



An Ingrate's Guide to Contentment:

Five Practices for a More Content Life—
No Matter Who You Are

by Dion Garrett

I am the last person on earth who should be writing on this subject. In fact, while I might be asked for advice on a few things, how to be content wouldn't be one of them. Every time I mention to people I'm writing on the subject of contentment, they laugh—out loud.

I don't blame them for it. Inside I'm laughing at how absurd this is too. You see, self-awareness *is* one of my strengths, and I've known something about myself for a very long time: I'm an ingrate.

Case in point: I am the husband to a beautiful wife, and together we have three healthy, talented, good-looking, and good-hearted kids. We live in a community often touted as one of the best places to live in America (though I'm highly suspect about such lists). We live in a great house that has more than enough space for our family of five. My kids are able to play out in the cul-de-sac in front of our house, ride their bikes up and down the street, and just be kids, without any real concern for their safety. We have two great cars, a luxury many wealthy families didn't have three decades ago. We get to take vacations I never dreamed of doing as a kid. Our kids have the opportunity to participate in so many activities that it boggles my mind. We have enough expendable income to eat out, something that was a rarity in my childhood home and still is for most people in the world. In short, we have a wonderful life!

When I pause and think about these things, I'm embarrassed at how great my life is. I'm overwhelmed by my blessings, **but I'm still not content.** No, I'm far from it. For whatever reason, it doesn't translate. Perhaps you can identify. If you can't, then maybe you're reading the wrong booklet or, as might be the case, you're not being honest with yourself. As our collective affluence has increased over the last several decades in the developed world, our level of contentment hasn't! Some would even say the two (affluence and contentment) have had an inverse relationship. I'm no social scientist, although I do play one in the pulpit on occasion, but here's what I know. Despite our affluence, we have a serious contentment problem.

Now maybe you're someone who is reading this and you just don't identify. Maybe your kids aren't healthy, or maybe you don't have kids at all. Maybe you're all alone in life. Maybe you're not feeling particularly affluent. Maybe you've got no house, no car, and no extra money at the end of the month. Perhaps your circumstances are vastly different than mine but, perhaps even there, you still want to find greater contentment in your life. If that's you, then maybe you can relate to the words of a guy named Paul who lived 2,000 years ago:

"... For I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (Philippians 4:11b-12).

Ever since I first read those words of Scripture years ago, they have haunted me: *I have learned the secret of being content in ANY AND EVERY SITUATION.* Seriously? How is that possible? Because, you know, up to this point, I've only known plenty (not want) and have been well-fed (not hungry) and I *still* can't seem to be content!

So Paul, can you help a guy out? **What's your secret?**

That's what this booklet is all about: finding the secret to contentment in "any and every situation." As I've said, I'm no guru on this subject. I have not yet internalized Paul's secret. But because I'm tired of being an ingrate, I have pursued and researched and prayed about this topic with great intensity, and I'd love to share with you what I've discovered so far.

The Five Practices

Although I'm still far from being a person anyone would call "content," I have discovered five practices that have moved me closer to that goal. Sometimes it's scientific research that has enlightened the next step for me; at other times it's the wisdom of God found in the Christian Scriptures. The five practices I follow combine both. Short of offering a money-back guarantee, I can tell you this: I am convinced these practices can take anyone closer to contentment, even an ingrate like me.

1. Getting Right with Ambition

The first thing we have to do is get right in our minds what contentment is and what it isn't. Contentment is not apathy. It's not a lack of drive to achieve or succeed in life. For years I mistook them as all being the same, which is part of the reason why contentment was so elusive for me. Fortunately, I've discovered they're not.

If you don't believe me, just look at Paul, the guy from the Bible I referenced earlier, who said he discovered the secret of being content. Paul was about as driven as a man could be.

He started off as a young phenom in the Jewish faith. He was an overachiever from the onset. He excelled beyond all of his peers in learning the laws, customs and Scriptures of Judaism. You can imagine older Hebrew men and women, the kind who liked to lament about "these kids today," pausing in the middle of their tirade and saying, "but you know we've still got guys like Paul!" (Actually, in those days his name was Saul, but that's another story). Paul was the pride of his people. He was faithful, disciplined, hard-working and *very* ambitious—*exceedingly ambitious*. When a "heretical" sect arose in Judaism claiming Jesus of Nazareth as the long-awaited Christ, Paul volunteered to single-handedly stomp them out.

