



Summary of Issue:

American culture tells us that pursuit of happiness is our duty. I have found myself agreeing with this idea by rating my life based on perceived happiness. I seem to seldom be content. I have been disappointed in my quest for unrelenting happiness and I need another goal.

Making it personal (take turns answering each question):

Do I resonate with the above paragraph? If so, please describe.

Do I see my spouse as having happiness as his/her goal?

In what avenues have I sought to find long term happiness? How successful was the effort?

Suggestion for improvement:

Perhaps a play on words will help illustrate the difference between happiness and contentment.

Human happiness is generally thought to be “having what I want”. Is having what I want sustainable? In most cases the answer is no. If we get what we want, which is seldom, we normally are disappointed, or want more of it, or lose interest and want something else. Happiness when defined as “having what I want” is almost never sustainable. A second interesting question is “where in time is happiness found”? What is normally the next word in this sentence fragment?... “I will be happy.....” In most cases the next word will be “when”. Examples: I will be happy when I graduate. I will be happy when I have \$10K in the bank. I will be happy when my wife quits nagging me. In other words, the time-frame of possible happiness is generally in the future. In summary, seeking happiness by having what we want is seldom sustainable and normally a hope in the future.

If we switch around the words from the first sentence in the past paragraph, we get a pretty good definition of contentment. Contentment is “wanting what I have”. This statement is 100% sustainable by definition. Since we want what we have, and we always have what we have, contentment is always sustainable. In Philippians 4 Paul writes, “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.” In addition to being sustainable, contentment is always found “in the now”.

Given the above two paragraphs are intuitively true, why are we so prone to pursue happiness?

First, American culture paints contentment as a negative word. It implies “settling” for something less than the ultimate. Contentment implies giving up or giving in. Unrealistic cliches such as “you can do anything you set your mind to” or “everything is possible if you give it your all” sound wise but they are deeply steeped in secular humanistic thinking. Unrealistic expectations breed unhappiness.

Second, our sinful human nature leads us toward selfish pursuit of happiness. We need to be intentional in viewing life from God’s perspective. Unless we deeply abide in Christ, our tendency is to slip into the futile pursuit of worldly happiness.

Homework:

Read and discuss the above paragraph as a couple. Then, each of you openly and honestly reveal how happiness vs. contentment is playing out in your life. After each of you have shared, invite your spouse to give their impression of happiness vs. contentment in their spouse's life. And finally, write down any changes I plan to make in my life to align my life with contentment. Think in terms of time priorities, money priorities, and where God fits in your day-timer and checkbook.

Follow up (discuss at your next marriage mentor session):

What did I learn about myself in this lesson?

What did I learn about my spouse?

What changes am I proposing to align my life around contentment?