

Today's Christian Woman

Series

LEADER'S GUIDE

The Joy of Being Content

Learning to smile with what you have.

We have more, but enjoy less. No matter how hard we work or how much money we accumulate, on the whole we are not happier. Why is that? Somewhere along the line we have entertained the notion that we are entitled to more. Thoughts like this make us discontent.

Can contentment be learned? What prevents us from being thankful for what we have? Ultimately who is to blame when we are discontent? We will discuss these questions in this study.

Lesson #5

Scripture:

Exodus 16:11–18; 2 Samuel 11:2–4; Psalm 84:11, 145:15; John 21:17–22; 2 Corinthians 12:10; Philippians 4:11–13; 1 Timothy 6:8

Based on:

"Seeing Green," by Nancy Beach, TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, September/October 1999, Page 82



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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "Seeing Green" from TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine (included at the end of this study).



Contentment is not a pie-in-the-sky, unattainable thing. God wouldn't give us instructions to do something without giving us the ability to follow through. He encourages us many times in Scripture to be thankful, to be grateful, to be content. Could it be that the world is working against us attaining a healthy level of gratitude in our lives? Tim Kimmel says, "Keeping the average family unsatisfied is vital to our economic system. In order to lure me to a particular product, an advertiser must create a dissatisfaction for what I have—or a nagging desire for what I don't need" (*Little House on the Freeway*, Multnomah Press, 1987). Although we live in this world, we are to follow a different set of rules. And the maker of those rules knows the temptations we face on a daily basis.

In *Simplify Your Life*, H. Norman Wright explains, "We have ad campaigns telling us how we need more stuff to fulfill our lives and make us 'happy.' We need campaigns to tell the ad campaigns we don't believe what they're saying and that we won't buy into it. This means going against the voices in our culture."

Discussion starters:

- [Q]** The media send daily messages that perpetuate discontent. Why?
- [Q]** Name the messages we encounter in life that foster discontent.
- [Q]** How can we constructively fight these messages?
- [Q]** How can possessions affect our values? Are there excess things you can remove from your life that would help reveal your true values?
- [Q]** Everywhere we turn we see signs that encourage us to strive for more. Is it possible to have needs that are unmet, yet be content?
- [Q]** Describe someone you know who is a model of contentment. Has this person always been this way? What attitudes does this person have that helps him or her be content?



PART 2**Discover the Eternal Principles****Teaching point one: Contentment is a choice.**

We are not the first who have struggled with contentment. We follow in the footsteps of our ancestors. Even Adam and Eve, when given everything in the garden with the exception of one tree, craved what they didn't have.

Read Exodus 16:11–18. Consider the Israelites and their desire for a change in their diet. It wasn't enough that God fed them; they wanted to order off the menu. All through Scripture we see people who wanted more than they were given. God addressed that very issue when he gave his commandments. We are told to refrain from coveting, wanting what someone else has.

Read Philippians 4:11–13. Paul *chose* to be content. That would be less challenging if we knew Paul sat with his choice of food, lodging, and ministry, but that wasn't the case. Read 2 Corinthians 12:10. Paul explains that even in undesirable surroundings, he was content. How could he be content in adverse conditions? Why are people on the other side of the world, who have so much less, often happier than we are? The only way any of us can develop an attitude of gratitude and rest in a state of contentment is to realize everything we have is from God.

[Q] In what ways are you like the Israelites, who grumbled because they didn't appreciate what God provided for them? When do you find yourself grumbling?

[Q] With which statement do you find yourself agreeing most?

- 1) Since God has given us everything, my ungratefulness is sin.
- 2) Contentment is attainable, but only with God's help.
- 3) There's nothing wrong with comparisons if I don't become envious.
- 4) Having fewer things will make me godly.

Why did you choose the statement you did? Do you find yourself agreeing with more than one statement?

[Q] Paul mentions times when he was content in extremely undesirable circumstances. How is that possible? Give details of a time you found yourself at peace in adverse conditions.

Teaching point two: Comparisons ruin contentment.

Read 2 Samuel 11:2–4. David coveted what was not his. Whenever we decide to sin, it starts in our minds. Pride tells us we deserve whatever it is we are coveting. Another word for coveting is lusting, and what we lust after covers a large gamut: food, sex, things, positions, even spiritual gifts or ministries.

Read John 21:17–22. When Peter wanted to know if John (the disciple whom Jesus loved) would suffer too, Jesus rebuked Peter, basically telling him to concentrate on his own obedience and not to worry about John. It's God's choice, not ours, what he wants for us.