If you know how the rest of the story goes, Paul went after early Christians, with a vengeance. He arrests some, has others beaten, even has some killed. But then one day while travelling to a neighboring city to carry out an attack on Christians, Jesus appears to Paul, strikes him with (temporary) blindness, and tells him he's been in the wrong. Surprisingly, Paul responds. Everyone is shocked. Christians are leery; they think it's a trick. Jews are beside themselves, at the thought of losing their great champion, and Paul, by the grace of God, is changed.

Now based on what many of us think about Christians and Christianity, you would imagine after his conversion that Paul suddenly became a very nice, polite man: no longer driven, no longer ambitious. But the reality is, even after coming to faith in Jesus, Paul *kept* his edge. He watched as leaders of the church were huddled in Jerusalem, sharing the message of Jesus' life, death and resurrection exclusively with other Jews, and he started to go nuts! Shouldn't *everybody* know the Son of God came to earth, was killed by wicked men, and then came back to life? Paul was so dissatisfied with the state of things that he went to the leaders of the early Christian movement and asked for permission to take the message of Jesus out—way beyond Jerusalem and the regions of Palestine—to people who were far from being Jewish and far from God. He had an *ambition*; Paul was *driven*.

If you study Paul, you'll see that this guy who had learned "the secret of being content" was anything but content when it came to the state of the world as it was. He looked at the number of people living their lives apart from the grace of God, and it made him crazy. It consumed him. He was so bothered by it that he kept sharing Jesus with people, even after being beaten and imprisoned. He preached Jesus Christ—*crucified* and *risen*—even though it led to his untimely death.

After looking at Paul's example, it seems that you can both be dissatisfied with life and still be "content in any and every situation." But how is that possible?

For the record, Jesus wasn't content either. He too was dissatisfied with the world as it was. When He looked around at the situation that we, with the help of our sinful nature, created, He was anything but content. The very reason Jesus came into the world and willingly gave up His life was because He had a dream of something greater for us.

For me this nuanced understanding about ambition, dissatisfaction and contentment was a huge paradigm shift. I hope it is for you too. If you're not sure about my distinction, let me point you to Scripture. It speaks in a similar way. In the same letter where Paul told us about "the secret" of being content, he gave this advice.

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves" (Philippians 2:3).

There's nothing wrong with ambition. Ambition is what changes the world. Jesus and Paul were both ambitious. What's dangerous is *selfish* ambition. To be content does not mean to lay down all ambition, all dreams, and all hopes for a better life and world! But how can that be? Again, how can discontentment and contentment exist at the same time?

The answer lies in the fact that there are different *kinds* of dissatisfaction. I call them simply *constructive* and *destructive dissatisfaction*.

Constructive dissatisfaction is the kind of discontentment that sees a world that's far from God's ideal and is not okay with it. It's seeing kids who are starving in a world that produces plenty of food and deciding to take action. It's not being okay with a world where people are trafficked to satisfy our appetite for cheap consumer goods, and changing our buying patterns. Constructive dissatisfaction is looking at a marriage that is characterized by disdain, neglect and apathy and saying, "Enough! Let's make this better!" It's what drives a person who is tired of the toll that addiction is taking on his life to reach out and get help. It's what encourages an overweight person to take control of her health so that she can avoid the effects of crippling disease. This kind of dissatisfaction is *constructive* because it drives us to action; it moves us closer to God's design for our lives and for the world.

But dissatisfaction (discontentment) can also be destructive. This is where many of us live. We are dissatisfied with what we own, so we get ourselves into debt to have more. We are dissatisfied with how we look, so we obsess, we abuse ourselves, or we surrender to self-hatred. We are dissatisfied with our relationships, so we fantasize about greener grass in another pasture. This type of discontentment is ultimately destructive because it either (1) drives us to inaction and despair or (2) drives us to action that is hurtful to ourselves and others.

Got that? *Constructive* dissatisfaction drives us toward action that moves us closer to God's design for life; *destructive* dissatisfaction moves us away from it.

I know too many people who are chronically discontent with all the little things in life that don't really matter much but, ironically, they have made peace with the things that are killing them.

It's my conviction Paul learned how to lean into constructive dissatisfaction while steering clear of destructive dissatisfaction. I think by rightly distinguishing between the two, we can begin to do the same. So don't slay your ambition. Apathy isn't God's plan for your life. Stay ambitious, driven and *dissatisfied*, but steer it toward the right things.

2. Dumping Materialism

When we talk about contentment, most of us immediately think about our stuff: what we have or don't have. But we all know this isn't an objective assessment. What ultimately makes or breaks our sense of contentment isn't what we have; it's what we have *compared to others*.

