

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
January 13 & 14, 2018
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Satisfied: Not Comparing | Matthew 20:1-15

We have, as I talked about, been trying to address this issue of contentment and it's something that's easier to show than to lecture about. So for instance, look at this mat. This mat is where you live right now. It's your apartment, or your house, it's your job, or your retirement. It's your relational world, it's your physical health, it's your mood most days—this is where you are right now—and what we are saying is that we would love it if you could become satisfied. Not apathetic, but if nothing more ever happened, you would be satisfied here. That's important because right over there, that bright red rug is our dreams, our future. It's the perfect job, that perfect house, it's the lake place, it's that 40 pounds I need to lose, it's the relationship that I want to have, it's this dream of *I could be happy if I could actually save money*. These are all good things! It's important to have dreams, but could you be content here? Could you be filled with joy here or is it *I've got to have that before I get there?*

We said last week that we wanted to be like the apostle Paul—a follower of Jesus—who said, “I have learned the secret of contentment no matter the circumstance, whether I am in the penthouse or the prison cell”, and he wrote that from a prison cell. “I have learned to be content.” Each week of this series, we want to define what contentment means. Contentment doesn't just mean, “I'm okay.” Contentment is the cultivation of a satisfied heart. It is cultivating a heart that will stay satisfied so that we have the practice of being fully alive to God. It is knowing every day that God is there, and sensing that God changes the world. Being fully alive to God with a satisfied heart also allows us to be fully alive to other people. *I'll be present with those people. They're not just my competitors or things in my way.* Whatever our material circumstances, contentment is the cultivation of a satisfied heart, but we live that in a culture that says, *no, no, that's not quite right.* Contentment comes from getting this one more thing. We live in a culture that accumulates to satisfy. You and I, as followers of Jesus, are almost indistinguishable in our buying patterns from people that don't go to church. We're almost exactly the same in our career track as people who don't believe in God.

So, what difference does faith make in contentment? I have to tell you that I think it is us. All of us, in this culture of accumulation, have a weak spot where accumulation sort of has to happen. It's different for each one of us, so let me role out four. The first one actually is that some of us, some of you, buy on impulse. It's a great ad, it's a sale that you walk by, or it's an upgrade! It's the next new thing. That gets some of us—*I'll be better with this new thing. The iPhone 10 is better than my flip phone.* The second way is that some of you accumulate things out of security. There is a sense . . . *trust me, I just need to get my kid into the right school.* That means you need the right neighborhood. That means you need to have just a little more in savings because if you have this then you won't be a drag on the kids. Our buys and our purchases are always

just for a little more security. The third thing is that some of us, in this culture of accumulation, are here because of accomplishment. You're successful. You've worked REALLY hard. You probably shouldn't be driving the same VW Bug that you had in college once you become the Vice President of the company, and bigger houses show that we have done well. A second house isn't bad, but is it a sign of success, of accomplishment—*I deserve this*. The "I deserve things" starts to drive us. The fourth is, for me I think, the most powerful by far—why people go for just a little bit more. I won't tell you what it is, but it's the most important. Let's see if you can figure it out. You will be tempted to change your pattern or accumulate more if somebody else gets the promotion that was promised to you OR if you lose the job and somebody you're better qualified than does not lose their job. You're dissatisfied and tempted to buy more when somebody else—maybe even one of your friends—loses 15 or 20 pounds and has the temerity to keep it off, and even worse, they've somehow given you those 15 pounds!

We're dissatisfied and we get more. We want more when somebody sends us pictures of their dream vacation—even over the MLK weekend—and our highlight was a trip to the mall in Burnsville. We're susceptible to being dissatisfied when we're surrounded by super kids—kids living the dream, kids that seem more talented than our kids, kids that are happier than our kids are—while we fret about our own children. I believe the root of many of the reasons we accumulate is because we compare.

