



I Want Happiness Now!

By Dr. Henry Brandt with Phil Landrum

LESSON 3: WANT CONTENTMENT? MAKE A COMMITMENT!

EVERYONE SEEKS CONTENTMENT

Almost everyone who comes to my consulting room has been in pursuit of the advantages of life, but something or someone went wrong.

Their contentment and sense of self-worth or self-respect has been shattered. If self-respect and self-worth is intact, then the loss of contentment is attributed to the behavior of the offending person or to the circumstances that have shifted to one's disadvantage.

PLAYING THE ADVANTAGES-DISADVANTAGES GAME?

Let me list some of the advantages we may be chasing and some of the disadvantages we are trying to eliminate.

Advantages and Disadvantages	
education	lack of education
wealth	poverty
authority	no authority
high position	low position
beauty	plain
popularity	unpopularity
health	sickness
marriage	singleness
singleness	marriage
retirement plan	no retirement plan

My clients tell me that advantages (or overcoming the disadvantages) do not lead to contentment, joy, peace, or a sense of self-worth and self-respect.

We watch the lives of the famous and the popular end in misery. The same goes for the healthy, the educated, the rich, and the powerful.

It's a frustrating world. Mechanical failures, impolite and careless people, social errors, noisy children, misunderstandings, and poor planning seem to make us angry—in spite of advantages.

Some years ago, a nationally respected head of the family relations department of a university put a bullet through his head. He was educated but miserable.

SEPARATE CARS

One couple came to consult with me in separate cars because they couldn't stand to be in the same car together. One car was a Cadillac, the other a Mercedes.

They lived in a professionally decorated, color-coordinated house. They had unlimited wealth but couldn't purchase friendship.

Another client had responsibility for several thousand employees. He had plenty of power but he couldn't command tension and bitterness to leave his body.

THE GAME PRODUCES LOSERS

By now you get my point. Surely, anyone would prefer to be educated, wealthy, powerful, and contented rather than uneducated, poor, powerless, and contented.

Nothing against advantages, you understand. But it is clear that advantages are just that—advantages. They, in themselves, do not produce contentment, joy, peace, a sense of self-worth or self-respect. If you play the advantages-disadvantages game, you'll always come up a loser.

That's quite a statement. If advantages don't produce these inner qualities, what does?

How can you be a Christian *and* be contented? How can you be famous *and* happy? Rich *and* at peace with yourself? Single *and* content? Married *and* happy? Poor *and* still enthusiastic about life? No beauty queen, *yet* with a good self-image?

There is an answer.

The next few pages may be a bit heavy reading, but they will launch us into finding the key to contentment. Jesus gives us the key in a reply to a question put to Him by a lawyer who asked:

Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law? And He said to him: "You

shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:36-39).

THREE STEPS TO CONTENTMENT

This is a surprise answer to me. The key to contentment, then, boils down to this:

1. Love God
2. Love your neighbor
3. Love yourself

In modern language, Jesus is saying that a good self-image is based on self-respect, on loving your neighbor, and on loving God.

In presenting this idea to my clients, it leaves them cold and unresponsive at first glance. Doesn't contentment involve making enough money, getting an education, popularity, being understood, an understanding and decent marriage partner, obedient children, appreciative friends?

Your answer depends on whether you decide if Jesus knows what He is talking about. As for me, if Jesus said it, there is no need for a survey or a research project to verify His statements.

Like my clients, your answer will not be changed by a further statement on my part that I have seen thousands of changed lives verifying Christ's statements.

The only way for you to evaluate His advice is to take a step of faith and prove it to yourself. Take Him at His Word and launch out on your own quest to prove the truth of what He says. If you do, then commit a year, or two—or better yet, five years—to finding out.

STEP 1: LOVING GOD

Assuming that you choose to take a step of faith, to make a commitment, come what may, let us proceed to step 1. Jesus said:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind (Matthew 22:37).

What does this mean? You commit yourself to falling in love with Jesus. You give your quest all you've got.

HOW TO LOVE GOD

How do you know if you love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind? One of Jesus' disciples asked Him that question. Jesus' answer:

He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me... (John 14:21).

To know His commandments is no easy process. They are contained in a big, thick book called the Bible. To become familiar with His commandments means long hours of study and application. To dig into that book is not a very exciting prospect at first glance. Is it worth it? Why should you take Jesus and His commandments seriously? Let Him speak for Himself. He said to His disciples:

These things have I spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace... (John 16:33)

...that your joy may be full (John 15:11)

...that you may be kept from stumbling (Jude 24).

