).

We want all of life to be laughing and dancing. But life is more like dancing with someone you love at a wedding and then weeping that the person you've danced with has died.

The brokenness of the world exacerbates our discontentment. The things we think we need to make us happy are so often stripped from us. And no matter how hard we try, we can't stop them from being taken away (Eccl. 3:14). This reality is a key part of what does the Bible say about money—that it is fleeting and cannot provide ultimate security.

## GREED IN THE BIBLE: CONTENTMENT IN A MATERIAL WORLD

This is, of course, why Jesus tells us not to store up treasures for ourselves on earth, where moth, rust, and thieves destroy and steal, but rather in heaven (Matt. 6:19-20). This is perhaps the most famous love of money Bible verse context, warning us that our hearts follow our treasure. The frustration we feel when we lose is meant to teach us something about the world and ourselves. My pen doesn't care whether it's being used, or in a drawer with other pens, or is lost or found. But you do. There's something different about how God has made you. Exploring a Christian perspective on minimalism and simple living can help us align our lifestyle with this heavenly focus.

After delivering his poem on the time around us, and after repeating man's MO (the universal quest of life), the Teacher finally speaks to why—the "time" within us:

God "has also put eternity in their hearts" (Eccl. 3:11).

God has made you different, and it makes you different from everything around you. There is a specific Biblical principles of money management found in recognizing that we are stewards of temporary things while belonging to an eternal Kingdom.

There's an iconic scene in *The Lion King* that comes after Nala has confronted Simba with his lack of responsibility for his people. Simba experiences an existential crisis as he deals with the guilt of his father's death, his confusion about his identity, and what responsibility he bears toward his people.

Mufasa appears to Simba in the clouds and calls to his son (try your best to read it as James Earl Jones would):

Simba, you have forgotten me. You have forgotten who you are, and so you have forgotten me. Look inside yourself, Simba. You are more than what you have become. You must take your place in the circle of life. Remember who you are. You are my son. The one true king, remember.

Mufasa calls Simba inward and to the past in order to arouse him to the present. There is a mismatch between who and what Simba is and the way he's living. If he looks inside and backward, he'll find that this is true. This

## FIELD GUIDE

mismatch is often seen in our struggle with materialism in the Bible, where we try to fill an eternal hole with temporal "stuff."

Do you know how many lions in the history of the world have looked up to the stars in existential angst? How many meercats have contemplated what they are? How many warthogs have had to remember their identity?

Not a single one.

Do you know how many healthy adults have pondered the meaning of life? How many of us have wondered, "What is the point of all of this?" How many have probed, "Why am I here?" How many have asked, "What happens when we die?" These questions are at the heart of teaching children about money and greed—helping them see that their value isn't found in their possessions. This understanding is vital for those wondering, "can a Christian be rich and go to Heaven?" The answer lies not in the amount of wealth, but in the orientation of the heart toward eternity.

Do you know how many cultures in history have sought to answer questions about the meaning of life: How did we get here? Where are we going? Why aren't things the way they're supposed to be? Will and how will all things be made well?

The human race collectively groans at its misery on Earth. It knows it was made for more than the world can offer.

You see, all creatures live in time. You can measure a rock's existence in time. You can measure a plant's life in time. You can measure a dog's life in time. All created things are in time, but humans are unique in that, in some strange sense, time has been put in us.

The only living thing on the planet that is discontent is man because God created us for more than we currently have. The dog is content with his bone. The plant has its light. But we were made for more than material can offer.

Your always-striving-never-reaching quest for happiness (the inward look) should lead you to discern (after looking back) that we were made for more.

## GREED IN THE BIBLE: CONTENTMENT IN A MATERIAL WORLD

Pascal writes that our inability to satisfy ourselves with the things around us should lead us to conclude “that there was once in man a true happiness of which there now remains to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings. . . . But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself.”<sup>4</sup>

Trying to be satisfied with another raise, a different house, or more followers on social media is like trying to reach infinity by adding ones (or better yet, zeros) together. The math doesn’t add up.

If you’re unhappy, it’s likely because you think you lack something. What you lack cannot be arrived at by gaining more of what’s in the world. Death will ensure all of it will be stripped from you, for starters. You were made for God, and your heart knows it.

