

Missionary Singles Issues: Contentment & Comparison

Suppose this happened. On his way home Bill, a single missionary, waved at Tom and Ruth playing with their children in front of their big house. As he went into his apartment, he realized how small it really was. It was big enough for him, but he barely had space to turn around in his kitchen. He surely could use more space.

Mary, another single missionary, followed Bill into the neighborhood and waved to Tom and Ruth as well. As she went into her apartment, she realized how lonely it was with no one else there. She would really like someone to care for her and laugh with her like Tom did with Ruth.

Bill and Mary are not contented with things just as they are. The thing that brought their discontent into consciousness was the sight of Tom and Ruth at their house. Anyone can have feelings of discontent, but single missionaries may feel it about different things than do married missionaries, and they have no one to talk with about it.

The Bible on Contentment

Paul, a single missionary, 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 (Philippians 4:11-12). Note that this was something he learned, not something that came naturally, and that ability applied to whatever happened.

He also wrote to a young missionary pastoring a church he had planted during a stay of several years in Ephesus. Paul wrote,

“Godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Timothy 6:6). The only other place that word for “contentment” is used in the Bible is where Paul wrote to another church he planted. It 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!

Results of Contentment

Contentment DOES NOT mean

- Bearing your “cross” of singleness
- Tolerating singleness
- Enduring singleness
- Grudgingly accepting singleness
- Etc.

Contentment DOES mean

- Satisfaction in serving God
 - Deep joy within
 - Gratitude to God
- 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)

The Bible on Comparison

Jesus, a single that never married, talked in 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, and apparently they were satisfied with that because they went 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).

Results of Comparison

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).

The relative deprivation principle maintains that people tend to overlook the ways in which they are relatively better off than others and to focus only on the ways in which they think others are better off. Thus they devalue their own gifts and blessings while overvaluing others. This only feeds their discontent!

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.

Furthermore, envy may lead to coveting, the last of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:17). There God gave not only a general command not to covet what another person has, but specified several things.

- House
- Spouse
- Servant
- Animals

As long as Bill, mentioned at the beginning, just wanted housing with more space he was not coveting, but if and when he reached the point at which he wanted the house where Tom and Ruth lived, he was violating the tenth commandment. This may then lead to taking steps to get that house, possibly causing problems within the whole team serving on that city.

As long as Mary just wanted a husband, she was not coveting. However, if she began wanting Tom as her husband, she had begun coveting, and this may lead to terrible results. This may lead not only to team problems, but also to the breakup of a marriage and children suffering from the effects of divorce.

Of course, even though married individuals have a spouse, they may also begin coveting someone else’s spouse. Not having a spouse, singles may be even more likely to begin coveting. As soon as attraction to a married person begins, singles must take steps to prevent it from growing. As attraction grows, it becomes a slippery slope down which people slide and become

irrationally willing to give up everything for that other person—even if it means breaking up families, derailing missionary careers, and living in sin.

What to Do

Few people readily admit their sin of envy. It is so filled with self, wanting something simply because someone else has it, that it is clearly mean and nasty. Whenever we notice differences between us and others, we are likely to begin making comparisons, and those comparisons often lead to envy. Since few of us escape feelings of envy, what can we do when the Spirit makes us aware of our envy? What can we do to avoid falling into this trap?

- Confess and repent. As with any other sin, we are to confess it, and God has promised to forgive (1 John 1). If we deny our sin, we deceive ourselves and remain in it. When we are forgiven, we are to repent, not only to feel sorrow for the wrong we have done but also to turn from the sin itself. Following are ways to help you turn from envy, to avoid rather than be trapped by it.
- Compare self with self. If you must make comparisons, compare yourself with yourself. Galatians 4:6 says, “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 your apartment, salary, vehicle, and so forth now with what you had 10 or 20 years ago, not with what married missionary colleagues now have.
- Compare with those who have less. Rather than comparing yourself with married missionaries who have more, compare yourself with people you serve who have less. Compare your apartment with the

living conditions of the homeless. Compare your salary with the unemployed and nationals you serve. Compare your vehicle with those who have no vehicle at all. Just as comparing yourself with those who are better off creates envy, so comparing yourself with those less well-off increases contentment. In fact, as you “count your blessings,” you may be motivated to share them with others who have less. Such sharing will increase your satisfaction even more!

- Accept that nothing (no thing) brings lasting joy and contentment. No matter what you have, you will 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 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 person. Doing so usually involves two parts. First, one needs 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 person may have to update and revise that surrender to include the attractive new things.

Although you cannot find joy, satisfaction, and contentment by pursuing these things, contentment may find you as you are careful about comparisons, avoid envy, and keep the Great Commandment to love God and to love others as you love yourself.

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