Israel's King David, one of the wisest men who ever lived, offers this advice:

How blessed is the man who(se)...delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night (Psalm 1:1-2).

These are beautiful promises.

A STEP OF FAITH

Surely some of my readers have taken a stab at reading the Bible, only to find it to be a dead, dull, meaningless, debatable book.

Many steps that we take are debatable and uncertain. I am writing this in an airplane somewhere over Colorado. Whether or not we arrive in Chicago is debatable. Will I arrive at my motel without a car accident, assuming we land safely? It's debatable. Is my bank safe? It's debatable. Is my investment safe? It's debatable.

Any of these things can be debated. Any of them can be doubted.

I don't move on the basis of my doubts. I move on the basis of my faith. I'll soon know if my faith in this airplane was well-founded. (It was.)

You may begin your quest for awakening a love for God and His commandments with

many doubts. Accept them and take a step of faith. You will soon discover whether your doubts are well founded or ill founded. Let me assure you that your step of faith will be rewarded. But you must begin by even putting faith in God's statement.

CAUTION

There is a preliminary step that you must take if God's commandments are to live for you:

But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised (1 Corinthians 2:14).

He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God (John 8:47).

What does that mean? It's like saying that calculus is meaningless to the reader unless he has a mathematical background.

Likewise, the Bible is dead to you unless you have the Spirit of God within you. It is said of Jesus:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me (Revelation 3:20).

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name (John 1:12).

Granted, these statements are debatable and subject to doubt. As an act of faith, open the door and He will come in and empower you to become a child of God.

Then, and only then, will you discover the truth of the words of Jesus when He said:

He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me... and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him (John 14:21).

Then His commandments will come alive and you will discover whether it is indeed true that they will lead you to peace, joy, stability, and blessing.

STEP 2: LOVING YOUR NEIGHBOR

Jesus said:

A second is like [the first commandment], "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39).

Now, that's a strange statement. How is keeping His commandments the same as loving people? I don't understand it. Neither do I understand how water can be snow, ice, and steam. Or how electricity can heat, refrigerate, and produce light. I don't need to understand it, just to use it. Jesus said:

This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friend (John 15:12-13).

The apostle Paul said:

For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Galatians 5:14).

It doesn't take much reflection to realize that loving beats hating. Both of them happen underneath your skin. We are all familiar with the misery of being filled with hatred.

If Jesus commands us to love and Paul says it fulfills all the commandments, shouldn't we take it seriously?

STEP 3: LOVE YOURSELF

We now move on to step 3. The brevity of my treatment of step 2 doesn't mean that it isn't important. But I have learned that the simplest way to get people started on keeping His commandments is to get them working on themselves:

You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:39).

This is another way of saying that I must have a sense of improvement in my attitude and reactions to all the people who cross my path. I must be pleased with my behavior toward them.

More important, I must have a growing sense of self-respect. I need to like myself. Imagine living day in and day out being repulsed by yourself.

I have spent a lifetime listening to the stories of people who don't like themselves. The details of these stories vary greatly, but gradually I've become aware of recurring themes as I listen to people tell me about themselves—how they chip away at their own self-respect, which leads to personal anxiety and misery, as well as trouble with other people.

FIVE WAYS TO BUILD SELF-RESPECT

These recurring themes fall into five categories and are usually given in this order:

1. Your behavior
2. Your talk
3. Your reactions
4. Your thoughts
5. Your goals

TAKE INVENTORY

Behavior. Just think about what you have done this week. Some of your behavior was commendable, sacrificial, far beyond the call of duty. However, some behavior may not have been commendable, but selfish, reluctant, far less than your best.

Words. Think of some of the words you've used—words of praise, of reassurance. There were helpful, constructive, supportive words. Then there might have been some murmuring, complaining, griping, or nasty words—even lies.

Reactions. What you do is observable and what you say can be heard. But the way you react to what's been said and done is not readily observable or audible. This is the invisible, private part of your world.

You may have sensed love, joy, peace, gentleness, tenderness, or appreciation within you.

On the other hand, you may have nursed some hatred, bitterness, anger, rebellion, or envy.

Thoughts. Another invisible, private part of your world is your mind. No one can observe your thoughts. You can be thinking wholesome, positive, constructive, complimentary thoughts.