God has put eternity in your heart. It’s the knowledge of God, but more like a memory. We could liken it to homesickness. I’m sure you have memories as a child being dropped off at a grandparent’s house, a cousin’s house, or a friend’s house. It was fun at first, but over time, the familial and cultural differences began to rub. The sights, sounds, smells, and customs make you feel alienated. You think to yourself, “We do that differently at my house.” “This is not what it’s like at my home.” With every encounter of distinction, you’re pushed away from that home and drawn back to your own.

That’s part of what God is doing with the seasons of life the Teacher shows us in the poem (the dying, uprooting, mourning, weeping, losing, estrangement, hate, and war). The negative or unfavorable seasons are intended to make you, in a sense, discontent with the things of earth—homesick. Our problem is that when we experience them, we tend to double down in our efforts to gain on earth. We work harder to make God’s gifts do what they cannot, often failing to see how to be happy with what you have biblically. And yet, they’re supposed to teach you to do the opposite. Every encounter with death, every uprooting, every time you have to mourn and weep, every time you’re estranged, or hated—they’re all intended to lead your heart away from this place: “This is not what it’s like in my home.”

## FIELD GUIDE

And the favorable seasons of life—the living, laughing, dancing, loving, building, embracing, and peaceful—they remind your heart, “this feels like home.” This dual feeling of what isn’t right and of what is, and yet never being able to reach it, is often likened to nostalgia by Christian and non-Christian thinkers alike. That is, the feeling that we were made for more, that we almost remember it, but we somehow can’t reach it, is so universal that there is a term for it. Recognizing this is a powerful step in overcoming financial anxiety with faith, as we realize our true security is not found in earthly wealth.

CS Lewis describes it this way:

Apparently, then, our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside, is no mere neurotic fancy, but the truest index of our real situation. And to be at last summoned inside would be both glory and honor beyond all our merits, and also the healing of that old ache.<sup>5</sup>

You were made to be happy. Your heart knows it. It almost remembers it. The problem is you’re looking in the wrong place.

What we need, then, is not a change in circumstances (not normally, anyhow) but a change in perspective. God’s temporal gifts cannot provide the permanent peace your heart craves. They’re just meant to be enjoyed for what they are and nothing more as you travel home.

The first step to being content, then, is lowering your expectations for what the world can do for you.

Imagine two different people building sandcastles. One man thinks it will be his actual home. You can imagine his determination. The sweat on his brow. The anxiety. The anger. The outbursts every time the wind, wave, or toddler knocks it down.

If you saw him, you might laugh or grimace. You’d analyze the situation with wisdom. He’s chosen foolish means (a sandcastle) toward a good end (a home).

The other man has the same circumstances. The same sand, water, wind, and waves. And yet he has perspective. He understands that the

## GREED IN THE BIBLE: CONTENTMENT IN A MATERIAL WORLD

sandcastle is temporary. He doesn't need it to live. And so, with shovel in hand and a good drink in the other (Eccl. 9:7), he builds with his kids, knowing it will not last, and yet, he enjoys it for what it is while it is.

Again, Jesus tells us:

19 "Don't store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves don't break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. – Matthew 6:19-21 (CSB)

And then our Lord adds to his instruction:

24 "No one can serve two masters, since either he will hate one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. – Matthew 6:24 (CSB)

So often our discontentment is rooted in the love of money because we expect it to do for us what only God can do. Christ warns that you cannot serve both. I think part of what the Teacher aims to show through his teaching on wealth is that you can't be served by both. Only one can offer you protection, security, peace, life, and joy: money or God. One offers fool's gold; the other, eternal riches.

### ***Reflection Questions:***

1. What separates humans from the rest of the world with regards to time?
2. What do our longings tell us about what/who we're made for?
3. How does having too high an expectation for this world set us up for failure?

# 3

## INCREASED CRAVINGS

How is it that the Teacher was able to amass properties, gardens, household servants, concubines, entertainers, reputation, and more? One word: money. So much of our discontent often lies at the feet of finances. We want more, and we think it can deliver.

The problem is, as we've already seen, finite things can't fill the infinite void.

The Teacher addresses this problem head-on in Chapters 5 and 6.

*5:10 The one who loves silver is never satisfied with silver, and whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with income. This too is futile.*

*6:7 All of a person's labor is for his stomach, yet the appetite is never satisfied.*

You know the feeling, I'm sure, of being starving and the relief and satisfaction that come with eating.

You have a built-in appetite by design. And not just for money (it's actually the things you think money provides). More fundamentally, you desire happiness, peace, permanence, value—in a word: life. This is the core of finding contentment in a consumer culture christian.

