

If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still. ⁹ The increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields.

¹⁰ *Whoever loves money never has money enough;
whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income.
This too is meaningless.*

¹¹ *As goods increase,
so do those who consume them.
And what benefit are they to the owner
except to feast his eyes on them?*

¹² *The sleep of a laborer is sweet,
whether he eats little or much,
but the abundance of a rich man
permits him no sleep.*

¹³ *I have seen a grievous evil under the sun:*

*wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner,
¹⁴ or wealth lost through some misfortune,
so that when he has a son
there is nothing left for him.*

¹⁵ *Naked a man comes from his mother's womb,
and as he comes, so he departs.
He takes nothing from his labor
that he can carry in his hand.*

¹⁶ *This too is a grievous evil:*

*As a man comes, so he departs,
and what does he gain,
since he toils for the wind?*

¹⁷ *All his days he eats in darkness,
with great frustration, affliction and anger.*

¹⁸ *Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot. ¹⁹ Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God. ²⁰ He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart. (Ecclesiastes 5:8-20)*

Contentment is a Gift of God

In the twenty years that I've been teaching and preaching the Word of God, I've been struck by the fact that the New Testament draws special attention to three big issues of our Christian lives. What are these "Big Three" things? Sex, forgiveness and money. Why does God spend so much time on these three issues? Because every one of them is hard for us believers in a sinful world. It's hard to forgive people who have hurt me. It's hard to resist temptation in a pornographic world. And it's hard to have the attitude that God calls us to have about money. Last week, we talked about money. Today, the readings that we follow focus again on money, or rather, they focus on our attitude toward money. Although he doesn't use the word in this reading,

King Solomon calls us to be content. Are we? Are you content with what God has given you? Or do you, like me, have to admit that being content is pretty much a daily struggle? Well, Solomon has good news for us today: **contentment is a gift of God.**

I.

It wouldn't surprise me if this is the first time that many of us here have heard this reading from Ecclesiastes. King Solomon probably wrote this book in his old age. It reflects what he had learned from a lifetime as king of Israel and as a child of God. He talks about life "under the sun" – life here, as opposed to life in heaven. The Holy Spirit led him to see that **contentment is a gift of God, a precious gift in this world's rat race.**

King Solomon describes that rat race. He starts with government corruption. He tells us not to be surprised when it happens, because you have layer after layer of government over the ordinary worker and even the king takes his cut. Money perverts justice and twists God's gift of government. Then he says, **"Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income."** We are one of the wealthiest societies in history. All over the world, people imagine that if they could just get to the United States, or if they could just have our standard of living in their country, they'd be happy. But what do they do when they get here? They spend their whole lives reaching for a better life – just like we do. My grandfather worked night and day in the steel mills in Chicago to move out to the suburbs. Most of his grandchildren moved to even bigger houses in even better neighborhoods. How much is enough? When will we be satisfied?

Solomon says, **"The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep."** This verse is not a Marxist attack on capitalists. Solomon is talking about contentment. A person who works hard to support his family and then trusts in the Lord, sleeps and is refreshed. But the person who's in the rat race finds no peace in what he has. He worries about keeping it. He worries about adding to it. It keeps him up at night.

That leads to **"a grievous evil"** that Solomon had seen: **"wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner"** and **"wealth lost through some misfortune."** God never intended that we should hoard our wealth. Now, there's nothing wrong with saving for your retirement and being prudent in your spending. But hoarding harms you. Obviously, if it keeps you up at night, that's bad for your health and your emotional well-being. But it's worse than that: hoarding destroys your faith. Greed has no time for the Lord. No matter how much you have, money cannot get us to heaven. But the other side is also true: if you get wiped out and your family is left on the street, that's a disaster. God chooses to provide for us through the economy, through jobs and money and hard work so we can buy what we need. And it's a terrible thing if we lose everything. So there is a proper place for money. God gives us the resources we need to live here and to serve him. But when we die it will all be gone. Sadly it's so easy for us to spend our lives chasing something that we can never truly keep. And the pursuit will make all our lives darkness, frustration and anger. That is the rat race.

Solomon says, **"Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot."** Is this your life? You go to work, you do your best, you come home and give thanks for the food God has put on your table? Do you find satisfaction in the fact that today, you kept soul and body together – even if you aren't a brain surgeon or an investment banker, even if you don't have the biggest house on the block, even if the dinner was meatloaf instead of filet mignon? Are you content with what God has given you or are you caught up in the never ending pursuit of more?

Solomon says, **"Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God. He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart."** God has given every one of us here wealth and possessions. We are all in the top ten percent of the seven plus billion people on earth. It's become common in America in the last decade to complain about the one percent that owns most of everything. And you can support whatever politics you want about taxes and health care and so on. But most of the world looks at us as the wealthy people. Compared to all people who have ever lived, we're definitely in the top one percent. When *Star Trek* came out in the 1960's, computers couldn't do as much as your smart phone. But today, the automakers are debating the best way to install a screen on the dashboard of new cars that will enable you to Facebook while you're driving! Your ancestors could not have imagined your standard of living.