On the other hand, your mind can be filled with negative, destructive, uncomplimentary thoughts—even if you look angelic.

Goals. Then there are your goals, your purposes in life, your objectives. You may have positive, constructive goals, or negative, destructive ones. We all have goals. Sometimes our goal is to not have goals. Or to not reveal them.

YOU NEED AN ACCURATE REFERENCE POINT

Loving yourself begins with self-respect, a good self-image. And the first step to healthy

self-respect is locating yourself in five areas: behavior, speech, reactions, thoughts, and goals.

To locate yourself, you need a reference point—a mirror—something to truly reflect and portray where you are right now.

Two men came out of a mineshaft. One had a dirty face. The other man's face was clean.

The man with the clean face looked at his companion, concluded that his own face was also dirty, and left to wash his face.

The dirty-faced man didn't wash up. After seeing his friend's clean face, he decided there was no need.

They used each other as reference points. Both came up with the wrong information. We need a reference point, a mirror, a guidebook that is consistently accurate.

I've used such a guidebook, and in twenty-five years of counseling I've never found its principles to be incorrect.

That guidebook is the Bible.

NOT ENOUGH TO LOOK IN THE MIRROR

It's not enough to stand in front of the mirror and see what's wrong. We need to take calm, corrective action. James 1:23-25 tells us:

For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does.

How can it be said more clearly? Without action, your information is not being used to your advantage. You can decide to start.

NO ONE MAKES A LIFETIME COMMITMENT...

A commitment requires a first decision and then a renewal of that decision whenever necessary.

Can you remember the day you borrowed some money from a bank? You committed

yourself to repaying that loan, didn't you?

Yet each time you had an installment come due, you had to recommit yourself to that promise.

LIKE GOING TO COLLEGE

Can you remember the day you made the initial decision to go to college?

Good. But if you'd stopped there, you'd never have made it through.

Each time a test came along, you had to renew your original commitment and take the test. You had to make daily decisions to study or not to study. You were reaffirming your initial commitment.

When it came time to do your research papers, you had to reaffirm your commitment. To get through college, you had to renew your commitment probably a dozen times a day.

Or you wouldn't make it.

WANT IT BAD ENOUGH?

If someone wants to do something bad enough, he'll do it.

I knew a young boy who didn't want to go to church. In fact, he resisted church stubbornly. No matter what his parents or friends would say or do, he was determined not to go to church.

He was ready to face the disapproval and pressure of family and friends to stick with his decision. It was a matter of will. He would not go to church!

Then, I've known teenagers who were just the opposite. No encouragement from home. For a fact, discouragement. Yet, you couldn't keep them from church.

They would get there for the Sunday morning service and get back for the youth group on Sunday evening and stick around for the evening service.

And every Wednesday night they'd be there for prayer meeting. No encouragement from their relatives...their schoolmates. It didn't matter.

They always made it to church.

Anyone committed to turning away from early childhood training will do so, regardless of

pressures not to do so.

It has been my observation that people who have rejected their early training can also turn from their present behavior.

I've watched people who are consciously wrong and justify it because of their past, then choose to stop being wrong in spite of the past.

I've observed young people adopt an entirely new pattern of behavior after only one year of college and then turn back to their early behavior just as abruptly as they turned away from it.

You can choose to read pornographic literature or you can choose not to.

Likewise, if you make a commitment to study the Bible and live accordingly, no one can stop you.

But, to remind you once again, a commitment made today will need to be renewed again and again as other opportunities tempt you to divert your time and effort.

COMMITTED TO WHAT?

The pivotal point leading to a life of joy, peace, and an abundant life is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. Jesus said:

He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me . . . (John 14:21).

It is within your power to decide to know and keep God's commandments. But you must renew that commitment many times a day. There will be many temptations along the way to draw you from your original commitment. The Bible contains a reassuring promise:

Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it (1 Corinthians 10:12-13).

The next chapters deal with the basis for loving yourself—for becoming indestructible.

Review Questions:

1. Do advantages in life produce contentment, joy, peace, and a sense of self-worth or self-respect?
2. What are the three things that hold the key to contentment?
 - a. Love _____.
 - b. Love _____.
 - c. Love _____.
3. The pivotal point leading to a life of joy, peace, and an abundant life is

_____.
4. What did Jesus say in John 14:21?
5. It is within your power to decide to know and keep God's commandments. But you must _____
_____.

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