Unlike eating food and satisfying your hunger, the person who looks to silver or wealth to do what only God can do is never fulfilled. Trying to satisfy your heart with income is like chasing the wind and then trying to get full on what you caught. No matter how many handfuls of air you eat, you'll never fill up. Understanding this is central to what does the Bible say about greed.

## GREED IN THE BIBLE: CONTENTMENT IN A MATERIAL WORLD

Money sees the hole in your heart and says I can fill that if you just chase me. But it can't do what it promises. This deceptive promise is the Spirit of greed in the Bible.

I have a four-year-old daughter. She regularly asks her three older siblings and her parents, "Is today tomorrow?" We all get a kick out of it. The kids especially love answering her, "no."

I've tried my hardest to explain to her that today is not tomorrow and that it's not possible. With every one of our replies and reproofs, she grows in anger. "NO, IS IT TOMORROW TODAY?!" I understand why she's upset. She went to bed on some kind of promise—we're going to the pool tomorrow, for example. And so she wakes up to ask, "Is it tomorrow?" Meaning, is it time for my promise? When we tell her it's not tomorrow, she hears us pushing her promise back.

Wealth makes you the same promise every day—if you pursue me, I'll make you happy tomorrow. The problem is that it always pushes back what's been promised. You'll find that you actually need one more raise to feel joy. You actually need a little more in the 401K to feel secure. You actually need a larger emergency fund to have peace. This endless chase is why trusting God with finances in uncertain times is the only way to find real stability.

Trying to be satisfied with silver is like going on a walk and trying to make it to the horizon, but it just keeps moving further back. You keep chasing after it, but you find yourself chasing the wind under a different name. This realization highlights the is greed a sin question—it's not just a moral failure, but a futile attempt to find life where it doesn't exist.

It doesn't matter if you make fifty thousand a year or fifty million. It doesn't matter what your starting number is or your potential for monetary growth—if money is the goal, you'll never be happy. In a very tangible, material kind of way, you're trying to add up to the infinite. You cannot add up enough dollars to fill up the infinite in your heart—in truth, you're draining your heart.

Here's the problem with greed. It's not just that money doesn't satisfy you; it's that it actually increases your appetite. Pursuing money, thinking it will fulfill you, is like drinking saltwater from the sea. It only adds to your thirst.

## FIELD GUIDE

It only dehydrates you more. Or, you could liken it to a drug addiction, you need more to do what a little used to do. If you're living for a bonus, but this year's is half the size of last year's, the surplus somehow feels like a loss. Few people happily lower their standards of living. Greed has a draining effect on the soul.

Neither money nor the things it can buy can guarantee happiness because happiness is not for sale. It's a gift.

### ***Reflection Questions:***

1. How does money uniquely trick you into thinking that if you only had more, your problems would go away?
2. How does knowing happiness is a gift rather than a right change your perspective?

## 4

# DISCONTENT WITH A LITTLE AND DISCONTENT WITH A LOT

In chapters 5 and 6, the Teacher tells a story about a man who had everything and yet was unhappy (Eccl. 5:10). His wealth attracted the wrong kinds of people (Eccl. 5:11). His ventures produced anxiety (Eccl. 5:12). He lacked sleep (Eccl. 5:12). He lacked friends (Eccl. 4:7) and most ironic of all, he lacked what he thought money could buy—joy.

But, this man didn't just have money, he had the Old Testament dream: add to the wealth, children and a long life (Eccl. 6:3). And yet, he wasn't satisfied.

Grammy and Academy Award-winning Will Smith recently gave an interview where he spoke not about hitting "rock bottom" but a corresponding place he calls "cliff top."

He says it's "when you get so high that you realize. . . literally none of the stuff can make you happy. . . You can get to the end of the material world. You get to the end of money. You get to the end of sex. You get to the end of fame. You have so much. . . and then you go like off a cliff and into an abyss. . . where life loses all of its ability to sustain and please you."

It's possible to have everything and find out it's not enough. That's what the Teacher has. That's what it sounds like Will Smith has or had.

## FIELD GUIDE

No matter how long he lives, if he is not satisfied by good things and does not even have a proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he -- Ecclesiastes 6:3 (CSB)

This man's life is somehow worse than death. Mel Gibson's William Wallace was right: all men die, but not all men live. You can be alive and not really live. And this man, from the eyes of the world, has everything to live, and yet is dead inside.