Are we content with all that God has given us? Do we accept our lot and are we glad for the blessings we have? Do we live without regrets? Notice what Solomon says: if we are content **“this is a gift of God.”** It doesn’t come to us sinful human beings naturally. But to be at peace with your life is an amazing gift. Think what a joy it would be to have sweet sleep at night because we never worry, to be glad for what God has given us and to not compare it with what he has given someone else. That is a very great gift indeed. Do you have it? I’ll be honest with you, my friends, I struggle to be the person Solomon is describing here. The only way that we can be that person is through the power and gift of God. And the amazing thing is that God wants to give every one of us that gift. God wants us to have perfect contentment in him.

II.

There is only one way to get that gift: the Holy Spirit working through the gospel changes our hearts. **Contentment is a gift of God, a gift he gives only by faith.** The world offers lots of different kinds of peace. There’s the peace we get from nature – on top of a mountain, by a lake or the seashore, on a path in a forest, we feel peace because we’re away from our jobs and the traffic and all the stress of life. There’s the peace we get from talking to good friends, or even from therapists. There’s the peace we get from retiring and being done. There’s even peace that comes from a good night’s sleep. All that peace is real. But it’s like the samples you get when you’re at grocery store. They cook some cookie or pastry and it smells so good. They give you a little piece in a plastic cup. It tastes great. But it’s not a meal. It won’t take away your real hunger.

The only real and lasting peace comes from knowing Christ and his promises to us. Why is that true? Because our sinful hearts always want more. That’s the underlying reality that makes all of Solomon’s observations about the rat race true. A discontented, unhappy sinner lives in each of us. He thinks that God just isn’t fair. That sinner wants something: more money, more friends, more respect, more recognition, more of something that God hasn’t given him. And he thinks that if God just came through, then he’d be happy. So it’s all God’s fault. But no matter how much God gives us, that sinner will never be content. He or she will always want more, will always rebel against God, will always criticize how God takes care of us. That sinner deserves nothing but death and hell.

But that sinner isn’t alone. We live in a sinful world that cultivates discontent. Every time I’ve ever bought a car, within days I saw commercials for a great deal on an even better one. And every single time, I felt a twinge of jealousy. Instead of thanking God for the car, the house, the furniture we just got, we get angry that we didn’t get a better deal. And every day that we live in this society, we are bombarded by messages that say we need a new phone or a new car or a new whatever. It’s all designed to make us discontent. And behind it all, the devil is laughing. He wants us to be discontent, partly because he likes hurting us. But on another level, he understands that contentment is a fruit of faith. Discontent is a fruit of unbelief and it is a poison to our faith. The worse our attitude is, the less we will serve God, the less we will testify to our Savior, the greater the possibility that we will walk away from our faith.

But that faith is the key to contentment. And God sustains that faith. God’s promise to us is that nothing can take us out of his hands. The devil already lost at Calvary and the empty tomb. God’s promise is that we will triumph over this life. On Judgment Day, we will have a greater standard of living than we could ever have here, because we will live with Jesus forever. And Christ has triumphed over all the sin and discontent in our hearts. He died because we sinners are never happy. He died and he paid for the unbeliever inside us who always has a complaint. Then he rose and God erased that sinner from our record. We have already won. Heaven is already ours. It’s just a matter of time until we live there with Jesus.

God promises to protect us from the devil, the world and our sinful flesh while we live here. Jesus came to destroy the work of the devil. He did that when he rose from the dead. Now, the devil cannot harm us. He cannot steal our faith. The devil cannot defeat God who elected us, who chose us to have faith. The world can’t beat God either, no matter how hard it tries. God will always work through the gospel, through the sermons we hear, through forgiveness we hear when we confess our sins here and in private, through communion and the memory of our baptism. Through all that gospel, he sustains our faith and keeps us on the road to heaven. God has planted inside us a new man, a believer, who clings to the truth and wages war against the devil. That believer trusts God absolutely. That new believer inside us truly is content. God builds him up every day to fight against the unbeliever inside us and all his discontent. Day after day, we do win, even though we aren’t perfectly content yet here.

So how do we grow in contentment? We focus on the promises of God. When life hurts, we go back to his promise to care for us, to love us, to give us what is best. When we feel discontent and unhappy, we remind ourselves that it's a sin to question God's love and we remember that Jesus died for that sin. And we remember that Jesus promised never to leave us or forsake us. When other people have more than we do, we go back to God's promises that he always gives us what is best for us. Those promises build up our faith and we have sweet sleep because our God is with us. We find satisfaction in the work God gives us to do and joy in his blessings here and now.

Our job as Christians is to renew our focus on those promises every day of our lives. The more we hear, the more we study, the more we take to heart what God has promised us, the more content we will be with what God has given us. Trust is the key to contentment. God gives us that gift through trust through the gospel of Jesus Christ. That makes Jesus the key to contentment. His life, his death, his resurrection, his love and care for us now, make us content, even when life is hard. Hear that good news about Jesus and cling to his promises. Amen.