

“THE MASTER’S GARDENERS (#2): LESS IS MORE”  
(Ecclesiastes 2:10-11; Hebrews 13:5-6; Luke 12:15)  
**[PROP NEEDED: “MePhone” Video]**

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 4-13-08]

--I--

1. Read Text Ecclesiastes 2:10-11; Hebrews 13:5-6; Luke 12:15 and Pray.

2. **[WATCH VIDEO: “MePhone”(Time: 3:48) from Sermonspice.com]**

A–From where does true contentment come in life? Is it from our possessions (our cars or houses, or MePhones)? Or is it from somewhere else?

B–Well, last week we began a series called “The Master’s Gardeners” in which we’re exploring the relationship between faith & possessions by comparing our life to a garden.

C–Today our focus is on **Contentment**, and how – like a gardener in God’s garden – we can learn to plant and cultivate contentment in our lives in such a way that our possessions do not possess us.<sup>1</sup> [*Please follow along in your bulletin “Sermon Notes”*]

3. Now, let’s start by recognizing that in our consumer-oriented culture, we are constantly being told that contentment is found in the pursuit and acquisition of material things around us.

A–For example, advertising says, “*If you’ll just buy this bigger house, or that nicer car, or these cooler clothes, or get that better job, or buy this or that product, ...then you’ll be more content and happy in life!*”<sup>2</sup>

B–And unfortunately, this consumer mindset also often spills over into our spiritual lives, and even into our human relationships.

1–For example, we become disillusioned with our church for some reason –we no longer find contentment there, so we go “church-shopping,” or give up on the church altogether.<sup>3</sup>

2–Or as another example: As a pastor, I can tell story after story of people who’ve become *discontent* with the spouse they have, and so (perhaps innocently at first) they begin relationships outside their marriage that end up not so innocent. And the result (as you might guess) is almost always devastating.<sup>4</sup>

4. But do you remember what the Ecclesiastes scripture said about this kind of consumer attitude?

**[NRSV:]** “*Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure.... Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind...*”

**[MSG:]** “*Everything I wanted I took – I never said no to myself. I gave in to every impulse, held nothing back.... Then I took a good look at everything I’d done... but when I looked I saw nothing but smoke and spitting into the wind. There was nothing to any of it.*”

A–You see, this is saying that in the end, we *shouldn't expect* any of the things in our care (including people or things) to truly or fully satisfy us, because only God can do that.

1–If we're looking for satisfaction from the things or people of this world, sooner or later we're going to be disappointed.

2–How did the early church leader Augustine put it? ...“*Our hearts are restless, O God, until they rest in you.*”

–II–

5. So how do we do this, then? **How Do We Find and Cultivate True Contentment** in a world that's like a garden of jumbled-up weeds? Well, today's other two scriptures give us a hint:

A–[NRSV:] The Hebrews 13 passage says, “*Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for [God] has said, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you...’*” And in Luke 12, Jesus says “*Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.*”

[MSG:] The Hebrews 13 passage says, “*Don't be obsessed with getting more material things. Be relaxed with what you have; since God assured us ‘I'll never let you down,...’*” And in Luke 12, Jesus says “*Protect yourself against the least bit of greed. Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot.*”

B–You see, both of these scriptures are essentially saying that true contentment is found when you and I **learn to SIMPLIFY LIFE and RELY ON GOD more.**<sup>5</sup>

1–Speaker Bill Gothard once said that “*Contentment is realizing that God has already given me everything I need for my present happiness*” – whether that's my spouse, my children, my family, my church, my job, and any or all of my possessions.<sup>6</sup>

2–Rather than thinking that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence (or in another relationship, or church, or different car), we need to remember that God has already given us what we need for now – so learn to be content with that!

6. And “*simplicity*” is merely another way of describing this posture. It says that we don't have to have so much clutter and “stuff” to be truly content in life – that (in the words of today's title) “**Less Is More.**”

A–Simplicity means that instead of trying to grow and organize *many* plants in a cluttered, chaotic garden, we cut back to just a *few* that can thrive in a more healthy environment.

