

LET US COVET CONTENTMENT

By John Gagliardi



Those recovering from alcohol, drug, gambling and other addictions are often introduced to a powerful little prayer known simply as “the serenity prayer”. Over the years, countless troubled and conflicted people have gained comfort and strength by praying these simple words:

***God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can
And the wisdom to know the difference.***

At its heart, what the serenity prayer offers is something only God can provide – contentment. One of the definitions of contentment I like (Oxford dictionary) is “tranquil happiness”.

In our hurly-burly, get-ahead-at-all-costs, dog-eat-dog world, out there in the marketplace, contentment or “tranquil happiness” is in short supply. There is always one more deal to be done, one more competitor to be bested, and one more dollar to be made.

Yet God says in His Word: “Now godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Timothy 6: 6). That should make those of us in business and in other areas of the marketplace sit up and take notice. When was the last time you felt truly contented, and enjoyed a state of “tranquil happiness”? If you are like the rest of us, the honest answer is probably not for a long time.

God promises us peace – a peace that passes understanding. (Philippians 4: 7). But we can only receive that peace when we stop striving and lusting after “things”. The Bible calls it “coveting”.

God’s Tenth Commandment expressly forbids us to covet: “You shall not covet your neighbour’s house; you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, nor his male-servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbour’s” (Exodus 20: 17). Yet covetousness is at the centre of so much of what motivates modern business.

Paul in 1 Timothy goes on: “...Having food and clothing, with these we shall be content ... those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil...” (1 Timothy 6: 8-10).

Here, Paul is not saying that it is wrong for Christians to be wealthy – indeed, in many places God’s Word talks of wealth and prosperity, and reminds us that He Himself gives us the power to get wealth (Deuteronomy 8: 18). The key to understanding this Scripture is to read it in context, and understand that Paul is warning us about the “love of money” – making money an idol in itself, and letting money have us, instead of us having money.

If we are consumed by the love – or lust – for money and all it can buy, we will never have contentment. Again, Paul spells it out for us: “I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased and I know how to abound ... I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me” (Philippians 4: 11-13).

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews also warns specifically: “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.” (Hebrews 13: 5).

Even back in the Gospels, when John the Baptist was preaching to the multitudes, he told some soldiers who asked him what they should do: “...Be content with your wages” (Luke 3: 14).

Clearly, covetousness and contentment are mutually exclusive, like faith and fear. If you have one, you can’t have the other. But contentment can only come through the power of God, because it conflicts with our fallen human nature.

Man says: “I want what’s mine and I want what’s yours too if I can get away with it”. But God says: “be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another...you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no harm to a neighbor ...” (Romans 12: 10; 13: 9, 10).

It is all a matter of what motivates us – if we are motivated by a desire to trust and obey God, then we will have “tranquil happiness” no matter what state we are in, like Paul. If we are motivated by greed and covetousness, and always grasping for what is not ours, then we will never have that “godliness with contentment, which is great gain”.

If we are motivated by a love for God, and to put His will first in our lives, then we will seek His Kingdom first, and God Himself will be our “great reward” (Genesis 15: 1) and “...all these things shall be added to you” (Matthew 6: 33).

Jesus tells us clearly and repeatedly not to worry about “things” – what to eat, what to drink, what to wear. He says “do not worry” because worry is the opposite of contentment. We will never have “tranquil happiness” if we worry – Jesus tells us that tomorrow will take care of itself (Matthew 6: 25-34).

He says: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock., and it will be opened to you ... Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7: 7, 12). This is the opposite spirit to covetousness and seeking our own benefit at the cost of others.

Let us pray with St Francis of Assisi:

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;

Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love.

For it is in giving, that we receive;

It is in pardoning, that we are pardoned;

It is in dying, that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.