

Contentment and Ambition

The apostle Paul is often cited as a model of perfect contentment. For example, when the Lord denied his request to remove the “thorn” from his flesh, he accepted the Lord’s answer and declared in 2Corinthians 12:10,

Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

Likewise, when Paul wrote to the saints at Philippi from his Roman imprisonment, he did not complain about his hardships, but instead he shared his strength with the Philippians. Notice Philippians 4:11-13:

¹¹Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am.

¹²I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. ¹³I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

The “secret” of Paul’s contentment was reliance upon the Lord. He had learned to be satisfied with whatever the Lord gave him.

At the same time, Paul was also a very ambitious man who refused to be satisfied. In that same letter to the Philippians, he described the tireless pursuit of his greatest ambitions. Consider Philippians 3:12-14:

¹²Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. ¹³Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

To realize his ambition, Paul had left behind everything that had been important to him before he believed in Christ (Phil. 3:1-11). Rather than being satisfied with his accomplishments, he forgot them and pressed on for more.

How could Paul be both content and ambitious at the same time? Of course, the difference was between the objects of Paul’s contentment and his ambition. Concerning material possessions and worldly circumstances, he had no ambition, but rather he was content in any condition. His attitude about these things is expressed in the teaching he gave in 1Timothy 6:6-8:

⁶But godliness actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. ⁷For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. ⁸If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content.

However, Paul was not content with his own achievements in the service of Christ. It was not enough for him to be known as an apostle of Christ, to have the revelation of Christ’s gospel, or to have taken the gospel to many thousands of people. Paul earnestly desired to teach more people, to do greater service, and to bring more glory to God. He had not yet achieved “the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus,” so he could not be complacent in his progress.

Contrary to Paul’s example, we often reverse this pattern of contentment and ambition. We become content with our progress in spiritual things, but we are dissatisfied with our worldly circumstances. In other words, we tend to think that we know enough, study enough, serve enough, pray enough, worship enough, and give enough for God. At the same time, we also think that we need more money, more stuff, more rest, more vacation, and more play. We become easily discontented with our homes, cars,

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clothes, appearances, marriages, jobs, and incomes, while at the same time we are satisfied with our own ignorance of God's word, disobedience to His commandments, neglect of His worship, and indifference to His people. This thinking is exactly backwards from God's instructions. Jesus said, "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33). Instead, we often set our ambitions on feeding our own pleasures and give little thought to God's kingdom.

Therefore, let us resolve to keep contentment and ambition in the realms where they belong. We should be content with the worldly circumstances we have (Heb. 13:5). This does not mean that we cannot seek to improve those circumstances (1Cor. 7:21), but we must not allow them to make us discontented, bitter, or resentful toward God, the giver of all things (Jas. 1:17). As for ambition, we should follow the instructions of Colossians 3:1-2:

¹Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.