B–It reminds us that the more we *have*, the more we have to take care *of*, so that everything we possess *beyond* our basic needs merely creates additional stress/anxiety.<sup>7</sup>

1–Author Randy Alcorn says that “*Nothing makes a journey more difficult than a heavy backpack filled with nice but unnecessary things. [So, that's why] pilgrims travel light*” – he's talking about learning to cultivate simplicity in life.<sup>8</sup>

2–Think back to our video clip: Wasn't that the lesson God was trying to teach that man (and us)? ...to learn how (in the word of a famous saying) to “*Live more simply, so that others may simply live*”? (This is on our church sign out front now)

B–Now, I'm not saying we need to get rid of *all* our possessions. But I *am* challenging us to ask ourselves if the lifestyle we're living helps or hinders our relationship with God? and do our current possessions help us *in* or hinder *from* sharing with those in need around us?

–III–

7. So then, in today's consumer-oriented, possession-driven culture, *How* can we learn to live more simply, not only so others might simply *live*, but so that *we* could be more *content*?

8. In the time we've got left, I want to briefly suggest **THREE STEPS TO LIVING MORE SIMPLY** that we can do (*each found in your bulletin “Sermon Notes” as a fill in the blank*):<sup>9</sup>

A–First of all, I believe we can ***Reduce Consumption To Live Below Our Means***.

1–We can make a plan to reduce our overall expenses and the “stuff” we consume so that they're below our income level<sup>10</sup> – if we make \$50K/yr, don't spend \$60K!

2–Instead of going out to eat 4 times a week, why not cut back to 2-3x. Try setting a goal of reducing your electric, gas, or water bill by 10% by cutting back your thermostat merely 1-2 degrees while you're out of the house and by taking shorter showers/baths. Or, how about taking only 1-2 napkins at the movies rather than the handful that we usually pick up (and throw away).

3–Not only can the money we save now be used for eternal, kingdom-use through the church, but it helps us to be better stewards of our earth's limited resources.

4–And I might add that there are *times* where living below our means *may* require us to consider making *major* changes to our lifestyle – like perhaps moving to a smaller house, or downsizing to a more cost-efficient car, or even selling our vacation home that we really only use once/year anyway.

B–A second suggestion is... ***Before Buying Something Ask: “Do I Really Need This? Why?” and Then Apply*** (what I call) ***The 24-Hour Rule***

1–For the past month or so I'd been wrestling with needing a new cell phone because my old one dropped calls left and right. And as a gadget geek, what I really *wanted* was a particular sleek, fancy, upscale smartphone that's hot on the market.

2–So, I went to the store and drooled over the phone, held it in my hand, and played with the controls for a while. But I didn't purchase it then; I waited 24 hours.

3–And you know, in that time, the more I prayed and thought about what I really *needed*, the more I became convinced that while that smartphone would’ve been fun, I really didn’t *need* all the extra bells/whistles, especially for the extra money.

4–So I went back and instead purchased a less flashy phone – one that doesn’t drop calls, does everything I need, and (w/rebates) cost \$3! And I took the extra money I *would’ve spent* on that smartphone & donated it to a ministry I regularly support.

5–Now, I don’t *always* do this, but these are good practices if we want to simply life. <sup>11</sup>

C–A third and final suggestion is to *Use Things Up Before Buying Something New*.

1–Now, we can’t always do this, but there are times when, if we take care of something well (a car, an appliance, a piece of clothing or furniture), we can use it a *long* time (longer than most of us tend to do) before we need a new one.

2–It’s been hard, but I’ve learned that just because there’s something “new and improved” available on the market *doesn’t* mean I have to have it *right now* – I could instead use what I already have a little longer! <sup>12</sup>

–IV–

9. You see, like a gardener in a simplified, less cluttered garden, in today’s scriptures I think God is trying to tell us that “*Less Is [Actually] More*” when it comes to true happiness – ...

A–...That when you and I learn to “*live more simply*,” not only will be others be able to “*simply live*,” but we’ll find that our hearts have more freedom and peace and contentment because they’re not as encumbered by things that have no lasting value anyway.

