

What Cross-cultural Workers Ought to Know about Contentment

Amy and her husband had served three years and had a fruitful ministry. However, they returned home sooner than they expected because of relationship stresses on the field and a new baby. They realized that they would not be returning to the field and wrote asking for help with two things, “reestablishing relationships at home” and “being content with where they are.”

Sam had served ten years on the same field, was liked by everyone, was very talented, had a successful ministry in a village, and had been promoted to being field director. Although he had never sought that “promotion,” agency leaders back home pointed out that he was the person best qualified. Sam and his wife both agreed that no one else was better, but he was going through a “season of discontent.”

Amy did not have contentment because she was not serving on that field, and Sam did not have contentment because he was serving on that field in a “higher” position. Contentment is not a matter of external circumstances, but a matter of how cross-cultural workers interpret those circumstances.

What is contentment?

Dictionaries have two definitions of contentment.

- One of definition is: Happy enough with what one has or is; not desiring more or different; satisfied serving God; deep joy within oneself or gratitude to God.

- The other definition is usually: Willingness; willing to go along or accept; or bearing their “cross.”

A thesaurus usually gives two sets of synonyms.

- The first list of synonyms includes such things as: rest satisfied, let well enough alone, feel oneself at home, serenity, gratifying, peace of mind, ease of mind, ease, pleasure, or happiness.
- The second list of synonyms includes such things as: put up with it, get over it, resigned to, barely tolerable, bearable, grudgingly acceptable, or adequate.

All of these definitions and synonyms indicate that people will be able to function in their circumstances, but the connotations of the first and second sets are quite different.

What does the Bible say about contentment?

Paul, an early cross-cultural worker, wrote a supporting church that he had learned to be content whatever the circumstances. He knew what it meant to have plenty as well as to be in need, and he had learned the secret of being content in any and every situation—even when hungry or in want (Philippians 4:11-12). Note that this was something he learned, not something that came naturally, and that learned ability applied to whatever happened.

Paul also wrote to a young cross-cultural worker pastoring a church he had planted during a stay of several years in Ephesus. Paul told Timothy, “Godliness with contentment is great gain.” He went on to say that if we have only food and clothing we can be content with that (1 Timothy 6:6-8). The only other place that word for “contentment” is used in the Bible is where Paul wrote to

another church he planted. Such contentment is the “having all you need” in the following passage: “in all things at all times having all you need you will abound in every good work” (2 Corinthians 9:8). That is contentment, and it refers primarily to the first definitions or synonyms of contentment in the previous section—things leading to peace and joy!

What prevents or destroys that contentment?

Paul said we can learn to be content when our basic needs, such as food and clothing, are met. The problem arises when our “wants” are not filled. Many people want more than the necessities of life. They want something bigger, better, newer, faster, more prestigious or more expensive. The most common source of these wants is comparison which often leads to envy.

Jesus told a parable about envious comparison destroying contentment. A landowner agreed to pay workers a denarius (a typical day’s wage) for a day’s work. Apparently they were satisfied with that because they started to work. Throughout the day more workers came to work. In the evening when the workers were paid, all of them received a denarius. Those who had agreed to work all day for a denarius were no longer contented when they compared their wages with the others (Matthew 20:1-16). When they objected, the landowner asked them if they were envious because of his generosity.

Later, when Jesus told Peter about his future, Peter looked at another disciple and said, “Lord, what about him?” Jesus told Peter that was not any of his business; he was

just to follow Jesus—not compare his future with anyone else’s (John 21:16-22).

Envious people do not even really love themselves. They are not grateful for, or happy in, what they are or what they have. This sin is deadly because it will not let people live as themselves, grateful for the qualities and talents that God has given them, and making the best and most rewarding use of those gifts. Their degradation of others is a reflection of their degradation of themselves and their gifts. These people wind up alienated from themselves as well as others and “miss the party” like the elder brother of the prodigal son in Luke 15.