He was discontent with a lot. And then he lost all of his money in a bad venture (Eccl. 5:14; 6:2). Now, he is discontent with a little. He's hit rock bottom.

*15 As he came from his mother's womb, so he will go again, naked as he came; he will take nothing for his efforts that he can carry in his hands. . . 17 What is more, he eats in darkness all his days, with much frustration, sickness, and anger. -- Ecclesiastes 5:15-17 (CSB)*

He eats alone in the dark, unwilling to burn a candle because he's hoarding what little oil he has. You see the imagery. Though he is under the sun, he lives in the darkness, anticipating the grave to which he goes.

The Teacher is showing us a double tragedy in the pursuit of happiness through wealth. It makes you miserable in the making and miserable in the losing. Miserable in the making: anxious, sleepless, friendless, always pursuing but never arriving. Now miserable in the losing. The irony is, the man who lost it all was nowhere nearer to happiness when he was rich, because material possessions are not a prerequisite for joy. But because he tethered his happiness to material wealth, now that he's poor, he's even further away from being happy.

Note: not only can wealth not buy you happiness, but the love of it will require from you what little joy you might have possessed.

What is the solution?

The Teacher tells us:

6 Better one handful with rest than two handfuls with effort and a pursuit of the wind.

## **GREED IN THE BIBLE: CONTENTMENT IN A MATERIAL WORLD**

This is Ecclesiastes' version of "one in the hand, two in the bush." It's better to be content with what you have in one hand than to pursue what you don't have with two hands and guarantee the loss of what you really need—rest.

To be clear, the issue is not money in itself—it's the love of money. It's the thinking that money will do for you what only God can. The love of money often underlies our discontent, as it promises to fulfill every other desire. But it can't.

It's better to be content with what you have (what God has given) so you can experience what you really want and need—joy.

The key to being content, then, is twofold: it's thinking rightly about the things you have (and don't have) and being rightly related to the one who gives them.

Joy is not something that can be gained by more striving. It's a gift from God right now.

### ***Reflection Questions:***

1. What is the 'everything' you're tempted to seek from this world? What do you think would make you finally happy?
2. How does not being satisfied with everything guarantee you won't be satisfied with nothing?

# 5

## SAMPLES FROM HEAVEN

In contrast to the man who had everything (and was miserable) and then lost it (and was equally miserable), the Teacher tells us about a man whom God gave “riches and wealth” and “allowed him to enjoy them, take his reward, and rejoice in his labor” (Eccl. 5:19). This is a central theme in Bible verses about wealth, showing that the outcome depends on the heart.

Notice that riches and wealth don’t necessarily mean happiness and rest (which is why we can be discontent or content regardless of how much we have). God must give the joy. In fact, God gives gifts for the same reason fathers give gifts—to bring their children joy. It is also the gift of God whenever anyone eats, drinks, and enjoys all his efforts (Eccl. 3:19). The problem comes when we’re unsatisfied with what God has given (Eccl. 6:3, 7). This dissatisfaction is one of the spiritual symptoms of a greedy heart.

I’m risking redundancy, but it’s worth repeating: what matters is not your circumstances but your perspective. The key to being content or happy is lowering your expectations of the world and increasing your expectations of God. This is the foundation of how to be happy with what you have biblically. If you look to wealth and riches, food and drink, friends and work, and wine, to do for you what only God can, you’ll be unhappy. If you receive them for what they are and nothing more, you can enjoy them. This is a vital lesson in Biblical principles of money management.

My wife and I have four kids, and so we do most of our shopping at the only place that can reasonably stock our pantry and fridge these days: Costco (if you’re unfamiliar, it’s a store with a cult-like following for its high-quality products, bulk items, and good prices). One of the best things about Costco is the free samples. Imagine being at Costco and standing

## GREED IN THE BIBLE: CONTENTMENT IN A MATERIAL WORLD

in line for a sample. Now imagine someone in front of you eats their one-tenth of a slice of a pizza cooked in a microwave and begins to frantically yell at the samples person.

“I’M STILL HUNGRY!”

“I’M STILL HUNGRY AND THIS PIZZA IS TERRIBLE!”

A bit like watching the fool on the beach with his sandcastle house, you observe this interaction with wisdom or perspective. You know the samples are not meant to fill you. That was not the promise. They’re just little gifts. A Christian perspective on minimalism and simple living helps us treat earthly goods exactly like these samples.

