

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

You're only as rich as you are content

Presented by Bob Smith

When I was a young man starting to think about how I might grow rich there was a commonly held standard that said you could call yourself wealthy when you owned three houses. Now this was long before the real estate booms of the past twenty years, but it provided me with a benchmark.

Then I heard the Duke of Edinburgh complaining that if the British Parliament didn't provide the Royal Family with more tax free income they might have to move into smaller premises. It made me wonder which of their other palaces they would choose and whether they would really feel poor and hard done by as a result.

It taught me that how we judge wealth varies with how much we have. John D Rockefeller, once the World's richest man, summed it up when asked how much one needed to be content; "*Just a little bit more.*" Whereas the Apostle Paul said, "*I have learned to be content whatever I have.*" So, was the discontented billionaire the one who was rich, or the other way round?

We used to judge the value of our currency, and therefore our wealth, by what was called the 'Gold Standard' – how much gold you could purchase with what you had. Nowadays we judge it by that basket of foreign currencies you see reported on the Evening News – how many US dollars, Euros, British pounds or Japanese yen it will buy.

But I believe that in real life terms – I mean quality of life terms – there is only one standard of wealth; and that is contentment. You are only as rich as you are content. What other purpose is there for the pursuit of wealth?

There's a saying that 'money is life's report card.' It means our success in life is in due proportion to how much money we earn, accrue and spend. Yet the universal experience of those who adopt this philosophy is identical with that of John D Rockefeller; how much do you need? "Just a little bit more."

But over against that stand the words of the Bible, "*Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you."*" It's not money that the Bible warns against; it's the love of money. It's that mentality that makes it life's report card. Because that mentality becomes an obsession that leads to the very opposite of what we are looking for. It does not lead to contentment; it actually drives us further and further from contentment; just as drinking saltwater doesn't quench our thirst, but actually increases it.

G.K.Chesterton, one of the greatest writers of the 20th Century, got to the heart of the matter when he said that '*contentment is not in having more, but in wanting less.*' That doesn't make sense to most people. It makes no sense because we have been brainwashed by those thousands of advertisements that bombard us every day, whose one purpose is to increase our dissatisfaction. And so we vainly search for that illusive

happiness in another round of retail therapy, often made possible by digging our way deeper into debt; or else we retreat into resentment because we haven't the money to buy our way to contentment.

Meanwhile the Spirit of God keeps telling us that real wealth is "*Godliness with contentment.*" "*Godliness with contentment is great gain,*" the Bible says. It's not how much money you've got that makes you rich; it's how content you are with what you've got. The secret of contentment is not in having more, it's in wanting less. That's what the Apostle Paul meant when he said, "*I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.*" That's why he was a rich man and most of us aren't.

The ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, used to teach that virtue was the mid point between two extremes. So, for example, there is recklessness on one extreme and cowardice on the other; but courage is the mid point. It is neither being fearless, like a reckless person who hasn't the sense to be afraid; nor is it to be paralysed by fear. Courageous people face their fear and do what has to be done. The important thing is to keep things in balance.

Contentment is very much a matter of keeping things in balance. The Old Testament Book of Proverbs says; "*Give me neither poverty nor riches...*" In other words, '*Give me just as much as I need*'. That's where contentment is found; in realizing how much is enough. Anything more is superfluous; great if you receive it, but your happiness doesn't depend on it. Anything less is a cause for anxiety. But knowing how much is enough is contentment.

I don't see any blessing in poverty. But neither is there any virtue in the compulsion to keep on acquiring more and more things beyond our capacity to use, let alone enjoy them. The deep spiritual malaise of Western society is that it has lost the concept of enough. We are wedded to a mentality that keeps us thirsting for more and more while appreciating things less and less.

I watch my grandchildren, sitting before the Christmas tree with their pile of presents, tearing the paper off one gift, giving it a cursory glance before putting it aside and diving into the pile for the next, then doing the same again. It made me reflect a little sadly on my own childhood in the rather austere days following World War 2, and the absolute joy I used to find in those three or four little gifts that would be mine, and how I would treasure them. My sadness is not for what I didn't have as a child in comparison to them, but for the appreciation they don't seem to have in comparison to me.

Preserving a sense of balance is part of the process of contentment. It's not how much you have that makes you rich, it's how much you appreciate what you have. The problem with increasing levels of acquisition is complexity. We think we want complexity but in reality we become overwhelmed by it. What our souls long for is simplicity.

Richard Foster wrote a book called '*The Freedom of Simplicity*'. The title appealed to me because the thing I have always desired most is freedom. And he rightly pointed out that ever increasing levels of accumulation do not make us feel more free, but actually enslave us. Whereas, it is in simplifying our lives that we actually find freedom, and contentment.

You are only as rich as you are content. Your life is only as free as it is uncluttered. That is one of the forgotten principles of life. But recapturing the freedom of simplicity and the riches of contentment is not easy. It requires a re-education process that goes against the brainwashing of consumerism. Even the Apostle Paul, in his great statement about contentment, tells us he had to learn it; "*I have learned to be content.*" He said. Let me suggest a couple of ways we can re-educate ourselves.

The first is to identify the things that really do bring contentment. Obviously these begin with our basic material needs. The Bible says; *“Having food and clothing Let us therewith be content.”* Well those of us who have been accustomed to a different standard of living than the people of his day would certainly want more than just food and clothing, but the principle is the same; we need an adequate standard of those things which we acknowledge to be the basic essentials of life.

But then we need to identify the things that truly make life worth living, and these are neither complex nor expensive. They include relationships in which we are loved and love in return, meaningful work and activity to fill our days, recreational activities that do re-create us, and a faith in God, however we may understand it, that gives us a sense of connectedness to the cosmos and assures us that we are creatures of Eternity. That’s the first thing: identifying what really counts.

The second thing is to cultivate the habit of awareness and gratitude. I believe that in Oliver Cromwell’s era it became the custom to inscribe on the walls of English churches the words *“Think and Thank.”* It was an encouragement to people to be aware of how much they do have and to deliberately give thanks.

Schopenhauer said ‘we rarely think about the 95% we have, but always about the 5% we lack’. And I have to admit that the times in my life when I have found the greatest feelings of contentment have been those times when I have disciplined myself to think and thank; or as the old hymn put it, ‘to count my blessings and name them one by one’.

The third thing is to cultivate the habit of simplicity, and that is much easier to do when you have identified those things that really do make life worth living. It is easy then to desire simplicity because you are so conscious of the way that complexity takes you away from what brings joy. I don’t mean becoming a dour, sour-faced ascetic. I mean developing our own understanding of what is important and when enough is enough, so that we can, on the one hand, avoid the misery of keeping up with the Jones’s, and, on the other, still have the time and energy to enjoy what you do have.

There’s an old Yiddish tale about a wealthy man who asked a wise rabbi to explain how we could be expected to give God thanks for our troubles." The rabbi knew he could never explain this with mere words so he sent him to Isaac the water-carrier, a poor man who had worked in that backbreaking job for fifty years. So the rich man asked Isaac the question and, after thinking carefully, Isaac said: *"I know that the rabbi is the wisest of men, but I can't understand why he would send you to me with that question. I can't answer it because I've never had those troubles. God has been so good to me."*

The truth is that life is not in what we see, but in how we see it. Wealth is not in how much you have, but in how much you appreciate what you have. And contentment is not in having more, but in wanting less.

Lord, help us to open our eyes and our minds that we might see and understand how great your goodness and loving kindness is to us, and in thinking on these things to find that contentment that comes through true appreciation. Amen.