Jesus, in his parable about the workers in the vineyard, made it clear that a common result of comparison is envy. Envy can never result in gratification—no enjoyment, only endless self-torment as its appetite increases. Envy is not merely wanting another’s goods but wanting to pull the other person down. This leads to resentment, backbiting, spite, slander, hatred, and even murder, as was the case with Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:2-8).

How do people get that contentment?

People can choose the level of contentment they have. Some people choose just to live in discontent, never satisfied or happy with their situation and not accepting and going along with things. Others decide to live with the second definition of contentment, tolerating things and going along grudgingly. Still others decide to take action to get the first definition so that they are satisfied with deep joy and gratitude in all circumstances.

Whenever people notice differences between themselves and others, they may

begin making comparisons, and those comparisons often lead to envy. Since few people escape feelings of envy, what can they do when the Spirit makes them aware of their envy? What can they do to avoid falling into this trap?

- Start looking up. As with any other sin, they are to confess it, and God has promised to forgive (1 John 1). If they deny their sin, they deceive themselves and remain in it. When they are forgiven, they are to repent, not only to feel sorrow for the wrong they have done but also to turn from the sin itself.
- Look at themselves. If they must make comparisons, compare themselves with themselves. Galatians 6:4 states, "Each man should examine his own conduct for himself; then he can measure his achievement by comparing himself with himself and not with anyone else." Compare their apartment, salary, vehicle, and so forth now with what they had 10 or 20 years ago, not with cross-cultural worker colleagues they now have.
- Count their blessings. Rather than comparing themselves with cross-cultural workers who have more, compare themselves with people they serve who have less. Compare their apartment with the living conditions of the homeless. Compare their salary with the unemployed and nationals they serve. Compare their vehicles with those who have no vehicle at all. Just as comparing themselves with those who are better off creates envy, so comparing themselves with those less well-off increases contentment. In fact, as they "count their blessings," they may be motivated to share them with others who have less. Such sharing will increase their satisfaction even more!

- Accept that nothing (no thing) brings lasting joy and contentment. No matter what they have, they may soon adapt to it and want something "better," whether it is housing, spouse, salary, vehicle, position, language ability, and so forth. Research in the late 20th century showed that relationships, not things, were most highly correlated with happiness.

Romans 12:1 urges people to offer themselves as living sacrifices as an act of service. This is pleasing to God and results in contentment for the cross-cultural worker. Doing so usually involves two parts. First, they need to make an open-ended general surrender to God of everything that is to come up in the future. Second, as unexpected specific things appear after that, the cross-cultural worker may have to update and revise that surrender to include the attractive new things.

Although cross-cultural workers cannot find joy, satisfaction, and contentment by pursuing these things, contentment may find them as they are careful about comparisons, avoid envy, and keep the Great Commandment to love God and to love others as they love themselves.

What are the results of contentment?

Though it may seem impossible, God's people are able to have contentment in the most difficult circumstances. Here are some examples in the Bible.

- Rejoicing even when expectations are not met (Habakkuk 3:17-18)
- Rejoicing when persecuted (Acts 5:41)
- Singing hymns to God even when flogged and thrown into jail (Acts 16:23-25)
- Joyfully accepting property being confiscated (Hebrews 10:34)

- Rejoicing when suffering for Christ (1 Peter 4:12-13)

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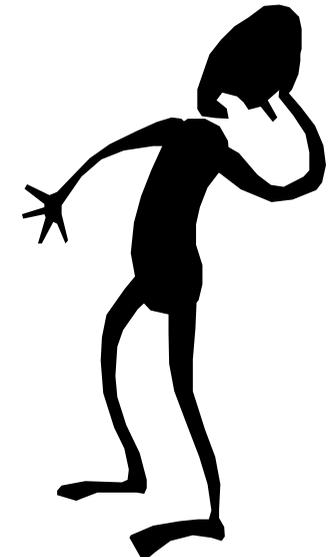
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