If you eat half a bagel bite at Costco thinking it was going to be a full pie from Una Pizza Napoletana in NYC, you’re going to be disappointed. Frustrated. Discontent. That’s how the Teacher looks at our attempts to find security, value, peace, permanence, life, and joy from money in the Bible, work, reputation, followers, sex, new tech, knowledge, folly, and more. We partake with frustration, not grasping that the samples aren’t meant to fill us. They’re to be received for what they are and nothing more: little gifts from heaven to be enjoyed as we journey home. This helps us understand what does the Bible say about greed—it is the mistake of trying to live on the sample.

In what areas of your life are you discontent? At the bottom of your discontentment is the belief (the lie) that gaining some material gift can give you what you think God currently does not. Does not history and God’s Word teach you differently? They won’t satisfy. God alone can. In what ways are you trying to make heaven’s gifts more than they are?

Here’s the thing about a sample: they’re just that—a sampling of the bigger and better thing. If you like it, you can go to the source for more. If the little pizza scratches the itch, you can buy the box. The point of the gifts is that we might enjoy them for what they are and that we might lift our gaze to the Father of Lights from whom they came (Jas. 1:17). This is the true path to finding contentment in a consumer culture christian.

### ***Reflection Questions:***

## FIELD GUIDE

1. What is the problem with fixing our happiness to our circumstances rather than our perspective?
2. If gifts aren't meant to replace God, what good are they? How should we go about thinking about gifts?

## 6

# EMPTY HANDS, FULL HEARTS

Part of the Teacher's burden is to give you a new horizon for living. Shockingly, it's death. Death and God's judgment, to be more precise (Eccl. 11:8-9). He's trying to awaken you to the fact that you're going to die, and it's coming soon. Your time here is like the smoke that lingers after you blow out a candle.

Part of his strategy for helping you meet death head-on is getting you to stop distracting yourself (money, entertainment, work, etc.). He pulls back the veil on all the things we use to insulate ourselves from our impending date with death so we can be wise for life.

If you're familiar with the wisdom literature (think Proverbs in particular), they aim to captivate you with God's wisdom and order. What vexes the author of Ecclesiastes is the exceptions. The race doesn't always go to the swift, the battle to the strong, the bread to the wise, the promotion to the deserving, death to the wicked, and so on (Eccl. 9:11). Life doesn't make sense or feel fair. And the exclamation point on life's absurdity is death. It doesn't matter if you're rich or poor, wise or foolish, wicked or righteous—all will die (Eccl. 9:2-3). Death is the great equalizer.

For the fate of the children of Adam and the fate of animals is the same. As one dies, so dies the other; they all have the same breath. People have no advantage over animals since everything is futile.  
20 All are going to the same place; all come from dust, and all return to dust. -- Ecclesiastes 3:19-20 (CSB)

Death doesn't discriminate between the sinners and the saints—it takes and it takes and it takes. Something about that doesn't feel right. Though, of course, the Christian understands this is fair. Death is the wages of sin

## FIELD GUIDE

(Rom. 6:23). Sin is the ultimate act of discontentment. Adam thought he could be like God, and now man dies like the dogs.

The wonderful news of the gospel, of course, is that God condescended by becoming man. Further still, he became obedient to the point of death on the cross. In doing so, he suffered for the sins of his people, dying that they might live.

Death becomes, for the Christian, then, not something to fear but the doorway to greater life, and so it becomes our teacher today. Death has at least two important lessons to teach us that lead to contentment.

First, death will strip everything from you. You will die as poor as when you were born. Naked you came and naked you'll go (Eccl. 5:15).

Ecclesiastes opens this way:

1 The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem.

2 "Absolute futility," says the Teacher.

"Absolute futility. Everything is futile."

3 What does a person gain for all his efforts

that he labors at under the sun? -- Ecclesiastes 1:1-3

The Teacher's question is rhetorical, making the answer as painful as it is obvious. What do we stand to gain under the sun? Nothing.

We cannot gain here because the world will not satisfy us while we're in it, and death will ensure we have no surplus at the end. Once it's all said and done, death will ensure our accounts read zero. All we strove to amass will be stripped away (Eccl. 2:21; Matt. 21:43).

Here's death's first lesson. If the things you amass on earth can't stop you from dying and will be taken from you at death, they can't give you life. A nicer home, a newer car, and a high-paying job cannot extend your life (quantitatively) or guarantee that you'll live before you die (qualitatively).