Contentment is difficult when we are looking around, making comparisons. There is no winning with comparisons. If we see someone who possesses more than we do, we are tempted to feel envious of that person. On the other hand, if we see someone who possesses less than we do, we are tempted to feel superior to the person.



- [Q] What did David want that he didn't have? What did it lead to? What was the final result of his lust?
- [Q] In her article "Seeing Green," Nancy Beach says that "envy occurs when you compare yourself with someone else, and in the comparison feel deprived or lacking." Name some times in your life you felt lacking. How did you respond?
- [Q] Beach further explains, "Envy devalues our self-worth and the uniqueness of God's creation, gradually distancing us from him and others." How does this occur? Share a time in your life when you felt distanced from God as a result of your envy or covetousness. What did you do to rectify the situation?
- [Q] Beach writes, "One way to fight envy is to talk to the person you are envious of." Mention a time you struggled with envy. What exactly were you envious of? How did you get victory over it?

Teaching point three: Greed is the opposite of contentment.

When John D. Rockefeller was asked how much money it would take to make him happy, he responded, "Just a little more." The children's story *The Fisherman's Wife* portrays this lack of contentment. A fisherman caught a magic fish that granted him three wishes. When he shared his experience with his wife, she looked around at her meager surroundings and demanded he ask for a larger house. The husband complied, but shortly his wife demanded an even larger house. This story captures the dark monster in each of us—greed. We just want more.

Remember sitting across the table from your brother, sister, or friend eyeing the piece of cake before you? You were told you could have it if you shared. The well-known rule was: if one cuts the piece, the other gets to choose. Funny how the other piece always looked larger.

When I bake cookies, I'm amazed at the rate they disappear. I realize what I want is an eternal cookie jar, one that never empties. God has wired us for life with him, and when we are in our heavenly home, we will finally be satisfied. Here on earth, we also must realize he is the only one who will satisfy us.

- [Q] What is tempting you to believe you will be happier once you possess it? Share a time you longed for something. How long did the joy of getting your prized possession or achievement last?
- [Q] Complete one of the following sentences: *If only I had ...* or, *If only I could be more like ...* As you continue in your walk with God, do you see yourself as becoming more satisfied, or less? Explain your answer.
- [Q] Kimmel (*Little House on the Freeway*) says, "An unsatisfied heart in a life with much blessing is sin." What state is your heart in now? Share some of the blessings God has bestowed on you. Why is it so easy to overlook them?
- [Q] Share a childhood memory of when you were ungrateful. What was the situation? What was the outcome?



Teaching point four: Contentment comes only if we believe God has our best in mind.

When our focus is on anything this world offers as a means of satisfaction, we will be disappointed. God chooses what he gives us. When we are dissatisfied, we are saying that what he has chosen for us is insufficient.

Read 1 Timothy 6:8. We are to be satisfied if we have the bare necessities. Paul, who earlier told us of his contentment with weaknesses, hardships, and persecutions, wrote the Book of Timothy. Like Paul, we too can learn to be content.

One of God's names in Scripture is "Jehovah Jireh," which means "the Lord will provide." We struggle when what God gives us differs from what we wanted. Or perhaps we don't agree with God's timetable. We are tempted to listen to the advertisements around us, believe we deserve whatever it is we want, and pull out our plastic.

Read Psalm 145:15. When God gives us our desires, he decides the timing. We find that hard to accept at times, becoming anxious and sometimes taking things in our own hands. Waiting on God is paramount to being content. Resting in God, knowing he is all knowing, good, and more than capable of meeting our needs, provides the perfect environment for the seeds of contentment to grow. Then, when weeds of anxiety and doubt try to sprout up, we can rest in God's truth.

Read Psalm 84:11. There are times God chooses to withhold something because it would not be good for us. Here again, we need to know his character so we can trust him when we don't understand.

- [Q] Share something in your life you are waiting for. How long have you been waiting for it? How will it change your life? On a scale of 1–10, where waiting well is 10, where are you regarding this situation?
- [Q] Share a time God withheld something you prayed for. Did you find yourself strengthened by the wait, angry by his decision, or are you still wondering about it?
- [Q] Tell about a time you withheld something from someone. What were your reasons? What was the outcome?
- [Q] What can you do to help you focus on God's goodness the next time you are waiting? How will that help you in your spiritual walk?
- [Q] Give an example of a time in your life when you were patient. What were you waiting for? Was it worth your wait?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

In *Get Serious*, Tony Evans says, "One of the tragedies today is that we don't have enough Christians who know how to give thanks for what they already have." He goes on to say, "You



may not have much, but if you have a compassionate Christ who can get to an all-powerful Father, you have everything you need" (Crossway Books, 1995).

