

# Learning Contentment

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1 Samuel 18:1-9

**Sermon Series:**  
**Seven Greatest**  
**Virtues and Vices:**  
**Envy and Kindness**

***“But I still  
haven’t found  
what I’m  
looking for.”***

- Bono

**U**2 released *Joshua Tree* back in 1987. The previous year had been hard on U2’s lead singer, Paul David Hewson, otherwise known as Bono. His marriage became strained due to the extended time it took to record the album, and his personal assistant died in a motorcycle accident. It was these desert-like experiences that caused Bono to choose the Mojave Desert for the cover.

*Joshua Tree* is considered one of the great albums in rock and roll history. It climbed to the top of the charts in 20 countries and eventually sold 25 million copies. This album catapulted U2 to rock star stature.

One recording on this album remains a signature song for U2. Rolling Stone magazine ranks it 93<sup>rd</sup> on a list of all-time greatest songs. When U2 originally released a music video of this song, it featured members of the band wandering through Las Vegas casinos. The video captures people’s vacuous, empty expressions. Despite climbing highest mountains, scaling city walls and kissing honey lips, the refrain of the song says it all, “But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.”

Bono admits that the song is more of an anthem of doubt than an expression of faith. Bono hints at his Christian underpinnings in the lyrics, “You loosed the chains and carried the cross of my shame...I believe in the kingdom to come.” The song also gives voice to spiritual doubt. It ends with the same refrain, sung again and again, “But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.”

What are you looking for?  
What do you desire?

Today’s sermon focuses on excessive desire; what the Bible calls envy. There is nothing wrong with desire, but excessive desire becomes a killer sin.

This summer, we’re not only focusing on the seven deadly sins, we’re examining their opposites—what we call the seven lively virtues. Last Sunday, I described kindness as the antithesis of envy. This morning, I want to think about another lively virtue that counterbalances envy—that of contentment.

Our Scripture lesson is a virtual case study in envy. Our story centers around King Saul and an up-and-coming military commander named David. Everybody in our story loves David. “The people of Israel

***“A heart at peace gives life to the body but envy rots the bones.”***

- Proverbs 14:30

and Judah love David” (1 Samuel 18:16). The servants of King Saul love David (18:22). Even the family of King Saul is gaga over David. David and Jonathan, Saul’s son, are the best of friends, virtual soul mates. We read in verse 2 that “Jonathan loves David as he loves his own soul.” Saul’s daughter Michal loves David, also (18:20). By the end of the chapter, David becomes Saul’s son-in-law (18:27).

We’re told, in verse 5, that “David is successful wherever Saul sends him.” He has “the Midas touch.” In chapter 17, we read about David’s defeat of a giant named Goliath. Some of you will recall this legendary story from Sunday School days. When David and his soldiers return from battle victorious, the women pour out of their villages singing and dancing, “Saul has killed his thousands and David his ten thousands” (18:8).

This makes Saul angry—really angry. He interprets this slight as a personal insult. David is being heralded for the very things Saul was formerly commissioned to do. He complains, “They credit David with ten thousands and me with only thousands; before you know it, they’ll be giving him the kingdom” (18:9). Saul fears his influence over his people may be waning.

Our story ends with the fateful words, “Saul eyed David

from that day forward” (18:9). Normally, the word “eye” appears as a noun in the Bible, but here is the only place in Scripture where eye functions as a verb. “Saul eyed David” meaning he kept a jealous eye on David.

The rest of 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel is a virtual commentary on this jealous eye syndrome. In the verses which follow our lesson, Saul attempts to pin David to the wall with his spear (18:10). Saul resorts to the same desperate measures in the following chapter (19:10). When one of Saul’s priests attempts to stand up for David, Saul throws his spear his way, also (22:14-19).

Saul becomes insanely jealous of David. Envy ends up consuming Saul. Envy in Saul’s life is precisely a killer sin.

Proverbs 14:30 says it well: “A heart at peace gives life to the body but envy rots the bones.” Envy rots Saul to the bones. I considered titling my sermon, Peace rocks, envy rots, but I thought otherwise. But the sentiment is true—contentment gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.