The easy advice is this: stop comparing yourself to others. Stop being envious and stop coveting what you don't have! But we all know that's easier said than done. The reason contentment with our possessions is so difficult is because we're working against a philosophy of life that's so deeply ingrained in our culture we can't even see it for what it is.

In the ancient world there were many competing life philosophies. While their approaches were distinct, what united them was they all promised to lead people to their best, most fulfilled, lives. For instance, hedonism was the belief the pursuit of pleasurable experiences would bring you fullness. Asceticism, on the other hand, maintained the denial of pleasure would ultimately bring you fullness. These are just two of the dozens of competing philosophies prevalent in the ancient world that people bought in to with the hope of finding fullness.

In the modern world these philosophies still exist but, for the most part, we've latched on to materialism as a life philosophy (aka consumerism). Seeking happiness in things is materialism; consumerism is searching for happiness in the act of consumption. We

are barraged by prompts to *buy* from all sides and in every way imaginable, but as we look around the world we also confirm our bias internally by what we *think* we see. People driving the nicest cars seem to be sporting the biggest smiles, right? Surely, all the folks who live in *that* neighborhood are more satisfied with life than me. Forget the fact that someone is right now looking at *your* life with envy, imagining how happy *you* must be. Daily the idea that things will make us happy is reinforced in so many ways.

Even those of us who are Christians believe this is true, in spite of clear instruction from God that it's not. We hear Jesus say, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15b). But mostly we don't believe Him. I mean, we kind of believe Him because He's Jesus, and we feel obligated, but not really.

We may even know what Jesus said to a rich young man who came up asking how to get treasure in heaven:

"One thing you lack: go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me" (Mark 10:21b). And then we spiritualize the meaning because we cannot believe someone's possessions could be part of what's keeping them from finding a greater kind of fullness in this life and the next. (There's more on this in the third practice.)

There's no question, part of the chronic, gnawing feeling of discontentment we experience day after day is because we keep looking to possessions to make us happy, and they won't—*ever*.

This isn't just attested in the Bible. Research is uncovering the truth of God's ancient words. Check out *The Easterlin Paradox*, and you'll see what I mean. The gist of this investigation is that economists have noticed as nations develop and people get richer, they tended to get happier—but only to a certain point. The paradox initially explained why people in the U.S. weren't getting happier in the 1970s despite rising incomes. Read too the work of Dr. Thomas Gilovich, a psychology professor at Cornell University. He has been working for two decades on the connection between money and happiness. I won't review all the scholarly work done on this subject here, but the bottom line is this ... *now are you ready?*

Things don't make you happy after all.

Impossible! Okay, granted, they do to a point. When you don't have a roof over your head, or don't know where your next meal is coming from, it's difficult to be happy. But once you get your basic needs covered, more stuff doesn't add to your happiness.

It's my conviction this is the reason that over the last 40 years of rising incomes, bigger homes, and fancier cars, we're no happier. In fact, I think this explains why so many of us are frustrated and disillusioned. When you spend your life trying to reach the summit of a very tall mountain and then discover at the top the view isn't all that great, it's bound to bum you out. Understand, this is the cycle of madness we are living in as it relates to our possessions. We start off believing things will make us happy, so we get things, but we aren't any happier. As a result, we either get depressed, or we think the answer is a few *more* things. Before very long, we're spiraling downward into debt and disillusionment. But meanwhile, God has spoken, and the research backs it up: **an abundance of possessions is not the way to be happy, but experiences are.**

Experiences? Yes! Dr. Gilovich explains why this is true. When we buy things, we quickly adapt to them. They become a part of our existence, but they don't fundamentally add to our existence. Instead, as we adapt to them they become usual and expected. Experiences, on the other hand, become a part of us. They have a lasting effect. Gilovich has demonstrated the value of an experience goes up over time, while the value of things always goes down. Even negative experiences have value over time. Awful memories can become the anecdotes we laugh at with friends. Gilovich and others have found that the time leading up to an experience is filled with eager anticipation; it's fun to look forward to vacation. But when you're anticipating a purchase (or waiting for some company to deliver it), you're often anxious, not eager.

And here's where this really hits home for ingrates like me. Gilovich found that **you're far less likely to get caught up in comparing yourself to "the Joneses" when you're measuring your life in experiences, not things.** It's easy to quantify things. A bigger diamond ring is better than a small one. A \$50,000 car is better than a \$15,000 one. But experiences are unique, individual. When we get back from a family camping trip, we're less likely to feel threatened by stories of someone else's luxury resort vacation because we know that our experiences are personal and intrinsically valuable to us. Even if our tent got flooded, our food got eaten by critters, and we fell into a patch of poison ivy, the experience adds meaning and value to our lives. It bonds us to those we experienced it with. It makes our life fuller. It may still bother us that others have more resources to spend on their experiences, but it doesn't create near the dissatisfaction that comparing possessions does.