We compare. It is not anything spiritual or unspiritual. The disciples are invited to follow Jesus and He says, "I'll give you life in all of its fullness. All you have to do is follow Me and give up everything else." *Well, let me think about that. I want life in all its fullness. I trust You, but give up everything else? These people aren't giving up anything, why do I?* And then it becomes personal. One of your friends is a young girl, you see her grow up, she gets into a good school, and she graduates in the top 10%. You're proud of her because she wants to be a teacher and change lives, but you know the demand for teachers goes up and down. So, she graduates in one of the down times and she ends up substituting for a whole year. Sends out resumes every single week to every principal or superintendent...all year, nothing works. She's discouraged and her friends who can't get jobs are discouraged, and then in the spring a principal calls and says, "Hey, I'm from this middle school and we have a need for a teacher, it's not exactly . . ." and she says yes before she even hears the rest of the sentence. Yes! She has a job! She's going to be able to teach and she's so excited. She calls her friend and her friend says, "I just got a job, too. Isn't that great? Let's get together and celebrate." They get together and she describes this job, and this principal seems like a good guy...and she asks her friend, "What about you?" Her friend says, "Well, I'm over at Tantrum Elementary." "Oh, I applied to Tantrum, too, but they didn't have any spots." "Well, one opened up and I sort of slid in". She looks at her friend who graduated in the bottom half of her class and she says, "Oh, okay. What grade?" "Third grade." Well, that's the grade she applied for and was told no. What makes it worse is that her new job, her great job that she's so excited about, pays \$3,781 less, and all of a sudden it's not great joy because \$4,000 at the beginning of your career is a lot of money. She thinks, "It's not fair." Then, she hears this Jesus talk and Jesus hears the disciples say, "I'm not sure this is fair." Toward the end the disciples have been following Jesus for a couple of

years, and Matthew tells us that the disciples said, 'Will this be worth it? We've given up everything. Will this be worth it?' And Jesus says, "It will be worth it, but it will be different than you think", and like He always does, He tells a story.

¹ "For the kingdom of heaven (want to know what heaven is like?) is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. (Needed temporary help). ² He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into the vineyard. [Matthew 20:1-2]

It's an agricultural world. All of them know what a denarius is. Probably would look about the size of a dime to us, but that doesn't sound very good. Instead, what if he said, "I'll offer you a living wage"? The living wage in that time for a good day was \$100. A good day was a \$100. (Migrant workers in California are given between \$9-\$13 dollars an hour. Take taxes out of that and you don't come close to \$100.) The owner says, "I'll give you a \$100 at the end of the day." Whoa! They run out—it's great early in the day because the ground is still cool and the fruit they are picking is still low on the vine. They're working with their friends and they have a job and all those other poor losers didn't get a job.

³ "About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' ⁵ So they went. "He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. ⁶ About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' ⁷ "Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' ⁸ "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' ⁹ "The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. [Matthew 20:3-9]

Right now everybody in that whole line We hit the jackpot." And they got \$100 even though they'd only been there an hour.

¹⁰ So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive even more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹² 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' ¹³ "But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?' ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶ "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." [Matthew 20:10-16]

As they walked away they went, *heck yeah! You've given somebody \$100 for an hour's work and a \$100 for 10 hours? It's not fair!* That's right. And what Jesus is saying is that God is not fair. God's reward will not always match what you are expecting. God's reward will not always match what other people get. Not because you get too little, but because they get too much. We're not poor, but when we focus on others we're not content. Paul says, "I've learned the secret of contentment in the prison yard or in the penthouse." You have to learn that again and again because every time I learn to be content right here, right where I am—this number of kids, or being single, or having this job—every time I'm here and I say *Oh, thank You God for what I have*, you know what? I see one of my friends and they've got more." And I think, *if I could just be there then I'd be content*. The problem is you bust your rear end and you get right where your friend is and you know what happens? Those suckers move and you're not content anymore. When we focus on what somebody else has, it steals contentment. I learned this as a child. Let me share with you an almost real story.

