

I. Introduction

- A. Today I'm beginning a new series of messages that will take us up to the Christmas season. The series is called *The Secrets of a Highly Contented Life*.
- B. In my humble opinion, most Americans have a highly warped concept of contentment and I include myself. Most of us, most of the time, think that contentment is the feeling you have when all is right with your world. You have your bills paid, your homework done, your savings plan fully funded, your kids napping, your perfect house, your perfect job, your perfect pastor and perfect church, your house clean, your fireplace crackling, your coffee brewed and your feet up. That's when you can be content.
- C. Or your vision may be that contentment starts the day you retire, move to Hawaii and never wear shoes again.
- D. Or when you're finally married, you can be content. Some of you are thinking, I'll be content when I finally divorce that bum. Or when I have kids. Or when my kids grow up and get out.
- E. If your concept of contentment is anything like these visions, do you know what you are? DOOMED! Yikes. You are doomed to a life of frustration. You are doomed to a highly discontented life. Do you know why? Because it's impossible to have kids AND a clean house at the same time. The very moment that you base your inner contentment on your outer circumstances, you're doomed.
- F. Look at what St. Paul wrote:
1. *"Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need."* Philippians 4:11, 12, NKJV
- G. Two observations:
1. *I have learned...*
 - a) The number one reason most of us are not content is because we've bought into the myth of instant gratification.
 - b) In the 1960's researchers at Stanford University studied delayed gratification in four year old kids. They put a marshmallow in front of the kids and told them they could eat it now; but, then they were promised if they waited 20 minutes they could have a second marshmallow.
 - c) What would you do? I mean today, as a grown up?
 - d) Some kids waited and other kids did not. Now here's the cool part. Researchers then followed those 4 year olds all the way to college. The kids who delayed their marshmallow gratification, the kids who waited, were determined to be better adjusted as teenagers, more dependable in school and they scored, on the average, 210 points higher on the SAT.
 - e) You're thinking, "Oh, so that was my problem. I ate my marshmallow too fast."
 - f) Why am I saying this?
 - g) Because most of us approach our maturity with the attitude: I want it and I want it now. I want instant spirituality to go with my instant maturity. I want contentment and I want it now. The inability to delay SPIRITUAL gratification is an indicator that you will soon, and I say this with all love and pastoral care, be in a state of protracted spiritual immaturity (PSI).
 - h) Churches only feed into that whenever we act as if what we do in church today will change your life forever. IT WILL NOT, most of the time. What we're doing is building a foundation for a lifetime of maturity. There is no shortcut. There is no instant maturity. There is no instant contentment.
 - i) Paul said, I have learned—and he learned it the same way we all do: patiently, consistently, a little bit at a time. It takes time. You will not become a stable, mature, contented Christian in one day or one week or even one year. It takes awhile and any church that promises you otherwise is messed up.
 - j) Some of you will never be content, because contentment is the sister of maturity and you are simply not spiritually consistent enough, over time, to grow mature. How sad for you and how sad for the people around you who need to see the strength of Jesus somewhere in their lives.
 2. *I know how to be abased...*
 - a) Abased means "smacked down." If you lose your sense of contentment every time life smacks you down, what does that mean?
 - b) It means that you weren't really content to begin with; you were just having a good day, so you felt good. But as soon as you had a bad day, you would feel bad. You've based your inner life on your outer circumstances and that is the spiritual kiss of death to your contentment.
 3. We are going to study contentment and, guess what, I promise at the end of this series you will not yet be content. You may even be more discontent than ever. But I promise this, at the end of this series you will have a map toward contentment to last you for a very long time. If you follow that map, baby-steps all the way, you will find yourself saying, not too long from now, *I have learned in*

whatever state I'm in, to be content.

H. So, we are going to jump into one of the most amazing stories in the Bible. It's the story of a man who had lofty dreams and who faced terrible disasters. Yet no matter how much life smacked him down, he was content. Because of his faithfulness to God and his contentment in Christ, on his bad days and his worst days—because of that, God promoted him and blessed him and gave him a heart of gladness and joy no matter how bad his circumstances were.

I. The man is named Joseph. We start his story in Genesis 37:1 and follow it all the way through chapter 47.

II. The Secrets of a Highly Contented Life

A. *"Now Jacob dwelt in the land where his father was a stranger, in the land of Canaan. This is the history of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brothers. And the lad was with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to his father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age. Also he made him a tunic of many colors. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him."* Genesis 37:1-4, NKJV

B. Verse one reveals the first secret of being content; but it's easy to miss it.

C. Jacob dwelt in the land where his father was a stranger. Your Bible may say where his father stayed or lived.

D. Genesis was written in Hebrew. The translation that really nails the Hebrew accurately, word for word, is the New American Standard:

1. *"Now Jacob lived in the land where his father had sojourned, in the land of Canaan."* Genesis 37:1, NASB.

E. Sojourned. Do you know what that means? It means to live as a pilgrim. A sojourner is a traveler, a stranger, an alien. To be a stranger in a foreign land.