God, the Creator of the universe, made each of us and put us here on earth. He promised to take care of us and meet every need we have. The All-Sufficient One listens as we pour out our requests, and he answers lovingly in his timing and in his way. When we agree, we thank God; when we disagree, we may get quiet. And yet, when we have another need, we know where to go.

The longer we get to know him, the more we will trust him. And the no's in life will become easier to hear. Not that we will ever like the word, but we love the One who speaks it. Contentment is a result of a mature life. It isn't a matter of getting what you want, but instead, wanting what you get. And the more we practice it, the easier it will become. Gratefulness, thankfulness, and contentment will emanate from us as we become like Jesus.

- [Q] Name five things God has given you that you are thankful for. How have they blessed your life?
- [Q] What tangible things can we do to promote a grateful attitude in our hearts? Share something that has helped you in this area.
- [Q] What can't you get enough of? Describe what you think heaven will be like. Compare and contrast heaven with the Garden of Eden.
- [Q] If you have children, how do you cultivate gratitude in their lives?

—Study prepared by Anne Peterson, poet, speaker,
and ongoing student of God's word.

Additional Resources



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[When God Says No](#)

[It's All About Joy](#)

[Does God Always Bless Believers?](#)

[Too Much Stuff](#)

[Prosperity and Faith](#)

[A Biblical Perspective on Money](#)



Cultivating Contentment, Jill Briscoe (Cook Communications, 2003; ISBN 0781439523)



Keys to Contentment: A Study of Philippians, Sharon Steele (Gospel Light, 1998; ISBN 08307211304)



The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment, J. Burrohs (Banner of Truth, 1998; ISBN 0851510914)





The Way of Solomon: Finding Joy and Contentment in the Wisdom of Ecclesiastes, Rami M. Shapiro (Harper Collins Publishing, 2000; ISBN 0060673001)



Women of Faith: Cultivating Contentment, Luci Swindoll (Thomas Nelson, 2004; ISBN 0785251529)



Today's Christian Woman

Series

ARTICLE

Seeing Green

*Don't let **envy** color your view of life*

By Nancy Beach, for the study, "The Joy of Being Content"

You know the type: the woman who effortlessly sews her own window treatments, makes her own candles, or prepares gourmet meals "to die for." I call these women the "Martha Stewarts," and I actually have some friends who fall into this category. One friend put in the plumbing when she and her husband remodeled their home. Another's such an outstanding gardener, I'm convinced she makes her own dirt!



One friend of mine, Ted, married a Martha Stewart. Not only can Cindy, his wife, mother four young children, create a fabulous home, sew everybody little matching outfits, and cook like Julia Child, but she's loving, generous, fun, and pretty. In short, she used to make me sick!

I noticed that when Ted and Cindy first got married, I felt depressed whenever I left their home. That's because in the domestic arena—cooking, decorating, gardening, and crafts—I feel somewhat insecure.

But as the years have gone by, I've recognized my sadness and my tendency to use sarcasm when I was with Ted and Cindy as masks for envy.

According to the dictionary, envy's defined as: "desire for something possessed by another." Envy occurs when you compare yourself with someone else, and in the comparison, feel deprived or lacking.

Unfortunately, it's an all-too-human tendency to look over our shoulder to see who gets the office with the window, who has a new sweater on, who has the most gifted children, or who gets to go to the Caribbean while we freeze in Chicago. Too many of us live in a perpetual state of discontent, whimperingly wondering, *Why you and not me?*

While envy is a normal—and unavoidable—emotion, that doesn't mean God treats it casually. The reality is, he's so set against it that he prohibited it: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his



manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor" (Exodus 20:17).

Most of us don't spend our energy envying other people's oxen, but we *do* envy their hair, car, income, personality, achievements, lifestyle—even spiritual gifts.

Although the sin of envy doesn't get as much press as adultery, murder, or stealing, its effects can be disastrous. Envy devalues our self-worth and the uniqueness of God's creation, gradually distancing us from him and others.

If you've been seeing green lately, here are some practical suggestions on how to change the way you look at things.

Call a spade a spade. Admit to your feelings, but remember, envy has many disguises—constructive criticism, self-pity, even fake praise.

