

A. OBSTACLES TO CONTENTMENT

- In Parts 1 and 2 of this mini-series, we've identified these obstacles that, if present in our minds and hearts, can allow discontentment to take root:
 - Doubt
 - Comparison
 - Greed
 - Bitterness
 - Covetousness
 - Unforgiveness
 - Self-pity
 - Pride
 - Envy
 - Entitlement
 - Jealousy
 - Offense
- We have a choice whenever we lack contentment: 1) Lean on our own understanding or 2) Allow the Spirit to find and remove these obstacles as we surrender to His good, pleasing, and perfect will: Phil 2:13 MSG-- Be energetic in your life of salvation, reverent and sensitive before God. That energy is *God's* energy, an energy deep within you, God himself willing and working at what will give him the most pleasure.
- Insights:

B. THORNS

- Another significant challenge to learning to lean and learning contentment is how we view and respond to hardship.
- Once again, the apostle Paul provides us with a radical way to approach the hard things that no one really want to deal with in life: 2 Cor 12:7-10 NASB--Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself! ⁸Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me.⁹ And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.
- Paul's “thorn” was not easy and definitely was unwanted! The literal meaning of “thorn” in the Greek is “tent stake,” i.e., it was no small thing and it was painful.
- Think of a thorn as a larger version of the goad. If it's hard for us to kick against the goads, we want to be extremely mindful of how we respond to our thorns!
- We are prone to wander. We're also prone to weakness and pride. Goads prod us toward God. Thorns are intended to develop the depth and quality of our character.
- “Paul identified God as his thorn-giver, not Satan. And he understood that God's purpose was to keep Paul humble and dependent on Christ's power.” (Jon Bloom)
- Paul readily admitted that his natural inclination was to have confidence in himself. Leaning on God's strength and grace was an acquired skill. (1 Tim 1:13, Phil 3:3-9)
- He pleaded with God to remove this thorn but to no avail. The Lord preferred to use this pain inflicted by the enemy for Paul's benefit.

- God's redemption of hard things perpetrated by sin and Satan is seen throughout Scripture. Think of Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, David, and ultimately Jesus.
- Thorns take various forms in the biblical narrative and illicit varied responses. They can affect us physically, mentally, spiritually, relationally, or provisionally.
- LISTENING QUESTION:
When hardship or difficult situations enter the picture, what are your most common ways of responding? (Ex: get busy, fix, deny, whine, passivity, shut down, medicate)

What is your pattern of thinking and behaving whenever a difficulty becomes a long-standing issue?

- Insights:

C. PURPOSE, POSTURE, POWER

- Paul, over time, was able to see his thorn as a gift. That required him to stop focusing on getting rid of it and its complications and to recognize its benefit to him.
- Purpose: Our thorns are for God's redemptive purposes in our lives. Let's learn to lean into His kind intentions and trust Him.
- Our thorns are opportunities to know God more deeply and intimately:
 1. "Grace"
 - Good will, love, kindness, favor by which God, exerting His holy influence upon souls, turns them to Christ, keeps, strengthens, increases faith, knowledge, affection, and kindles them to exercise Christian virtues (G5485)
 - Grace displays the Father's covenantal love for His children and His commitment to conform them into the image of their elder brother, Jesus.
 - 1 Cor 15:10--By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace to me was not in vain.
 2. "Sufficient"
 - To be possessed of unending strength; to suffice or be satisfied, to be enough (against any danger; to defend, ward off); root meaning is a barrier (G714)
 - God is El Shaddai, the All Sufficient One who possesses more than enough for us.

- 2 Cor 3:5-- Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as *being* from ourselves, but our sufficiency *is* from God,
- 3. "Power"
 - Inherent power, power residing in a thing by virtue of its nature, or which a person or thing exerts and puts forth (G1411)
 - Elohim is one of God's names. It refers to His limitless power and sovereignty.
 - Eph 1:19-20 NLT-- I pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead
- 4. "Perfect"
 - To perform, execute, complete, fulfill, (so that the thing done corresponds to what has been said, the order, command etc.) (G5055)
 - We can count on the Lord's faithfulness in keeping His Word and in finishing what He has started in us.
 - Ps 138:8-- The Lord will perfect *that which* concerns me; Your mercy, O Lord, *endures* forever; Do not forsake the works of Your hands.
- Posture: Leaning is the best posture for connecting with the Lord and His good purposes. It helps us, like Paul, to learn to be content in:
 - "Weakness" = lack of strength or capacity to understand or perform a thing; inability to bear trials, troubles or temptations (G769)
 - "Insults" = injury, wrong, reproach, insolence, impudence, pride, or overbearing (G5196)
 - "Distresses" = calamity or dire straights (H318)
 - "Persecution" = ill treatment, oppression, pestering, provoking, torture or murder (G1375)
 - "Difficulties" = a narrow place, calamity, anguish, affliction (G4730)
- We must face the truth and accept the fact that thorns, weaknesses, hardship, and trouble are to be expected in this life.
- "When the world tells us that everyone has a right to a life that is easy, comfortable, and relatively pain-free, a life that enables us to discover, display and deploy all the strengths that are latent within us, the world twists the truth out of shape." (J.I. Packer)
- Paul, after praying and receiving a different answer than he wanted, determined to be content with his thorn and many other hard things that came his way.
- He even came to the place of boasting or glorying in his weakness because he was able to see it as a platform for Jesus to be made manifest to him and to others
 - "Boast" = to rejoice or glory (whether with reason or without) (G2744)
 - "I am well content with" = choose, determine, decide, to do willingly, perceived as good, or to one's good pleasure (Strong's G2106)
- LISTENING EXERCISE:
Lord, it isn't natural for me to welcome pain and difficulty. But I don't want to stay miserable and discontent in my troubles either (name them here):