B–In the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, Simplicity was a hallmark of a Christian tradition called the “Shakers.” And I want to leave us with the lyrics to one of their most famous hymns that sum up well what we’re saying today:

*“’Tis the gift to be simple, ’Tis the gift to be free,  
 ’Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be.  
 And when we find ourselves in the place just right,  
 ’Twill be in the valley of love and delight.*

*When true simplicity is gained,  
 To bow and to bend we shan’t be ashamed.  
 To turn, turn will be our delight,  
 ’Til by turning, turning [i.e., towards the way of simplicity] we come ‘round right’”<sup>13</sup>*

10. [PRAYER]

11. [CLOSING HYMN: “Simple Gifts”]

## ENDNOTES:

1. Before beginning, it's important to recognize that as human beings, you and I were created by God to intentionally have a certain degree of *discontentment* in life regarding *who* and *whose* we are. As the 19<sup>th</sup>-century pastor James McIntosh once said, "*It is right to be content with what we have, but never with who we are.*" In other words, you and I are meant to constantly strive to become better, to have more of God tomorrow than we did yesterday – in Jesus' words, to have a "*hunger and thirst for righteousness*" (Matthew 5:6); a "holy discontentment" (if you will) regarding our spiritual life and relationship with God.

The problem is that, far from having this, most of us tend to be *content* with who we are and with what kind of spiritual lives we have and lead. For example, we're content with our prayer life, our Bible study practices, with how much and how often we worship – we're as much a Christian as we *think* we need.

So, our problem is not that we actually *experience* discontentment in life. Instead, our problem is that we're discontent with the *wrong* things! We're *discontent* with things of the world & *content* with eternal things, rather than the other way around. Another way of stating this is to say that "*Most people are content with things with which they should be discontent, and discontent with things they should be content.*"

2. For example, we buy our dream home, and the moment we move in it's not quite right – the paint's chipped in places, and the appliances actually don't meet our needs after all, and after we get all our furniture in we discover that the bedrooms are not quite big enough. So, we're frustrated and "discontent", and become obsessed with getting them upgraded. Or, we buy a new car and before the new car smell even dissipates, we're dreaming of our next car. Plus, many of us are discontent with our jobs, so we spend hours looking for a new one, even on company time.

3. For example, many of us have the illusion that life should be perfect in our church. But we experience a member who wasn't friendly, or a pastor who said/did something that hurt our feelings, or we missed a while and no one called or seemed to notice. And now we can't see anything good/ right that our church does – all we see is its warts and what's wrong with it. So, we become disillusioned and discontent.

4. We even do this with our families: we'll be in store where there's a well-behaved child, and as parents we may even say to our children, "*Why can't you be more well-behaved like them?*" And even if you've never said that to your children, be honest... you've probably thought it at times!

5. In fact, in Verses 16-21 of the Luke 12 passage (immediately following the verses we read today), Jesus goes on to tell the parable of a rich man who built bigger and bigger barns to store his earthly crops, but did nothing to tend his relationship with God. It ends with a warning for "those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." This is a parable warning of the dangers of NOT living a simplified life that engenders a trust towards and reliance on God.

6. Bill Gothard, cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), Entry#1784. Other notable quotes along this vein: "*Contentment is not the fulfillment of what you want, but the realization of how much you already have*" [Draper, Entry#1783]; "*Contentment is not found in having everything--but in being satisfied with everything we have*" [Croft M. Pentz, "Contentment," The Complete Book of Zingers (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1990)]; "*The secret of contentment is knowing how to enjoy what you have*" [Penz]; "*Contentment is understanding that if I am not satisfied with what I have, I will never be satisfied with what I want*" [Bill Gothard, cited in Draper, Entry#1785]; "*He is a wise man who does not grieve for the things which he has not, but rejoices for those which he has*" [Epictetus, cited in Draper, Entry#1793].

7. The surplus is a source of stress because even though we don't really need the extra, we still have to look after it. In other words, the more we get caught up in the relentless pursuit of possessions and things, the more stressed out we get over all the "stuff" we have to maintain. For example, it used to be that the average U.S. household was only about 1200 square feet. Today it's 2400 square feet – that's twice as much to clean,

and pay taxes and insurance on, and more things to stress out about! This is precisely why even though we're always seeking more, after we get it we find that that "more" is making us less and less content.

Once, a distraught man rode his horse up to John Wesley shouting, "*Mr. Wesley, something terrible happened! Your house burned to the ground!*" Wesley listened, then calmly replied, "*No. The Lord's house burned to the ground. That means one less responsibility for me*" [Cited in Randy Alcorn, The Treasure Principle (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Publishers, 2001 ), p. 26].

