

# Godliness With Contentment

## *The Three F's: Flee, Follow, Fight*

1 Timothy 6:6-19

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Reflect for a moment on the following questions: What in life makes you content? Do you even consider yourself to be a contented person? If not, what would it take for you to find contentment?

Maybe it would help to start with a definition. Contentment isn't quite the same thing as joy or happiness. **Being content is being satisfied**, like with your possessions, your status, or your situation in life. There's an element of being at peace and having ease of mind. One of the best definitions of that I have heard concerning possessions is, "Contentment is not having all you want but wanting only what you have."

So how do we find contentment? Primarily, **contentment comes from focusing on and being thankful for what you have in life, not in what you don't have**. Contentment also comes from living a balanced life – a theme I have preached on before.

Today's Epistle Lesson from 1 Timothy also reveals that when it comes to finding contentment in life, there are certain things we should flee from; certain things we should follow; and certain things we should fight for. I call this the **Three F's of Contentment: Flee, Follow, and Fight**. More on this later.

Interestingly, the words 'content,' 'contented,' or 'contentment' occur rarely in the Bible – only 3 times in the entire Old Testament, and only 6 times in the New Testament. For instance, from Hebrews 13:5, "Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have." From the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 12, "But God said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' ...Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." Also from Paul in Philippians 4:11, "for I have learned to be content with whatever I have."

The biblical understanding of contentment stems, in part, from being satisfied with our lot in life, especially with our possessions. **While many of us struggle with a 'glass-half-empty' attitude toward life, contentment comes from approaching life from a 'glass-half-full' perspective.**

Let's look a bit closer, now, at what we learn about contentment from the author of this letter to a young aspiring minister named Timothy. By the way, tradition claims that the Apostle Paul wrote this letter, but many modern biblical scholars, for a variety of reasons I won't go into this morning, question the authenticity of this claim.

Today's sermon text comes from Chapter 6, the conclusion to this letter. It consists of many exhortations, which is a fancy term that means words of encouragement, advice, or warning. Many of these exhortations are about the danger of pursuing wealth. Evidently there were some in Timothy's congregation that had the

view that religion should turn a profit, and that living a godly life would generate wealth. In my opinion, there are still far too many televangelists and so-called 'prosperity gospel' preachers (many of whom lead nondenominational mega-churches) have the same misguided philosophy today.

It is in this context that the author counters in verse 6, "Of course, there is great gain in godliness," but he adds "combined with contentment." So yes, in one regard, being a person of faith *does* yield high dividends, but only when we are content with what we have.

Our text sketches a life of faith as one that moves the pursuit of wealth and possessions to the periphery, rather than being at the center of our lives. It recognizes money as valuable, but never of ultimate value. Therefore, we are encouraged to lead a godly life, yet godliness combined with contentment. **Again, contentment is seen as the capacity to be satisfied with what is *already* ours, rather than being driven to possess what is not ours.**

The biblical author cautions us, then, about getting caught up with the trappings of life. In a very familiar scripture passage, he writes in verse 7, "**we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it.**" This view encourages us to see riches and possession, then, as simply decorations along the way between birth and death. That's why he goes on to state, "but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these." But let's be honest, **how many of us would actually be content with just the minimal basics of life?**

We tend to forget that a major portion of the world's population has to live on a day-to-day basis with only the bare necessities of life, and far too many below even that level of subsistence. But if you have ever traveled to such places, and I have to a few, we often find that overall a larger proportion of that impoverished population seems more content than we are in ours.

At the very end of today's passage the author returns again to the issue of wealth, this time with a set of instructions for those who are rich. And yes, according to world standards, that includes all of us. **First**, the rich are charged not to be haughty or arrogant. A humble spirit is seen as the proper corrective.

**Second**, we are reminded of the uncertainty of riches and urged to rely on God who is the source of all we have. Money in the bank, as many of us have watched disappear over the past couple of years, either because of the downturn in the economy, overspending, or a personal tragedy, can provide a false sense of security.

**Third**, riches can have positive value if they belong to persons who are generous. Verse 17 advises, "As for those who in the present age are rich...they are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share." (Now there's a good text and theme for Stewardship Sunday.)

Bracketed by all these instructions on riches and wealth in today's Epistle reading are the imperatives I referred to earlier: to **flee**, **follow**, and **fight**. After those cautions about the dangers inherent in pursuing wealth, the biblical author tells Timothy in verse 11, "But as for you, person of God, shun all this." As Christians, therefore, we are faced with times when it is best to **flee** from certain things. Earlier in this chapter, the author reveals that contentment in life can result, in part, from fleeing from such things such as conceit, combativeness, greed, envy, and craving for controversy (especially in connection with a church setting). All these will only create difficulty in life, and can lead us away from the ways of God *and* contentment.

So in this regard, let me ask you: **Is there anything going on in your life right now that you think you should flee from? Is there anything you can think of that is leading you away from the ways of God and therefore, away from contentment?** If so, the imperative to flee from such things may be just the word that you need to hear this morning. Many are able to work toward this by simplifying their lives – removing aspects of your daily life that aren't fulfilling you.

The second imperative to finding contentment is to **follow**. Six things are listed that relate to how we should live our lives on a daily basis. Following after these things can indeed help lead to contentment. We're told in verse 11 to **pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness**. Going back to my days before seminary, I memorized this list and prayed for them regularly. "God, help me to live my life today marked by righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness." Perhaps this simple prayer can be of help to you.

Finally, after *fleeing* from things that are harmful, and *following* godly virtues and behavior, the third imperative is to **fight**. In yet another well-known scripture passage, Timothy is encouraged to "**fight the good fight of the faith**." This is active, dynamic language. Though I don't like language that encourages violence in any way, are there not indeed things we need to fight for in life? Again, however, not in a physically violent or verbally abusive way. On the forefront of things I feel called to fight for, and I know for many of you as well, are:

- **Fight for inclusiveness**, including justice, equality and respect for *all* people, including persons of other faith traditions.
- **Fight for the end of ignorance and prejudice** in our personal lives, church life, and certainly within our culture and society;
- **Fight against the systems that lead to war, hunger, poverty, and homelessness.**

The list of causes that each of us are called to fight could go on for pages. "Fighting the good fight of the faith," therefore, should remind us that being a person of faith is not just a simple game that we play. **Living a life of faith is often a struggle, sometimes even a battle.**

So let us remember that God is the source of our strength, and that is often found in and through the encouragement and support of others. In today's scriptural context, we are to learn that it is not the pursuit of riches nor possessions, but rather God alone who provides the basis for our hope and contentment.

And the search for contentment in your life, then, just might be aided by the Three F's: Flee, Follow, and Fight.

Amen.