I grew up in Chicago. Periodically during the summer it would be 150-160 degrees. Okay, maybe not, but it feels like that when you're 7-years-old, right? It was so hot and we didn't have air conditioning. I'd come in from running around and just stand in front of the fan, hoping mom wouldn't catch me standing there. One day in the middle of the summer (hottest day in 50 years) I'm there and I hear from the kitchen, "John, get in here." "Oh shoot!" "John, get in here now." So, I go in and my mother hands me this bowl, and inside was this huge mound of ice cream. She hands me a spoon and I think *you're the best mom there ever was*. I go out on the porch because it's better to have ice cream when it's hot on the porch. I am sitting down just looking away and my brother comes up and... "What?!" He runs inside and 36 seconds later he's right next to me with an identical bowl, identical spoon, and we're looking at each other like life is good! Life is great and I'm in heaven until I look at my brother's bowl. This is what my brother's bowl looks like (shows a picture with 2 scoops of ice cream). This is what starts wars.

It's only been 59 years and I've forgotten that completely. That's just kid stuff, right? When you become an adult that never happens, right? We never get jealous of somebody else who gets the promotion we want, or loses the weight, or does something special. We never get jealous, but if we did it would be because comparison kills contentment. Comparison kills joy. I loved that ice cream. It filled me with joy, but when I started to compare, it destroyed my joy and not only did it destroy my joy, it killed my sense of contentment. I was content on that step with my brother whom I love, and comparison destroyed my contentment. Can I tell you what destroys your contentment as much as anything on planet earth? Social media. Instagram, Twitter, Facebook. What you are doing is coming out of your gym where you work out and gain two pounds, coming out of geometry class that you are getting a C- in, and you go online and there is your friend looking incredibly cute in Barbados having the time of his or her life. Comparison kills contentment because we compare our normal life to their highlight reel. We don't really see what's going on in their lives. I think comparison not only kills joy and contentment . . . I think the reason Jesus tells this story is because comparison kills our faith. Faith is built on my ability to trust God. I trust that God loves me not more or less than He loves you; God loves me, and I can trust God. But when I compare the

size of my church to the size of my friend Bill's church that has 25,000 members, it's not fair! It happens to all of us. We start to feel ripped off when we compare our relationships to others, instead of focusing on the gifts of God. I know this is wrong, but it feels like if I have a good relationship with God then I'm supposed to do better. The secret of contentment is for you to counter the power of comparison. Can I tell you that the key is what is in your bowl—to discover today what's in your bowl.

If you are here, you have enough health to get here and you are mentally stable enough to listen. If you are here, it is almost 100% likely that you're able to read. If you are here it's because you got here somehow. You either have transportation or friends. If you are here, what's in your bowl is enough. Maybe there's more in our bowls than we think.

So, practice number one was count your shoes and count your shirts. Practice number two comes out of looking at your life on the other side. Manion (Jeff) talks about keeping a journal. I've kept a journal since college and you can see some of them there (shows a picture), one for each year. Then about 12-15 years ago my handwriting got worse and worse and worse...it started to look like a doctor's writing, you know? So I started using a laptop, and probably every three days of my life I journal. When we get to the end of the year, Laura and I discipline ourselves to read through the last year of our journals. Because I knew this was coming, I decided I would establish the practice of asking, "What am I grateful for right now?" Not, what do I have, but what am I grateful for right now? So, I sat at a coffee shop and wrote down, *grateful for coffee shop*. I just sat there for a half hour or so and I broke it down. I said there are things that I am grateful for that are material, and physical, and relational; I wrote that if I'm going to be contented, it's because I'm grateful for the beauty of the frozen lake I saw outside. Look at the flakes coming down. I was grateful for the warmth of watching a frozen lake. Where I am, I'm grateful for books. I love books. I'm grateful for the fact that I can read. I'm grateful for a car that starts even when it's cold. I'm grateful for jumper cables that help when it doesn't start. I'm fine—I'm grateful for that. This week I'm grateful because one of Laura's friends has ALS and she got a motorized wheelchair. She can blow into a straw and go around her house, and she has a computer that her eyes can activate with sound so that she can talk to her grandchildren. I'm grateful for that—that she's not stuck in this box alone.