How do you know if what you're really feeling is envy? Ask yourself:

- ◆ Do you get upset when acquaintances advance professionally or socially?
- ◆ Do you belittle the accomplishments, talents, or appearance of others?
- ◆ Do you feel tempted to sabotage a person to whom you feel inferior?
- ◆ Do you feel secretly pleased when a friend, even a loved one, suffers a setback?

Examine yourself carefully. If what's really going on is envy, say it out loud: "I'm feeling envious."

Once you own up to envy, you can receive God's forgiveness for it and the strength to change.

Stop hiding, start talking. If possible, talk to the person you envy. Bring your secret out into the light, and see if you can work together to dispel it. Chances are, you'll even discover that person envies something about you!

This inevitably happens when women talk about hair. Those of us with straight hair envy curly hair. Those with short hair envy long hair. With men, it's really simple: They all just want hair!

Do you know what else you'll learn when you get up close to the people you envy? Often you'll discover their lives aren't as wonderful as they appear. You'll find they struggle with things about which you had no idea.

Get off the comparison track. I run laps at my local Y.M.C.A., and its track has three lanes: the inside for walkers, the outside for speed demons, and the middle for the rest of us. Sometimes I notice that when a fast person comes along, I become competitive. *I'm not going to let her beat me*, I think, so I begin running faster and



faster. The trouble is, I run too fast for my own pace, and by the end of my run, I'm completely out of steam.

I'm learning I don't have to compare myself with the really fast runners—or the slower ones, either. I just need to run *my* race. If you're a Christ follower as I am, we're running a race to build God's kingdom in our hearts and in the world. But runners who look over their shoulders take the risk of stumbling or falling before they make it to the finish line.

Tap into the positive. The destructive side of envy is self-hatred, resentment, and covetousness. But if you can convert your envy into something positive, such as admiration, you can become motivated to *emulate* instead of *envy* someone else.

For example, my college roommate, Laura, inspired me to begin exercising. Laura was a runner, and at first I envied her consistency. But when I transferred my negative feelings into emulation, I decided to follow Laura's example.

Reevaluate what you want in life. If what you envy is attainable, such as a firmer, fitter body, start working out! But if what you want is unattainable—all the voice lessons in the world won't make me a singer—learn to accept your limitations. Keep in mind you don't have to be good at *everything*.

Savor your uniqueness. The truth is, our Creator longs for us to be content with how he made us and with what he chooses to give us.

When I envy the Martha Stewarts of the world, I waste precious energy focusing on what I can't do instead of celebrating what I can do, such as lead and encourage others in my church.

It's impossible to have a grateful attitude when you're envious; you're too busy feeling deprived. But God designed us each as "one of a kind"—and no other human being exactly like you and I will ever walk the face of this earth again.

Crank up the celebration. Have you ever noticed how it's easier to mourn with those who mourn than rejoice with those who rejoice? That's because envy is divisive, spoiling our ability to enjoy others. Single people envy marrieds; married envy singles. Those who don't have children envy those who do. Sometimes I'm tempted to envy the freedom and solitude of my friends who don't have young children—until I remember how at peace I am with my choice to have a family.

Remember that a friend's victories are *your* victories. So when she receives a promotion, a new car, or diamond earrings, learn to say, "I'm so happy for you" without gritting your teeth. Don't let the stab of envy rob you of the joy of shared celebration.

Discover the crux of true contentment. In Psalm 73, the psalmist laments how much the godless people around him had. He was disillusioned until he met God



and realized that what he had was far more important. Verses 23–28 describe a heart that wrestled with envy yet ultimately arrived at peace and contentment: “Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into your glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”

Our culture drives us to seek significance in all the wrong places, so for most of us, it’s a lifelong battle to keep returning to the simplicity of desiring only God. But God longs for you and me to have hearts at peace. He knows how deadly envy is, and he asks us to get rid of it for our sake, the sake of our relationship to him, and the sake of our relationships with others.

I’m making progress with my “Martha Stewart” envy. I visited Ted and Cindy recently, and had a wonderful time. I deeply appreciated Cindy’s hospitality, her beautiful home, and outstanding meal. Gradually I’m accepting with joy who I am — and who I’m not.

Don’t let envy color your world. If you’ve been seeing green, admit it to God. He’ll help you find contentment.

—Nancy Beach is the programming director and a teaching pastor at Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. She and her family live in the Chicago area.

“Seeing Green,” by Nancy Beach, TODAY’S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, September/October 1999, Page 82





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