Along this same line, Mother Teresa once said, "*We have very little, so we have nothing to be preoccupied with. The more you have, the more you are occupied, the less you give. But the less you have, the more free you are. Poverty is for us a freedom. It is not a mortification, a penance. It is joyful freedom ... I find the rich much poorer. They are never satisfied. They always need something. The poor are content. That is the great difference between the rich and the poor*" [Robert C. Shannon, 1000 Windows, (Cincinnati, Ohio: Standard Publishing Company, 1997)].

In the devotional book Our Daily Bread, Philip Parham tells the story of a rich industrialist who was disturbed to find a fisherman sitting lazily beside his boat. "*Why aren't you out there fishing?*" he asked. "*Because I've caught enough fish for today,*" said the fisherman. "*Why don't you catch more fish than you need?*" the rich man asked. "*What would I do with them?*" "*You could earn more money,*" came the impatient reply, "*and buy a better boat so you could go deeper and catch more fish. You could purchase nylon nets, catch even more fish, and make more money. Soon you'd have a fleet of boats and be rich like me.*" The fisherman asked, "*Then what would I do?*" "*You could sit down and enjoy life,*" said the industrialist. "*What do you think I'm doing now?*" the fisherman replied [Scott Minnich from Toms River, NJ, cited in Leadership magazine, Vol. 16, No. 3.].

8. Randy Alcorn, The Treasure Principle (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Publishers, 2001 ), p. 53.

9. These were taken generally from Five Steps for Simplifying Our Lives, found in the sermon notes of a sermon titled "*Cultivating Simplicity and Contentment*," preached October 28, 2007 by Rev. Adam Hamilton at the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection (Kansas City, MO) at [www.cor.org](http://www.cor.org).

In addition to these five steps regarding simplicity, Hamilton there also suggests four Keys to Cultivating Contentment: (#1) Tell yourself, "*It could be worse*" (John Ortberg). That is: look for the "silver lining" in everything you already have; (#2) Ask yourself: for how long will this make me happy? Many things we think will make us happy only make us happy as long as it takes to unwrap the wrapping on them; (#3) Learn to develop a grateful heart. We have two choices whenever and whatever we're faced with (complain or be grateful, it's our choice); and (#4) Ask yourself where your soul finds satisfaction? Is it in "things" or (what the Bible says) only in God.

10. The founder of Methodism John Wesley in fact did this by not buying the kinds of things generally considered essential for a man in his station of life. In 1776 the English tax commissioners inspected his return and wrote back, "*[We] cannot doubt but you have plate for which you have hitherto neglected to make entry.*" They assumed that a man of his prominence certainly had silver dinnerware in his house, and they wanted him to pay the proper tax on it. Wesley wrote back, "*I have two silver spoons at London and two at Bristol. This is all the plate I have at present, and I shall not buy any more while so many round me want bread*" (Cited in "Money II," Christian History, Issue 19).

11. Also try something called the "24 Hour Rule": the next time you have something in your hand you're not sure you really need, give it 24 hours before purchasing and see if you still feel you need it then before buying it. Other quotations along this line: "*Contentment consists not in great wealth but in few wants*" [Epictetus, cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), Entry#1780; "*He is richest who is content with the least*" [Socrates, cited in Draper, Entry#1794]; "*My riches consist not in the extent of my possessions but in the fewness of my wants*" [Joseph Brotherton, cited in Draper, Entry#11839].

12. “Surely the higher ambition is entering into the deeper possession of what we already have rather than going out to acquire something new” [Richard Nelson Bolles, author of What Color Is Your Parachute?, cited in Leadership magazine, Vol. 11, no. 3]. “May we never let the things we can't have, or don't have, or shouldn't have, spoil our enjoyment of the things we do have and can have. As we value our happiness let us not forget it, for one of the greatest lessons in life is learning to be happy without the things we cannot or should not have” [Richard L. Evans, cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), Entry# 8635].

A potential fourth way to simplify life that we didn't have time to talk about today is to **Plan Low Cost Entertainment That Enriches**. Today's culture tries to say that we have to spend lots of money to have fun. But its' just not true! We can plan vacations and outings that don't necessarily always have to cost a lot of money? For example: we can enjoy a short day at a free city/county park, instead of a high-cost amusement park; we can watch a low-cost rental or free already-owned family movie at home, instead of paying \$30 or more to see one at a theater. In short, we can find creative ways to simplify our entertainment options. It doesn't mean we *never* go to an amusement park or movie theater; simply that we don't *always* have to do those to have fun!

13. Traditional 19th-century Shaker lyrics and tune.