Envy obsesses over what other people have. We are fine with what we have until we start comparing ourselves to other people. Suddenly, what we have isn’t enough. Envy wants what other people have.

***Envy  
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people have.***

Envy acts on the belief that achieving this one thing will give me greater stature and happiness and that not having it will diminish me in some way. My friends have nicer homes and cooler clothes. They have better cars, better cell phones and better everything. “*Invidia*,” the Latin word for envy, literally translates as resentment at seeing other people’s success.

Envy is an emotion we don’t like to admit to feeling. It’s one of those unmentionable sins. This is understandable since admitting to feelings of envy doesn’t paint a flattering portrait of us.

Thomas DeLong, a professor at Harvard Business School, writes about a disturbing trend among his students. In his book *Flying without a Net*, he calls it “comparison obsession.” He writes about a former student who graduated 10 years ago from Harvard Business School and has a terrific job at a Fortune 500 company. At least it seemed like a terrific job until she received her alumni newsletter and learned that a fellow alumnus, who had been in the MBA program with her, had just been named a Vice President at a Fortune 100 company. From that moment on, she could barely hold a conversation without bemoaning her lack of VP and Fortune 100 company status. On more than one occasion, she told people that she felt like a failure.

***Envy also  
blinds us to  
what we have.***

Professor DeLong makes the observation that business professionals, now more than ever, are obsessed with comparing their own achievement against others. He writes, “Over the last five years, I have interviewed hundreds of high-need-for-achievement professionals about this phenomenon and discovered that this comparing has reached almost epidemic proportions. This is bad for individuals and bad for companies—when you define success based on external rather than internal criteria, you diminish your satisfaction and commitment.”

He concludes, “In my 500 interviews with high-need-to-achieve-professionals over the last three years, more than 400 of them questioned their own success and brought up the name of at least one other peer who they felt had been more successful. Many of these individuals are considered among the best and the brightest, yet they are trapped by their own comparing reflex.”

Envy obsesses over what other people have. Envy also blinds us to what we have. Envy not only resents God’s goodness to other people. It also ignores God’s goodness to us.

Let’s return to the proverb referenced earlier: “A heart at peace gives life to the body but envy rots the bones.” Peace gives life to the body. The Hebrew word for the word

*...to center  
your  
heart...on  
God's  
goodness to  
you rather  
than God's  
goodness to  
someone else.*

peace, shalom, refers to well-being and contentment. A contented heart gives life to the body as well as the soul.

Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians, "I have learned in whatever state I am to be content" (4:11). The word "content" used in this verse is a term Paul borrows from Stoic philosophy. In Stoic thought, contentment means self-sufficiency. But here in Paul's letter, contentment references another type of sufficiency, namely a Christ-centered sufficiency. Paul continues in Philippians, "I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any situation; I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (4:12-13).

Notice Paul says he has learned contentment. Contentment is a learned behavior. It's an acquired attitude.

I offer you three suggestions for your consideration today:

First, I invite you to make a conscious decision to turn your heart, mind and will over to God, who offers peace and contentment. I found myself singing "But I still haven't found what I'm looking for" all week. But I have found what I'm looking for, or perhaps it found me. You will not find what you're looking for by climbing highest mountains,

scaling city walls or kissing honey lips. We believe God offers the world something unique in Jesus Christ. If this expresses your sentiment today, I invite you to make the closing prayer your heart's desire.

Second, I invite you to center your heart, mind and will this week on God's goodness to you rather than God's goodness to someone else. A gospel hymn from the 19<sup>th</sup> century comes to mind; "Count your blessings, name them one by one, and you'll be surprised what the Lord hath done."

Does counting your blessings actually help? Several studies indicate that gratitude has a positive influence on our lives. I encourage you today to list five things for which you are grateful. Count your blessings. Name them one by one.

Third, I invite you to commit Proverbs 14:30 to memory. We diminish the value of memorizing Scripture in our day. The benefit of Scripture memorization is the capacity for instant recall. Wouldn't it be great to have this verse on mental speed dial? "A contented heart gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones."