

The title of this morning's sermon is "Being Content."

This past week, I had to change the sermon I wanted to preach about some lessons I learned in Africa because one of the lessons was about Andy and Lisa, and I wanted them here for it. But they're sharing about Africa at their church. Hopefully, they can be here next week, and then I can deliver that sermon.

Instead, I will preach the other sermon about contentment that I felt burdened with in Africa. You can probably guess why I was thinking about contentment when I was in one of the poorest places in the world.

Let me show you a video that gives you an idea:

Video driving

Mike is our Malawian driver who works at the nursery. Mark asked him if the mouse on a stick was in season. That's one of the common things people eat during certain times of the year.

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Let me illustrate what I hope these sermons do for us by sharing something that happened with Katie.

A little background: When we took the trip to Africa, there were two teams. I was on the teaching team with Andy Langdon, Andy's Pastor, Mark, and a man named Eddie, who had accompanied them on many trips before. Andrew shared in Sunday school about the other team traveling during the day to evangelize and visit people's houses.

For my team, we spent the first week, Monday through Friday, teaching at the Sola Scriptura Bible College, about an hour away. The second week, I spoke at a pastor's conference, about two hours away. I'll share more about this in a future sermon.

For now, here is a video of the Bible college:

Bible college video

Okay, now let me pause and tell you what happened in the LaPierre household the day Johnny and I left for Africa:

Picture of stove

I was leaving Friday evening, but the kids were cooking at the stove Friday morning, and one of them left a can of Pam cooking spray on a hot burner. The can exploded. The bottom shot out and destroyed the burner, and the can shot up into the microwave and destroyed it, too.

Shards of glass and metal flew out as far as the dining area, so we did two things:

1. First, we prayed as a family and thanked God that nobody was injured.
2. Second, we had a physics lesson about gases expanding when they heat up.

I began a claim with my homeowner's insurance and left for the airport. When I got to Malawi, I started getting messages from my insurance company that they couldn't reach me. I would email them back in the evening, but they said they needed to talk to me on the phone. I couldn't get the claim moving while I was overseas, which meant Katie couldn't get a new microwave or stove.

I apologized to Katie because I knew this was inconvenient.

Now, here's the other part of this: every day I sent lots of photos to Katie, and here's one of them:

Picture of women cooking a Bible college

These wonderful women volunteered to cook our lunch at the Bible college each day.

So when I apologized to Katie that she had to cook without a microwave and stove she wrote back, “I won’t be complaining after seeing those women cooking over an open fire.”

And this brings us to lesson one:

Lesson One: Thinking about those with less should help us be content.

I hope that’s what these sermons do.

I will be transparent with you about something that has happened to me:

When I first came back from Malawi, guess how I felt?

Super content. Super grateful:

- I’m thankful for our house
- I’m thankful for our stores
- I’m thankful for our water
- I’m thankful for our wifi
- I’m thankful for our electricity
- I’m thankful for our roads that don’t make me feel like I’m throwing out my back while driving on them...except for S. Pekin Rd. over by the entrance to our neighborhood. I think that road might be rougher than most of the roads in Malawi.

But then, over time, I’m no longer grateful. It is human nature to gradually forget our blessings and take things for granted gradually.

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I want you to think about something for a moment, and that’s the location of the book of Numbers.

Numbers was originally called “The Book of Murmurings,” and you know why if you’ve ever read it. It is about the Israelites complaining in the wilderness. The location of this book is so shocking because it is one month after Israel was delivered from Egypt...when you think they would be super thankful for all God had done for them. Instead, they constantly complained.

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Now, we have probably all heard before about how wealthy the United States is compared to the rest of the world.

Let me provide some statistics that make this clear.

Slide of disposable income

Disposable income is the amount of money households have for spending and saving after income taxes have been accounted for:

- Russia’s disposable income is less than \$17,000.
- France’s disposable income is \$60,000.
- The United Kingdom’s disposable income is \$83,000.
- Canada’s disposable income is \$86,000.
- The nation in second place is Switzerland with \$128,000.
- The United States is in first place with a disposable income of \$176,00, almost 40% more than the nation in second place.i

Slide of US Wealth

There are 7.5 billion people in the world. China is the world's most populous nation, with 1.4 billion people, or 18.6% of the world's population. It has 10.5% of the world's wealth. The United States has 327 million people, or a little more than 4% of the world's population, but we have 41.6% of the world's wealth.ⁱⁱ

In the US, the poverty threshold for a family of five is \$30,500, which means if a family of five makes less than this, they are considered living in poverty.ⁱⁱⁱ The official poverty rate in the United States is 12.3% or 39.7 million people.^{iv} The average global income for a family of five is about \$10,500, which means people in poverty in the US still make about three times more than the average for the rest of the world.^v Even our “poor” people are still three times wealthier than the average person in the rest of the world.

Things are more expensive in the United States, but even after adjusting for cost-of-living differences, a typical American still earns an income ten times higher than the income received by the average person in the rest of the world. In the United States, an annual income of \$32,400 doesn't seem very high, but it is a salary that puts people among the top 1% of earners worldwide.^{vi}

Because Americans are so rich, we would expect to be the happiest—or most content—nation, not just in the world but in all of history. No people who have ever lived should have an easier time being content than Americans because of our wealth. But this is far from the case.

Slide of study on depression.

Let me share some statistics with you...

A study published in the Journal of Abnormal Psychology concluded that since the late 2000s, the mental health of teens and young adults has declined dramatically:

- Between 2009 and 2017, rates of depression, attempted suicides, and “serious psychological distress” among ages twelve to twenty-one have increased by 51%.
- More than one in eight Americans ages twelve to twenty-five experienced a major episode of depression.^{vii}
- The CDC reports that between 2007 and 2016, suicide rates jumped 56%.^{viii} Suicide is now the second leading cause of death among people ages ten to thirty-four.^{ix}

Americans are rich...and depressed! Wealth doesn't make people content!

Lesson two...

Lesson Two: Wealth doesn't produce contentment.

Social media is a big part of the problem.

Nobody puts up terrible pictures. We see everyone else's perfect lives, marriages, families, and children. We are flooded with everyone's expensive stuff, including homes, cars, and vacations.

Suddenly, our stuff doesn't look as good. We were content with our home, car, job, spouse, friends, vacation—you name it—but then we see our neighbor's better one, and ours no longer looks good. We are filled with covetousness, and our contentment is gone.

The richest country in the world can also afford the most advertisements. Television, radio, Internet, billboards when driving down the road, and fliers in our mailboxes surround us with ads. This also works against our contentment!

My undergraduate degree is in business. Marketing 101: “Cause people to feel miserable without whatever you sell. Make them discontent.

They will want to buy whatever you are advertising so they can be happy.”

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Let me back up and share something that stood out from our lives a few years ago...

Many of you probably know that after my dad passed away, Mom was lonely, so I asked Katie if she wanted to invite my mom to live with us.

We needed a rental to live in while we shopped for a new house that would fit the twelve of us and waited for my mom’s house and our house to sell. We found a house we could never afford because it was so big and fancy, but it worked well to rent while looking for our new (and smaller) house to buy.

At first, living in such a fancy house seemed like a dream come true: the well-equipped kitchen, the spacious living room, the comfortable bedrooms, the walk-in closets, the luxurious bathrooms, and the list could go on. But as time passed, the rental began to feel no different than any other house.

When we found the house that we currently live in, we were eager to buy it even though it was 25% smaller and, let’s say, ordinary.

This probably isn’t a surprise to any of you, because I think we all know that newer, bigger, and fancier wears off. Soon, it is no better than older, smaller, and plainer.

But I want to share something that happened in Malawi that did surprise me:

When I first arrived, I was discouraged by the poverty and sad for the people and how they lived. But two things changed my view.

First, Amy and I were having a conversation about the trip and what stood out to us. Amy shared, “Everyone seems so happy and content.”

I spent the rest of the trip recognizing that she was right. I had projected how I would feel living in their conditions, which led me to assume that they were as discontent as I would be.

I could show you lots of videos of interactions with Malawians, and you’d see their joy and never hear them complain.

When I was in Africa I had a desire to make sure I came back and shared how the music sounded. Every time they sang I thought it sounded incredible. And I think this will help you see these people’s joy despite their poverty.

The first video is singing at the nursery...

Video singing at nursery

the second video is singing at the Bible conference and I just want you to notice the condition of the room because I will talk more about it in a moment.

Video singing at bible conference

There was a joke that white men can’t dance and you can see why.

Video singing at pastor conference

One of the other reasons I wanted to show you these videos is they let you see the condition of the rooms where the Bible college and pastors' conference were held. They were dilapidated. There was no electricity, and one of the walls looked like it was about to fall over. The floors were uneven and filled with cracks. The chairs were metal or plastic and without cushions.

I couldn't help but contrast these rooms with the churches in the United States where I have taught and preached.

But within a few days, I didn't notice the differences. Each room became just another room.

And this surprised me: just as I stopped noticing the fanciness of the rental, I stopped noticing the squalor of the building. The excitement of the new house, car, or boat wears off, and I learned in Africa that the discouragement of the old house, car, or boat also wears off.

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As I talk about wealth not producing contentment, it would be easy for you to attack my credibility. How can I make that statement when I have never been rich, at least by American standards?

In Scripture, God provided someone with the credibility to say riches don't satisfy, and that's Solomon. He had more wealth than most of us can imagine. His kingdom had so much gold that **1 Kings 10:21** and **2 Chronicles 9:20** says silver became worthless.

The Queen of Sheba visited Solomon. She was a wealthy woman, accustomed to luxury, but listen to this:

1 Kings 10:4-5 When the queen of Sheba saw...the house that [Solomon] had built, **5** the food of his table, the seating of his officials, and the attendance of his servants, their clothing, his cupbearers, and his burnt offerings that he offered at the house of the Lord, *there was no more breath in her.*

As a queen, I doubt much took her breath away, but Solomon's wealth managed to do just that. He has the credibility to tell us whether wealth satisfies.

The point is if there's only one person in Scripture we would expect to be content, it's Solomon. But ironically, he is the author of Ecclesiastes, the book about discontentment. He put it this way:

Ecclesiastes 1:1 The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. **2** Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity

The Hebrew word for "vanity" is *hebel*, which means "emptiness, unsatisfactory." Of the seventy-three times *hebel* occurs in the Old Testament, thirty-eight instances are in Ecclesiastes because it is a record of the futility or vanity Solomon experienced. Solomon repeatedly explained everything this world offers—including wealth and possessions—proves vain and unsatisfying.

Look at Ecclesiastes 5:10:

Ecclesiastes 5:10 reads, "He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity."^x

Because wealth doesn't satisfy, we always think we need more:

Lesson Three: We often think we need more.

Lee Iacocca, was a man of great success and wealth, but he once found himself vulnerable. After being fired by the Ford Motor Company, he candidly shared his struggle to let go of his job, primarily due to the financial security it provided. Many of us can understand this situation, as it's not easy to walk away from a job that offers almost a million dollars per year (plus perks), a sum that would be even more significant in today's economy.

Iacocca confessed, *"My father always said, 'Be careful about money. When you have five, you will want ten. When you have ten, you will want twenty.' He was right. No matter what you have, it is never enough."*

This statement underscores the universal struggle for contentment, even for the rich.

No matter how much we have, it will never be enough, which is why it is vanity.

In a 1992 survey, people were asked how much money they needed to obtain "the American dream."^{xi} Almost everyone answered that they would finally be happy if they made approximately twice as much as they were making. Those earning \$25,000 or less thought they needed around \$54,000. Those earning \$100,000 thought they needed around \$192,000. This indicates that regardless of how much we have, we aren't satisfied with that amount.

I'm not sure how many of you have seen this chart that seems to be circulating on social media...

Picture of the income a family needs

The upper right says this is based on two working adults with two children. In Washington, a couple with two kids would need \$257,000. Do I even know anyone who makes \$257,000?

I suspect much of this chart is influenced by the belief that people are convinced they need twice as much money.

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Look at Ecclesiastes 5:11...

Ecclesiastes 5:11 When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes?"

Lesson Four: Possessions can cause problems.

Beginning with this verse, Solomon lists problems that possessions cause.

The people in Malawi seem to lead much simpler, slower lives than us. I can imagine they wouldn't have some of these problems.

Here's the first problem: they bring the wrong people!

Imagine all of Solomon's possessions. He knew the more you have, the more people show up to take it from you: **They increase who eat them.**

Some of these people are friends and relatives who do not show up because they love you and want to spend time with you. They show up because they love your possessions and want to consume – **eat** – them. They want your hospitality, to enjoy your stuff and take advantage of you.

Proverbs 19:6 Many entreat the favor of the nobility, and every man is a friend to one who gives gifts.

People love you when you are rich!

The tax agent shows up because the government wants to “eat” more of what you have. Lawyers show up because nobody sues poor people, but they do sue the rich. Thieves show up because they don’t break into shacks, but they do break into mansions.

Kidnappers show up because they don’t abduct the poor, but they do abduct the rich:

Proverbs 13:8 The ransom of a man's life is his wealth, but a poor man hears no threat.

The rich have the money to pay the ransom, but the poor are not threatened in the first place.

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Because of all the problems caused by wealth and possessions, Solomon asks, **“What advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes?”**

Sadly, not much!

What can you do with your possessions besides look at them? Invite over your friends and say, “Look at my new house...car...shotgun...golf clubs.”

Henry Ford said, “You can only wear one pair of pants at a time and look at the rest.”

Ecclesiastes 5:12 reads, “Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.”

Wealth produces anxiety.

Although it sounds like rich people are kept awake by eating too much, Solomon uses a physical illustration to make a spiritual point. The man who works hard sleeps well, whether he’s eaten little or not, but the rich man is filled – not with food – but with anxiety that keeps him awake.

If you want to sleep well, work hard! Few things are as satisfying as a good night’s sleep. The hard worker sleeps better than the rich.

Some think money provides peace and security, but the Bible says it can cause anxiety. Wealth is no guarantee that nerves will be calm and sleep will be sound. People worry:

- Do I have enough?
- What do I do now that I’m upside down in this big, expensive home?
- Why did I purchase that extra car?
- I should not have bought that big flat-screen television because the payment plan sounded good.

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I have more about contentment to share with you, and I might do so next week or the week after. I need to ask Andy and Lisa when they can join us.

For now, I want to conclude by discussing how we can be content. We talked a lot about what threatens contentment, but we haven’t talked about how we can be content.

Lesson Five: Contentment comes from Christ.

Please turn to Hebrews 13.

Because we tend to think contentment comes from wealth and possessions, we see it as a physical issue rather than a spiritual issue...which is completely backward.

Listen to the way Jeremiah Burroughs perfectly explains this:

“My brethren, the reason why you have not got contentment in the things of the world is not because you have not got enough of them. That is not the reason. But the reason is because they are not things proportionable to that immortal soul of yours that is capable of God Himself. Many men think that when they are troubled and have not got contentment, it is because they have but a little in the world, and if they had more then they would be content. That is just as if a man were hungry, and to satisfy his craving stomach he should hold open his mouth to take in the wind, and then should think that the reason he is not satisfied is because he has not got enough of the wind. No, the reason is because the thing is not suitable to a craving stomach.”

Just as we can eat as much wind as we want and still be hungry, we can have as much wealth and possessions as we want and still be discontent. This is why people in the wealthiest nation in the world are so discontent, and perhaps why people in Malawi seem content.

Lasting contentment only comes from the spiritual and eternal. Our hearts must be rooted in Christ, who offers the spiritual riches that produce lasting contentment:

Colossians 1:27 God chose to make known how great...**THE RICHES** of the glory of this mystery, which is **Christ in you, the hope of glory.**

Ephesians 3:8 This grace was given [to me], to preach...the unsearchable **RICHES OF CHRIST.**

Think about this...

Throughout the Old Testament, God told people He would not leave them. When Jacob had the dream of the angels ascending and descending on the ladder, God said:

Genesis 28:15 Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go...*For I will not leave you.*

God told Joshua:

Deuteronomy 31:6 It is the Lord your God who goes with you. *He will not leave you or forsake you....Joshua 1:5* Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. *I will not leave you or forsake you.*

David told Solomon when he became king:

1 Chronicles 28:20 Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed, for the Lord God, even my God, is with you. *He will not leave you or forsake you.*

Then, we see this promise in the New Testament. Jesus told the disciples:

Matthew 28:20 Behold, *I am with you always*, to the end of the age.

The Lord told Paul in a vision:

Acts 18:10 *I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you.*

This promise is made to us too in Hebrews 13:5:

Hebrews 13:5 Keep your life free from love of money, and *be content with what you have* for he has said, *“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”*

How would we expect God to say we can be content?

Perhaps by “despising money...never coveting anything...hating the pleasures of this world.”

Instead, we are told we can be content because the Lord promised to “**never leave [us] nor forsake [us].**”

We can be content because we will always have Christ.

This promise is one of the most forceful in the New Testament because it contains two double negatives, comparable to saying, “I will never, ever leave you.” The Lord wants to make it overwhelmingly clear He will never leave us!

But this is not only about knowing He will never abandon us. This is about truly believing the Lord will always be with us. When we walk in this reality, it becomes a foundation for our lives, and we can experience lasting contentment.

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If you have any questions or if I can pray for you in any way, I will be up front after service, and I consider it a privilege to speak with you.

Let’s pray.

ⁱ “Visualizing Countries with the Highest Household Wealth,” *howmuch.net*, July 9, 2018, <https://howmuch.net/articles/household-net-financial-wealth-around-the-world>.

ⁱⁱ Erik Sherman, “America Is the Richest, and Most Unequal, Country,” *Fortune*, September 30, 2015, <https://fortune.com/2015/09/30/america-wealth-inequality/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ “The Population of Poverty USA,” *Poverty USA*, accessed September 28, 2021, <https://povertyusa.org/facts>.

^{iv} “What is the current poverty rate in the United States?,” *Center for Poverty & Inequality Research*, September 15, 2021, <https://poverty.ucdavis.edu/faq/what-current-poverty-rate-united-states>.

^v Gautam Nair, “Most Americans vastly underestimate how rich they are compared with the rest of the world. Does it matter?” *The Washington Post*, August 23, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/08/23/most-americans-vastly-underestimate-how-rich-they-are-compared-with-the-rest-of-the-world-does-it-matter/>.

^{vi} <https://www.investopedia.com/articles/personal-finance/050615/are-you-top-one-percent-world.asp>

^{vii} <https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/abn-abn0000410.pdf>

^{viii} https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr67/nvsr67_04.pdf

^{ix} <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/03/trends-suicide>

^x This resembles 1 Timothy 6:10, which says, “The love of money is a root of all kinds of evils.” God wants to make sure we don’t miss the problems with loving money, so he repeats it in both testaments. The previous verse, 1 Timothy 6:9 discussed “those who desire to be rich,” and desire always outruns wealth.

^{xi} <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/matthew-6/>