Jesus said it, and research is backing it up. Things don't make you happy. And you know it's true too. When you think about the richest parts of your life, they seldom revolve around a purchase, a promotion, or an acquisition. The things that top your list are meaningful and deeply personal experiences. So, if you want to move toward contentment, start living as if that's true. Stop measuring your life in terms of possessions. It's empty and useless. Instead, use whatever resources you do have to create rich experiences. They'll add greater value and depth to your life.

3. Leveraging Generosity

As a pastor I believe there are practices that are totally life-changing: the power of a married couple worshipping together, the value of serving/volunteering, and the importance of giving your children a foundation in faith. But whenever I encourage people to do those things, I know my motives are suspect in some ways. After all, I'm a *pastor*. I *want* people to come to church; it adds to my job security. I understand that to some it may seem guys like me have a conflict of interest, but if you can just get past that, you can have your life changed by this next practice.

The next practice is generosity. Jesus said, "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Luke 6:38).

He's pointing out an important truth about giving—that by giving, we *get*.

Now there are some who would teach that this is a surefire strategy to get rich—give to God and He'll give you more back. I think that interpretation is based on the faulty idea that money and things will make us happy, and it misses the fullness of what Jesus is actually promising. Jesus *is* promising that when we give, we'll *get* more than we can imagine, in return. But that doesn't mean we'll get *rich*. The kind of abundance we get is much fuller, much more complete than what we give.

Again, we can seek out research (just think how much further along we'd be if we just listened to Jesus, in the first place). Michael Norton is a professor of business administration at Harvard Business School. If you haven't already, you should watch his TED Talk episode. It's online. In it he says money can indeed make you happy, *if* you spend it right, namely, if you *give it away*.

In his TED Talk, Norton describes an experiment he and his associates did. They walked up to random people and asked them how happy they were that day. The people rated their own happiness, and the researchers recorded it. After that the subjects received an envelope with money in it—an amount between \$5 and \$20—along with a set of instructions. In the instructions some subjects were instructed to spend the money on themselves; others were instructed to spend it on others.

Later that night the subjects got a call back from the researchers, asking them if they followed the instructions. They were then asked to again rate their level of happiness. Here's what this rudimentary experiment demonstrated: the people instructed to spend the money on others felt happier. Those who were instructed to spend money on themselves experienced no real change in happiness.

Norton describes other empirical research that shows a link between giving and happiness, which perhaps is what Jesus was getting at in His promise in Luke 6. When we give, we get, but we get something more valuable than simply more money. We get happiness, satisfaction, perhaps even a greater feeling of contentment.

According to recent statistics, on average, Americans give around two to three percent of their income away. While this isn't a huge number, the good news is that it has been increasing slightly over the last several years. It could be people are starting to discover that when you give away your money, you get something more valuable than what you get by keeping it. You get happiness.

There is a sure causation between generosity and contentment. Can you think of a better way to combat your desire for *more* than to say you're intentionally going to live on *less*? Every parent knows that if you take 90 percent of the toys out of the kids' playroom, the remaining 10 percent will get more attention than the sum of all of them combined. Maybe the minimalists are right: less is more.

Our tendency is to believe we can't afford to be generous because we're too busy amassing more stuff. The reality is when we start releasing our financial resources, we can be a lot happier, even if that means keeping the old car longer and staying in a smaller house. When we give there is a kind of overflowing abundance that Jesus pours right into our laps that we simply cannot buy for ourselves.

4. Discovering the Genius of Gratitude

Let's be honest, things are valuable. Even though experiences may be more important for our happiness, we still need things. Some have gone so far in their pursuit of contentment they have decided to sell everything, to live free from the need for any physical thing, until one day they steal a shopping cart because they still need a place to keep their stuff.

God doesn't oppose our need or desire for physical things. In addition to our spirits, He gave us bodies that are also gifts from Him. We've also been entrusted with the entire created order around us of beautiful, physical, things. Things do add to our lives and can even add to our happiness.

Not too long ago, I was at a breaking point with my own ingratitude and was ready to make a change. It was right around the time we were planning a message series at my church called, "The Genius of Gratitude." The series was a look at how the discipline of gratitude is pure genius. I was a bit suspicious to think that gratitude was actually *genius*, but as one of the pastors I felt obliged to play along. So I did.