Christ makes this point in John chapter 6:

26 "Truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate the loaves and were filled. 27 Don't

## GREED IN THE BIBLE: CONTENTMENT IN A MATERIAL WORLD

work for the food that perishes but for the food that lasts for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” . . . 34 Then they said, “Sir, give us this bread always. 35 “I am the bread of life,” Jesus told them. “No one who comes to me will ever be hungry, and no one who believes in me will ever be thirsty again. . . . 40 For this is the will of my Father: that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him will have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” -- John 6:39-40 (CSB)

After seeing Christ multiply bread and fish to feed 5,000+, the crowds tracked him down. They miss the point of the sign (the sample), however, and simply want their stomachs filled. Christ has a better gift in mind: namely, himself—the bread of heaven that leaves you never hungry again and guarantees your victory over the grave. That’s something no loaf of sourdough can do. That’s something no degree, no income, no vacation, or pair of shoes can do. Christ offers life, eternal life, yes, the happy life, as a gift. Which means it’s not something to be earned or gained, but simply received from him. It also means it’s something that can’t be taken by death. In fact, the Christian finds that death is the one place where they actually gain because they get Christ (Phil. 1:21).

The bread multiplied by Christ had a dual effect. It was meant to be enjoyed as bread. And it was meant to lift the crowd’s gaze to the bread of heaven, Jesus Christ.

The teaching of the New Testament regularly works to lift our gaze from the gifts to the giver:

31 So don’t worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ 32 For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you. 34 Therefore don’t worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. -- Matthew 6:30-34 (CSB)

Notice, there is a bit of a rebounding effect. When you focus less on the things you think you need (here, they’re actual needs like food and clothing, but we can expand the list on the principle) and look to God for

## FIELD GUIDE

provision, we get something better—God. And because God is a good Father, we also get the things we need (and so often, much, much more).

When you increase your expectations for God, when you find your satisfaction in Christ, when you store up treasure in heaven, you find yourself content with the things of earth because you don't need them. You already have the life and peace, and security, and permanence, and joy you long for. And so, you are freed up to enjoy God's gifts for what they are and nothing more.

### ***Reflection Questions:***

1. Tell your mentor about a time when you realized that Jesus alone is better than all the world has to offer.
2. How does the certainty of death and the promise of eternal life change your perspective on accumulating more and more material possessions?

# 7

## EAT AND DRINK FOR TOMORROW WE DIE

Once your expectations are rightly set for both God and his gifts, you're able to enjoy and be content with your station and stuff in life.

The second lesson Death wants to teach you is to enjoy today. Not tomorrow, but today.

What a shame to spend your entire life discontent, looking to the future when you can finally be happy.

Because you were made for so much more than you are experiencing in this world (eternity in the heart), your inclination is going to be to try to find Eden now, though not in God but in his gifts. And because none of those gifts can deliver what you want, you're inclined to think you're just a few steps away from arriving. And so, the discontent person is always living for tomorrow, anxious for tomorrow, working for tomorrow, and never enjoying today (and, spoiler alert: tomorrow never comes).

Pascal puts it this way:

“Let each of us examine his thoughts; he will find them wholly concerned with the past or the future. We almost never think of the present, and if we do think of it, it is only to see what light is thrown on our plans for the future. The present is never our end. The past and the present are our means, the future alone our end. Thus we never actually live, but hope to live, and since we are always planning how to be happy, it is inevitable that we should never be so.”<sup>6</sup>

God is so generous toward his children, giving us all that we need in Christ and more. He gives us food and drink and work and friends that we might

## FIELD GUIDE

enjoy them (Eccl. 3:15). And yet, like the toddler complaining at the table, we spurn his generosity, thinking we deserve today what's not promised tomorrow.

Discontentment is a vicious cycle. If we only ever live for tomorrow's home, tomorrow's promotion, tomorrow's degree, and family—we'll only ever have anxiety and restlessness today. Like the man in chapters 5 and 6, who was miserable in the making and in the losing, the discontent person never enjoys today and never reaches "tomorrow." They're living for tomorrow's wind but never catch it.

And, as the Teacher is eager to show, your life is a vapor. You're running out of tomorrows quickly. Don't do that, never having enjoyed today.

There's a better way to live—receive this day as a gift from God. As seen above, if you're satisfied in Christ, you don't need more gifts, and so you're freed up to enjoy what you have.