F. Now we have to wonder a little bit, why did Moses write the story this way? It's such a big deal, that Moses traces the sojourning of Joseph's family for three generations.

1. Joseph's father, Jacob, knew he was a pilgrim: Genesis 47:9

2. Joseph's grandfather, Isaac, knew he was a pilgrim: Genesis 37:1

3. Joseph's great-great grandfather, Abraham, knew he was a pilgrim too: Genesis 17:8

G. So here's my question for you: Do you see yourself as a pilgrim? Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the fathers of the race of God's people, were sojourners, pilgrims. Just how important is this concept of pilgrimage to us today? Does it really make a difference? What is God trying to tell us about true, lasting, stable contentment?

H. The first secret of contentment is having the heart of a pilgrim. You have to think, live, feel and act like this world is not your permanent home. You're just passing through. You'll never be content unless you start here.

I. What does that look like? We're going to spend the rest of our time in Hebrews 11:7-16.

III. A Pilgrim Mentality

A. *"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going."* Hebrews 11:8, NKJV

1. If you want to have the heart of a pilgrim, you start with a HEALTHY DETACHMENT. I'm not talking about hating the world or being a hermit or a monk. I'm talking about not getting your emotions deeply entwined with your stuff, your success, your security or your earthly resources. You have to hold all things lightly. Whatever it is, enjoy it while you have it, and don't go crazy if you have to let it go.

2. There's this great scene in *The Call of the Wild*, where John Thornton is sitting at the edge of cliff. Three hundred feet straight down to naked rocks below. He sits there with two friends and his faithful dog, Buck. Buck is a big dog, a cross between a St. Bernard and a collie. He's fiercely loyal to John Thornton because they've been through so much together. Buck would do anything for his master and John knew it. But he wanted to test it.

3. As they sit along that cliff, John has this crazy thought. He sweeps his arm toward the edge of that 300' jagged, rocky cliff and commands his dog, "Jump, Buck!"

a) "Jump, Buck!" he commanded, sweeping his arm out over the chasm. The next instant he was grappling with Buck on the extreme edge, while Hans and Pete were dragging them back to safety.

b) "It's uncanny," Pete said, after it was over and they had caught their [breath]."

4. He said the word and his dog was so trusting, so loyal, so faithful, he would have leaped to his death.

5. One sunny afternoon, Abram (later Abraham) is mowing his lush lawn, whistling some contemporary praise music and thinking about dinner with Sarai, his intelligent and beautiful wife. His face lights up as he surveys his white picket fence, four-camel garage and executive mansion overlooking his own Ponderosa.

6. Suddenly, the voice of God speaks to him:

a) *"Now the LORD had said to Abram: 'Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, To a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'"* Genesis 12:1-3, NKJV

7. One moment he's living his dreams and the next moment God points in an unspecified direction and

- says “Abram, jump!”
8. What would you have done? “Lord, you don’t understand. I have bills to pay. We specifically moved here for the schools. Plus, Sarai just ordered new flooring, you know, we’ll be on cherry hardwood next week. I just can’t get up and go. Lord, I need details. Where should I go? What is the route? Why am I going there? What will I do when I get there? Lord, no self-respecting lawyer would sign a contract like this. Come on, Lord. Be reasonable.”
 9. That’s what I might say. Why? Because many times I forget the first secret of contentment: A pilgrim mindset that gives me a healthy detachment from material stuff so that it never gets in the way of my spiritual usefulness to God.
 - a) *“No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier.”* 2 Timothy 2:4, NKJV
 10. Healthy detachment from the affairs of this life. God, you can move me, change my job, change my health, change my finances, change my home, change my surroundings. God, you can throw me in a pit, in a prison or in a palace. It doesn’t matter. It will not spoil my joy, because my joy is not anchored in my material world. I’m a pilgrim, a sojourner. You say jump, I jump.
- B. *“By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise;”* Hebrews 11:9, NKJV
1. He was one of the wealthiest men of his day, and Abram lived in a tent. I’m sure it was a very nice tent, but it was still a tent. So what?
 2. The second quality of a pilgrim mindset is HAPPY SIMPLICITY. Scripture records no permanent dwellings for the first three generations of the Jews: Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob. Don’t miss the important little detail that he was in the promised land, he was in his God-given earthly home yet he still lived in tents.
 3. Why?
 4. Because not even his earthly promised land was the finish line. For Abram, the finish line was heaven so he lived every day with the mindset of a pilgrim. HEALTHY DETACHMENT, HAPPY SIMPLICITY.
 5. Do you really want to be content and happy with your life? Research shows what the Bible has taught for thousand of years: You can’t have it all. Money doesn’t buy happiness. Actually, sometimes, once your basic needs are met, the more you have the less happy you are.
 6. There’s a growing body of research that says materialism is bad for you.
 - a) Research shows even though Americans earn twice as much in today’s dollars as they did in 1957, the people who say they are “very happy” has gone down from 35 to 29 percent.
 - b) A Forbes magazine survey of America’s 100 wealthiest people shows that they are only slightly happier than the average American.
 - c) Average Americans, whose income has increased steadily over the last 10 years, are no happier than those whose income is stagnant.