Did you know the Bible mentions the act of "giving thanks" almost 70 times? I didn't. Did you know that expressing thanks is the antidote to fear and anxiety? I didn't. Did you know that taking time to intentionally express your thanks to God for the stuff of life—whether in prayer, writing it out, or expressing it to a friend—will completely change your attitude? I didn't, until I actually tried it.

I started journaling five things a day I was grateful for, for an entire month, with no repeats. It was easy at first. But as time went on it got harder, I had to dig deeper. I had to notice things I wouldn't have considered otherwise. I went from expressing thanks for all the obvious things—my marriage, my health, my children, Jesus—to having to admit I was thankful for my iPhone and my Bluetooth speaker. At first it felt a little awkward to admit I'm actually *thankful* for that stuff, but once I started owning it, good things began happening.

What I discovered is the *practice* of gratitude is powerful. It gives you a profound appreciation for what God has given you, even the little things you usually neglect. It's also humbling. When you express gratitude for what you have, it opens your eyes to the dozens of things that are in your life only because God favors you. Finally, what I discovered is that when I don't *feel* thankful for my life, when I'm giving in to envy, comparison, and a desire for more stuff—if I stop and make myself express gratitude—it begins to take away the power of discontentment in my life and replaces it with a deep and sincere sense of contentment.

In the same research I mentioned earlier from individuals like Gilovich, it was discovered that the only thing able to prolong people's satisfaction with their *stuff* was an intentional practice of gratitude for those things. Go figure. No wonder God told us to do it nearly 70 times in the Bible.

5. Finding Satisfaction in God

We've finally arrived at the final practice. This is the most "churchy" and pious sounding of them all, but I'd be of no service to you if I didn't mention it because it is also the most transforming.

If you want to find true contentment in life, it starts with digging deep into what God offers us for free, the things we need most.

I think many people know about God, the Bible, and the doctrines of the Christian faith. They believe in Jesus as their Savior and have been baptized in His Name. And while that's enough to get you into heaven someday, it doesn't scratch the surface on what Paul described, as he reflected on what God brought into his life.

"But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of His resurrection and participation in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:7-11).

There's a lot here, but what I'd like to point out is this: for Paul, what he found in Christ was so full and rich and valuable he said it made all kinds of other things he really valued seem like trash. Before this he talked about his pedigree, titles, accomplishments—

all things he greatly valued at one time but that had now lost their luster. Maybe the way we take power away from things that consume us is by letting Jesus show us the incredible value of knowing Him. Because for Paul the deeper he went with Jesus, the less all those other things mattered, until they didn't matter at all.

The things we need most in life, things like belonging, love, security, purpose, forgiveness and certainty come freely from God, as we delve into a relationship with Jesus. There's no price tag on these things. And they're not only for a select group of people; they're available to all of us. In a market economy, we assume the rare and exclusive are worth more than the free and inclusive. As a result, we overlook what Jesus offers us, even though He offers the most satisfying things in the world.

This was the essence of Paul's great secret. I believe the other four practices will help you immensely but, like Paul, you won't find true contentment outside of Jesus. Again, look at what Paul said:

"... For I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. **I can do all this through Him who gives me strength**" (Philippians 4:11b-13).

For Paul, it was Jesus who gave him not only strength, but all the other things in life that we desire most.

This is the x factor of contentment: the secret sauce. The first four practices can get you moving toward contentment, but this is where the true power to be content comes from. And here's an unsettling, yet liberating, thought: what if our lack of contentment is due to us trying to buy, achieve and advance our way into something that God offers us for free?

Start Your Journey!

So there you have it, five practices to get you started toward contentment. Even if you're an ingrate like me, you can begin your journey. The beauty of this guide is you can begin with any of these practices and you should see the needle begin to move. Start with the practice most attainable to you and once you've integrated it, move on to another. Don't get paralyzed by the order I've presented or trying to do each one perfectly; just do something! The pursuit of contentment is a worthy one. God wants you to know fullness; Jesus came to take away your sins and make you whole. It's His desire for you.

But whatever you do in your journey ahead, don't forget that for Paul the secret was Jesus. If you're not taking hold of the things that God offers you freely through His Son then contentment will always elude you. If you're not sure what it means to take hold of what God offers, talk to a Christian friend or find a pastor who can help you take some solid next steps. It's too important to your wellbeing for you to let it remain a mystery.

I'm sure there are other practices I've yet to discover that will move you toward contentment. Go ahead and try them. I, like you, am on a journey with this and don't have it all figured out. But here's one thing I *do* know, I too have discovered that—

"Whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of His resurrection and participation in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:7-11).

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