Please enable me to connect with Your grace, sufficiency, power and commitment to perfect Your purposes in these situations.

- Power: There's joy in seeing Jesus' power come to the rescue as we begin to lean into His grace and sufficiency in our hard places.
- Why would we settle for our own lesser strength and resources when the infinite power of God is available to us?
- He has power to use the painful things in our lives to strengthen us in these ways:
 - Maturity: Heb 12:11-12 MSG--God is doing what *is* best for us, training us to live God's holy best. At the time, discipline isn't much fun. It always feels like it's going against the grain. Later, of course, it pays off big-time, for it's the well-trained who find themselves mature in their relationship with God.
 - Humility: Mark 10:27--Jesus looked at them and said, "With men *it is* impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible."
 - Gratitude: 1 Thes 5:18 AMP--In every situation [no matter what the circumstances] be thankful *and* continually give thanks *to God*; for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.
 - Bringing Him Glory: 2 Cor 2:14 NLT--But thank God! He has made us his captives and continues to lead us along in Christ's triumphal procession. Now he uses us to spread the knowledge of Christ everywhere, like a sweet perfume.
- Paul became content with the painful aspects of his life by hearing Jesus' words and seeing the truth of them played out in his life. Christ's strength really is better!
- May that truth penetrate our hearts to the place that we learn to be content as well: Eph 3:16-19 AMP-- May He grant you out of the rich treasury of His glory to be strengthened *and* reinforced with mighty power in the inner man by the [Holy] Spirit [Himself indwelling your innermost being and personality]. ¹⁷ May Christ through your faith [actually] dwell (settle down, abide, make His permanent home) in your hearts! May you be rooted deep in love *and* founded securely on love, ¹⁸ That you may have the power *and* be strong to apprehend *and* grasp with all the saints [God's devoted people, the experience of that love] what is the breadth and length and height and depth [of it]; ¹⁹ [That you may really come] to know [practically, through experience for yourselves] the love of Christ, which far surpasses mere knowledge [without experience]; that you may be filled [through all your being] unto all the fullness of God [may have the richest measure of the divine Presence, and become a body wholly filled and flooded with God Himself]!
- Insights:

I. PERSONAL APPLICATION

A. ONE THING

The One Thing that I'd like to take away from today's class and believe God to accomplish in my life is:

B. PONDER THE TRUTH

- Write out the scriptures in this lesson that spoke to you most. Review them often to take the truth to a deeper place.

- Listen to God as you meditate on your One Thing and the verse(s) you've written. Be still and expectant in His presence. Record your thoughts and insights here or in your journal.

C. PRAY IT IN

Take your One Thing and the verse you have chosen to the Lord in prayer:

"Is there a particular attitude or issue that you want to bring into the light of this truth?" Write down anything that comes to mind to keep for further exploration:

"Lord, what would it look like for me to apply this truth?"

D. SING IT

- Give the Learning to Lean playlist a try this week either in your devotional time or when walking, cooking or driving. Did this practice help you integrate the principles more effectively?
- How else were you impacted?

- What about using a praise song or 2 of your choice to open your time with God?

Try it for several days and see if it makes a difference in connecting with Him. If so, what did you observe?

E. PERSONALIZE IT

Read through these questions early in the week. Ask the Holy Spirit to apply the truth to your life and to help you connect with the ways He is making your paths straight.

Obstacles:

- How would you describe your level of openness to letting HS identify and then remove obstacles to contentment in your life?

- Take some additional time to think about situations that might qualify as thorns in your life (painful and unwanted). Make a list of them here. Beside each thorn recorded, write how you have been choosing to cope with it up until now:

THORNS:

COPING STRATEGIES:

- Can you see how inviting God's grace and power might bring immediate improvement? If so, take some time in prayer to ask the Lord to do just that. For example:
Lord, I can see how my opinion and way of responding to (name the thorn) is hindering contentment and my intimacy with You. I choose this day to stop leaning on my own ideas and resources and to invite Your perfect grace and power instead. By faith I say, "I trust You to be my strength and sufficiency here."
- Observe and record any changes that happen on your insides as well as in the outward circumstances during the week:

- Ask God to help you see how these thorns have potential benefit to you. Journal about each of the ways we named and any others that come to mind:
 - Maturity

 - Humility

 - Gratitude

 - Bringing Glory to God