(1) [From *The High Price of Materialism*, by Tim Kasser]
 7. In fact, one psychologist and couples therapist sees an alarming rise in depressed couples who have the same profile:
 - a) “A husband and wife no longer connect. They are so exhausted from the pursuit of *nice things*, a big house, private school for the kids, fancy cars, they are time-starved and depleted. Life is luxurious but unsatisfying and simply no fun.” [International Herald Tribune, Feb 9, 2006.]
 8. Listen, especially all students and everybody at the Well. You are starting your career or working on your education and that’s great. We believe in working hard, working smart, and providing for yourself and your family. It is not a sin to be rich.
 9. But never forget this: Don’t let your pursuit of riches crowd out your pursuit of the things that will actually make you happy, because getting rich won’t do it. It is relationships, commitment to your spouse and kids and purpose in the kingdom of God that make you happy.
 10. Here’s what happens: We start our families and maybe get a house. Then we start filling our house with stuff, lots of stuff. Then we have kids and there’s lots and lots more stuff, so much stuff that your house is stuffed. You start putting it in the garage and soon your garage is stuffed. You rent a storage unit for your stuff. Is this working for you? Making you happy? Hold on, we’re not through.
 11. You have to store all your stuff, but that’s not all. You also have to clean it, repair it, insure it and change its oil. You have to dust it, oil it and knock the cobwebs off it. You have to box it, stack it, shrink wrap it and vacuum pack it. You have to mow it, paint it, trim it and fertilize it. Every time you move, you pack it, load it, drive it. Then you have to appraise it, inventory it and put it in your will.
 12. Where does it all go? To the gigantic garage sale your kids have after you die.
 13. You begin to wonder, just who’s serving whom here? Here is the basic law of materialism, Bill’s Law of Stuff:
 - a) *You live to serve the things you keep.*

14. So be careful what you keep and stockpile, because you will become its slave. Being rich is expensive.
15. Abram had enough money to build a palace, but he lived in tents. He simplified his life. He was a pilgrim and he was content.

C. *“for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.”* Hebrews 11:10, NKJV

1. Healthy Detachment, Happy Simplicity and now Heavenly Attachment. [I hate it when they all start with the same letter. Sorry.]
2. A true Christian pilgrim is a person who knows that your real life is anchored in heaven and all the stuff of your life is referenced there.
3. Before I had a house, I lived for years in a tiny apartment. A basement apartment in Chicago. I lived paycheck to paycheck and thought I'd never have a house. I remember driving through some really nice neighborhoods at Christmastime with a friend who was a pastor. He pastored a really small church and he lived in a really small house with his family. His name was Wayne.
4. Wayne looked at those beautiful mansion, decorated for Christmas, covered with just enough snow to make them look like Norman Rockwell paintings.
5. I think we were both a little jealous.
6. Maybe a whole lot jealous.
7. Until Wayne said, “My mansion in heaven is gonna be bigger than theirs.” And suddenly, we were content. We detached our emotional state from earth and reattached it to heaven. That is a great secret of contentment.
8. “What is this life?” asks James. It's just a vapor that appears for an instant and then vanishes away. Our real home, our real life is in heaven. You have 70, 80, 90 years here and then an eternity in heaven. If you have the heart of a pilgrim, you never forget it.

IV. Why Have A Pilgrim Heart

- A. So we'll be looking at *The Secrets of a Highly Contented Life* and the fantastic life of Joseph. What I've been talking about today is the very foundation of all of it. We must have the heart of a pilgrim.
- B. Why is this so important?
- C. One reason: You have to think like a pilgrim because you are one. It's your fundamental nature. It's the truth about you and until you align your instincts and emotions and decisions around that truth, you'll feel fragmented, frustrated, addicted and self-contradictory. You'll do on Tuesday what you said you'd never do on Sunday.
- D. Let me illustrate this and then be done. Here is the test of a pilgrim's heart which is the foundation of contentment.
- E. Here's the test: Does your heart, your inner life, feel more like picture one or picture two?
 1. Picture one is a junk drawer: Your life is a bunch of stuff thrown into a drawer. Possessions, sports, friends, hobbies, family. It's all there, but it's all disconnected. The junk drawer kind of heart is NOT THE WAY YOU WERE WIRED TO BE, a random collection of parts. Nope. So here comes picture two:
 2. Picture two is a bicycle wheel. Many different spokes, all held together by a single hub. When God drew up the plans for a human soul He designed you so that you would only be contented when all the parts of your life connected to Jesus and were seen from the eternal perspective of heaven.
- F. So, are all the parts of your life thrown together without any organizing principle? Or do they flow out of the inner life of Christ.
- G. Which picture resembles your inner life today?

Do you have excess baggage? Do you need to lighten your load? Do you need to bring every thought and every part of your life into that electrifying, galvanizing connection with Jesus? Until you do, you'll never be content. You can do it. Joseph and the Holy Spirit who tells us his story, will show us how.