Listen to the apostle Paul as he draws from Death's instruction:

But godliness with contentment is great gain. 7 For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out. 8 If we have food and clothing, we will be content with these -- 1 Timothy 6:6-8 (CSB).

Note how Paul draws the same lesson from death. Naked we came. Naked we'll go. Don't bank your life on things death will strip. Rather, if you have enough to eat and wear, you can be content. Paul's "standard of living" in one sense is very low. In another sense, it couldn't be higher. The reason he's satisfied is because he has Christ.

I don't say this out of need, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I find myself. 12 I know how to make do with little, and I know how to make do with a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content — whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need. 13 I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me -- Philippians 4:11-13 (CSB)

Paul lowered his expectations of the world as he increased his expectations of God.

## GREED IN THE BIBLE: CONTENTMENT IN A MATERIAL WORLD

If Paul's description of the good life—gaining Christ even while losing all other things (Phil 2:7-8)—seems bare bones, it's because you're still expecting too much from the world and not enough from God. It's when you're satisfied in Christ that you don't need more than him, food, and clothing. Anything else is a tremendous blessing from God, given to be enjoyed.

And so, for all of Ecclesiastes' ostensibly grim outlook on life under the sun (you're going to die, the world is broken, you won't be remembered), he offers one repeated application. Seven times, he pops his head above the clouds to give insight from heaven:

24 There is nothing better for a person than to eat, drink, and enjoy his work. I have seen that even this is from God's hand, 25 because who can eat and who can enjoy life apart from him? -- Ecclesiastes 2:24-25 (CSB)

15 So I commended enjoyment because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat, drink, and enjoy himself, for this will accompany him in his labor during the days of his life that God gives him under the sun. -- Ecclesiastes 8:14-15 (CSB)

These passages only make sense when you grasp the keys to contentment in each hand. Food, drink, work, marriage, and the lot won't give you life. God eagerly and generously looks to give you life. When you grasp both and are satisfied in Christ, you experience the "rebounding" effect whereby you can actually enjoy the things you were once tempted to find life in. And rather than viewing them as means for tomorrow's happiness, you can enjoy them today.

Happiness is God's gift today.

### ***Reflection Questions:***

1. What stops you from enjoying today and its gifts?
2. In what ways are you tempted to be discontent?



# CONCLUSION

So let me ask you again, are you happy? If not, why? I'm guessing it's because you lack something you think you need. It's because the thing you lack you think will do for you today what you think God is not already offering you. This realization is the cornerstone of finding contentment in a consumer culture christian.

What is the solution? Lower your expectations for the things of the world. Increase them for God. If you have food and clothing and God, you have enough. You have more than enough even. You have the infinite one who fills the gap of your heart. And you have (probably) more temporal gifts than you need, which he's given you to enjoy as you travel to meet him face to face. This is the heart of how to be happy with what you have biblically.

The question is, is that enough for you?

Hear Paul again, keeping in mind that there is nothing to gain in the world (material things can't satisfy and will be stripped at death). His words stand in sharp contrast to the materialism in the Bible that leads only to vanity:

7 But everything that was a gain to me, I have considered to be a loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I also consider everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them as dung, so that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own from the law, but one that is through faith in Christ — the righteousness from God based on faith. 10 My goal is to know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being

## **GREED IN THE BIBLE: CONTENTMENT IN A MATERIAL WORLD**

conformed to his death, 11 assuming that I will somehow reach the resurrection from among the dead. -- Philippians 3:7-11 (CSB)

Gain is possible only in Christ. He alone can satisfy. He alone conquers the grave. When we stop overcoming financial anxiety with faith by looking at our bank accounts and start looking at Him, we find peace. This Christian perspective on minimalism and simple living isn't about having nothing, but about having everything in Christ. Find satisfaction in him, and you can have contentment in all things.



## END NOTES

1. Bobby Jamieson, *Everything is Never Enough* (New York: Waterbrook, 2025, x).
2. If you're not following, you would be well served by reading or watching J.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*!
3. Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, 425.  
<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/pascal/pensees.viii.html>.
4. Pascal, *Pensees*, 425,  
<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/pascal/pensees.viii.html>.
5. C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (San Francisco: Harper, 1980), pp. 41-45.
6. Pascal, *Pensees*, 172,  
<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/pascal/pensees/pensees.iii.html>.



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