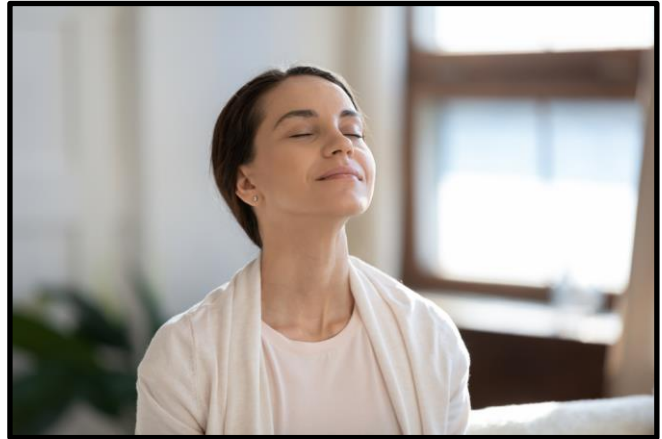


Choosing Contentment

We experience it every day... Advertisements telling us that we need the “latest and greatest” to make our lives full and complete. We see others with more than we have – more money, more “shiny things”, a more prestigious position, more success, more influence, more good looks, more intelligence, more of this, more of that. Our culture constantly emphasizes two very insidious beliefs. First, that life is a constant comparison to others and to an ideal; and second, that we should always be striving for “more”. Immanuel Kant noted, “give a man everything he wants and at that moment, everything will not be everything.” The words “more” and “content” do not seem to go hand-in-hand.



None of us are not immune to the challenges of embracing a contentment-filled lifestyle and finding a consistent personal contentment can be particularly elusive for pastors. Financially, clergy, as a profession, face one of the largest gaps between educational requirements (and related cost/debt load) and compensation levels. More intrinsically, the dangerous currents of comparison run swift and deep, even for clergy. Peter Scazzero confesses in *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, “I struggled with envy and jealousy of other pastors – those with larger churches, nicer buildings, and easier situations. I didn’t want to be a workaholic like my dad or other pastors I knew. I wanted to be content in God, to do ministry in the unhurried pace of Jesus. The question was ‘How?’”¹

A first step in addressing a lack of contentment is to identify potential causes. I’ve touched on the dangers of “comparison traps”² – and I believe it is critical that we reflect on the challenge of comparison from the broadest possible viewpoint. While a natural tendency is to compare our material status with others, the dangers here are far deeper than a focus on accumulation. We can compare ourselves to others on virtually ANY factor or characteristic: how much we serve, our level of sacrifice, our leadership abilities, our social status or prestige, etc. Taking a moment to stop, noticing that we are comparing ourselves to others (even indirectly or insidiously) and then asking ourselves what is driving this need to compare is a critical self-care step.

Additionally, there is always a question of whose will are we seeking: our will or God’s will for us? Are our feelings of discontent, our need to “strive”, our tendency to compare coming from God or are they a reflection of something going on inside of us? As such, another valuable step in identifying the causes of discontentment may be to reflect on how our shadow motivations might be engaging. Do we have unprocessed or unmanaged shadow issues that are surfacing relative to birth order, family practices and attitudes around money, a need to please or achieve or succeed or impress, or envy and greed? While our shadows are often subconscious, they can have a hugely negative impact on our ability to be content.

When we take a moment to ground ourselves, we can reflect on how this insatiable drive for “more” runs counter to Jesus’ promise of an abundant life (John 10:10). We can also reflect on how contentment is “essentially a matter of accepting from God’s hands what He sends because we know that He is good and therefore it is good.”³ Moreover, contentment is foundational to healthy relationships – with others, with ourselves, and with God.⁴ Underlying feelings or attitudes of discontent and envy can quickly poison even the strongest relational bond.

Above all, there is power in embracing contentment as a conscious lifestyle choice – really a series of constant lifestyle decisions. We don’t become content without consistently choosing to be so. We can’t embrace a content-filled lifestyle without regularly addressing our shadow motivations so that we do not activate the “comparison trap.” Most importantly, by choosing contentment we are consciously choosing an attitude that says, “I fully embrace what God has provided.” “This is enough, because it is from Him.” And perhaps most importantly, “I am enough, because I am His.”

Reflection Questions:

- In what areas of your life are you experiencing something short of the contentment of the abundant life that Jesus promises?
- What shadow motivations might be contributing to discontent you may consistently experience?
- How can you make contentment a conscious lifestyle choice? What impact might that have on your life? On your calling? On your relationships with others? On your relationship with God?

Notes

¹ Scazzero, P. (2015). *The Emotionally Healthy Leader: How Transforming Your Inner Life Will Deeply Transform Your Church, Team, and the World*. Zondervan Reflective. 14.

² Phrase borrowed from Goff, B. (2019). *Live in Grace, Walk in Love*. Nelson Books. 317.

³ Parker, J.I. “The Secret of Contentment.” Address given at Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. February 27, 1984. Quoted in Swenson, R. A. (2004). *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives*. NavPress. 161.

⁴ Swenson, R. A. (2004). *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives*. NavPress. 161-162.

Additional Resources and Suggested Next Steps:

If you are interested in a deeper exploration of contentment and how to embrace a contentment-filled lifestyle, I recommend several outstanding readings as well as two powerful ongoing support opportunities.



My favorite books on contentment include:

- *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical Financial and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives* (NavPress) by Richard A. Swenson.
- *The Emotionally Healthy Leader: How Transforming Your Inner Life Will Deeply Transform Your Church, Team, and the World* (Zondervan) by Peter Scazzero.
- *Money and Your Ministry: Balance the Books While Keeping Your Balance* (Marcuson Leadership Circle) by Margaret J. Marcuson.

In addition, the Pastoral Respite Ministry at Silver Bay YMCA (Silver Bay, NY) offers online Pastoral Self-Care Cohorts where groups of pastors come together to support each other and explore different wellness topics, including choosing contentment. Please contact Rev. Garth Allen (gallen@silverbay.org) or Rev. Bruce Tamlyn (btamlyn@silverbay.org) if you are interested in joining a pastoral self-care cohort or in initiating a spiritual direction relationship to further support your self-care efforts.

Finally, if you are interested in exploring either a short-term or ongoing mentoring relationship to strengthen your leadership and management skills or to accompany you on your broader self-care commitment, please contact me at ChrisClark@NorthernElmMentoringGroup.com (additional information on mentoring services is available at www.NorthernElmMentoringGroup.com). All mentoring engagements are conducted on a pro-bono basis, with the request that participants prayerfully consider a donation to Silver Bay YMCA's Pastoral Respite Program in lieu of mentoring fees.

About The Author:

Chris Clark is a strategic, passionate, faith-based, retired executive with over 20 years of executive leadership with a successful global med-tech company, as well as extensive lay leadership experience. Chris seeks to help address what he refers to as "The Crisis in Comprehensive Pastoral Health" through public and lay advocacy, and by walking alongside pastors in individual mentoring relationships focused on providing leadership and management insights. You can learn more about Chris and his ministry, Northern ELM Mentoring Group, at www.NorthernElmMentoringGroup.com.