I went on to what I'm physically grateful for. I am so glad that I can move my hands—they don't do what Sara can do on the piano, but I can move, and if my writing is illegible now, I can type! I love the way I can walk out on a freezing day and the air hits my cheek and makes me feel awake. I'm so grateful that I can sip chocolate disguised as coffee. It's a great thing. I'm grateful that even though I can't play basketball anymore, I can walk. I'm grateful for this body.

Then I turned to my relationships. I went to a Starbucks that overlooks a lake, and I started to be grateful. A friend walked in and I'm grateful for that friend who waved and went and sat somewhere else. Hey, I'm grateful because I had emails this week from a small group of guys who are wrenching their lives to get into a Bible study with me that we can do even though we all travel so much. I'm so grateful for a marriage that's done

more than just endure, but . . . in one of the few things Jack Nicholson said that makes sense, “My marriage makes me want to be a better man.” I’m grateful for that. I’m grateful frankly that I have a son-in-law who loves me enough to send me a note saying, “Wish you were here” and then goes out and plays Pebble Beach without me. Maybe that didn’t go the right way. Gratitude. It’s all about gratitude. I am so grateful for this little guy named Michael that I met in Uganda when he was 10 or 11-years-old who walked miles to come and say, “I want to be a doctor”. I have known him for almost 10 years and he’s about to graduate from medical school and stay in Uganda to help. I’m so grateful to God for that.

You know what? When I’m being grateful I am content. I’m not comparing, I’m content. I pray for you that this week if you want the secret to contentment, be grateful. If you want the secret of contentment, do not believe that life is fair. In the view of the Bible, life is not fair. The question is, can you trust God in an unfair world? If you are a contented person, you will be buying less than everybody else has to buy. If you are a contented, Godly person, you will be giving away more than other people are. If you are a contented Godly person, you will be out serving other people while they’re out having fun. The reality is, for the time being in an unfair world, contentment will feel like a losing proposition to the followers of Jesus. The pursuit of the satisfied life always comes at a cost. Around you are real people buying real things. Some of these are your neighbors, and associates, and schoolmates, and I hate to break this to you, but your sisters and your brothers-in-law too. Don’t compare; be grateful.

Let me close this with a pastoral word. You see this bowl here? I’ve got stuff in my bowl that I’m grateful for, but I know that coming in here there are some of you that say *I believe that, but that’s not my life. You know what my bowl looks like? It’s broken. I want to be grateful, but my bowl is empty. The cancer has come back. I’m still unemployed. I feel desperately unloved.* Whatever it is that is cracking your empty bowl—we can’t get pregnant or the kids are gone—I want to ask you . . . *is it possible that God is still there?* Is it possible that the presence of God may actually be more real for you when things are tough than when you’re on top of the mountain? I want to say to you, in humility because we’re not comparing bowls, one of the reasons we come to church is so other people can hold us up when we’re down. I want to tell you that if your bowl is cracked today, He will never leave you or forsake you. His presence may be even dearer. Contentment for you is keeping your eyes on the bowl that God has offered you this day and seeing what you should be grateful for. And peace will come.

Lord Jesus, I thank You for this weird story. It seems so unfair that the people who work ten hours get the same as the ones who work one, but what You are saying is that we can trust You, and that we lose that sense of contentment when we stop trusting that You love us as much as You love them. That those people who had to only work one hour got just as much as we did, but they had to wait all day thinking they were not going to have anything for their kids. Dear God, I pray that You will give my sisters and brothers and I here contentedness of the heart. That You will cultivate in us a satisfied heart, and that whether we are in

the penthouse or the prison, You will give us peace. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

Benedictus is the Good Word. Let me give you a blessing: There is a God who loves you just as you are, different from anyone else, and there is a Savior who will give you grace when you screw up and love you just as you are. As you leave here there will go with you the spirit of God who will guard your hearts and give you peace. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, go in peace.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.