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Discontentment

Why Am I So Unhappy?

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PERHAPS YOU'VE NEVER thought of discontentment as a root cause for your unhappiness, but as a Christian, you really should. It just might be that you have underestimated the misery that this common sin can produce. Many of those who seek my advice for any number of problems unknowingly struggle with this issue. It is *the* underlying problem for many.

What is the opposite of contentment?

“Why, that would be discontentment, of course.”

Sure, but what does the Bible set over against contentment? I don't think you will find the word *discontentment* in too many concordances.

“I guess you're right. So what is it?”

How about *covetousness*? “Let your conduct be without *covetousness*; *be content* with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’” (Heb. 13:5 NKJV, quoting Josh. 1:5; cf. Eccl. 5:10).

It is covetousness (our inordinate desire to have more than what God has seen fit to give us) that makes us discontent. Jesus warns, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses” (Luke 12:15 NKJV). Jesus is saying that we need to be on guard against our sinful desires to have more than what has been appointed for us to have. Our good, sovereign, loving, and wise heavenly Father knows much better than we do what we need to glorify and enjoy him now and forever. He knows what will make us happy. He knows how much of a good thing we can handle and how much of it will tempt us to sin. We don't fully comprehend these things, although we often think we do. In his classic book

The Art of Divine Contentment, Thomas Watson makes some interesting points:

God sees, in His infinite wisdom, that the same condition is not suitable for all; that which is good for one, may be bad for another; one season of weather will not serve all men's occasions, one needs sunshine, another rain; one condition of life will not fit every man, no more than one suit of apparel will fit every body; prosperity is not fitting for all, neither is adversity. If one man is brought low, perhaps he can bear it better than another can; he has a greater supply of grace, more faith and patience. . . . Another man is seated in an eminent place of dignity; he is better suited for it; perhaps it is a place that requires a greater measure of judgment, which every one is not capable of; perhaps he can use his estate better, he has a public [open] heart as well as a public place [open home]. The wise God sees that condition to be bad for one, which is good for another; hence it is He who places men in different orbs and spheres; some higher, some lower. One man desires health, God sees sickness is better for him; God will work health out of sickness, by bringing the body of death, into a consumption. Another man desires liberty, God sees restraint better for him; he will work his liberty by restraint; when his feet are bound, his heart shall be most enlarged. Did we believe this, it would give a check to the sinful disputes and quibbles of our hearts: shall I be discontented at that which is enacted by a decree, and ordered by a providence? Am I going to be a [devoted] child or a rebel?¹

As we will see, the New Testament writers repeatedly address this issue.

Now, just in case I haven't yet convinced you of the tremendous scope of this problem, perhaps a peek into your own heart might persuade you. Here is a little test you can take that will

1. Thomas Watson, *The Art of Divine Contentment* (London: L. B. Seeley and Sons, 1829), 39–40 (paraphrased).

give you a general idea of the extent to which you struggle with discontentment.

Biblical Contentment Inventory

Respond to each of the following twenty-five statements, using the rating scale below according to the frequency of each occurrence.

RATING SCALE	POINTS
NEVER (HARDLY EVER)	4
SELDOM	3
SOMETIMES	2
FREQUENTLY	1
ALWAYS (ALMOST ALWAYS)	0

1. I am prone to murmur and complain when things in my life do not go as I wish.
2. I tend to worry and fret when I am faced with the loss of some temporal possession.
3. I get distracted and have difficulty focusing on my God-given responsibilities when things do not go according to my expectations.
4. I give in to discouragement rather than trust God when it seems that my hopes and desires are not going to be fulfilled.
5. I am more motivated by how the things I want will please me than how they will glorify God.
6. I am willing to sin in order to get what I want.
7. I get angry or have some other sinful attitude if I do not get what I want.
8. I spend most of my spare thought time every day thinking about material things rather than eternal things.
9. I derive more pleasure from my thoughts about worldly plenty than I do from my thoughts of Christ, his Word, heaven, and spiritual things.