

Script, Pastor Frank Johnson
Aspiring for More, Contented with Less
“Godly Ambition vs. Grateful Contentment”
1 Chronicles 17; Philippians 3:12-16; 4:10-13

Take a first look.

I. I have told you before that several years ago I was talking with the new president of the Kittitas Valley Ministerial Association (KVMA), a fellow pastor here in the Kittitas Valley. I had just mentioned to him my lifetime motto. At that time, I would have stated it like this: “Aspiring for More, Settling for Less” (I have since revised it to “Aspiring for more, *being contented* with less” to be more accurate with what it means to me). I told him this simple idea had helped me both to keep my life moving in the right direction and to combat a spirit of discontent. He did not like my motto at all. He was intent on mobilizing all the churches in the county to win the region for Christ and make a world-scale impact for the kingdom of God. The part of my motto to which he objected was the second part: “settling for less.” He quibbled with me over that phrase. He wanted to aspire for more and more and more and never settle for less. I have since found that the term “settle” carried the wrong connotation. That’s why I changed it to “*being contented* with less.”

Over a year later, after that year was past, we were talking again about the KVMA, the work of Christ, and particularly the past year. He was lamenting how little he felt he had been able to accomplish during that year as the president of the KVMA. Recollecting our conversation of a year earlier, I hesitantly brought up my motto again. I did not wish to rub his nose it in, but to show what the idea meant to me, which both keeps me motivated and grounded. His godly aspiration (and that is just what it was) was commendable. I would not have tried to get him to back off of that one little bit. But what he needed (and what we also often need) is a solid balancing point. We need to learn the lesson of bringing together both godly ambition *and* grateful contentment. You will notice that both verbs in this motto are present tense: *aspiring* for more and *being contented* with less.

I tried to help my friend and fellow pastor to remember that God had inspired his ambitious goals. They had not all been realized, but they were surely worth aiming for. At the point of looking back and seeing how little progress he had been able to make toward them, he was feeling like a failure. However, I don’t think he had failed. Many good things had happened the past year. Pastors were praying together, joint services of worship had been held, and Jesus’ people were more focused on reaching out with the gospel. It was obviously going to take longer than a year for everything he had hoped for to happen. What he envisioned may happen in the next year, or in our lifetimes, or in the lifetimes of our great-grandchildren, or (May I even suggest this?) at the dawn of the third millennium!

II. Let’s rewind a few thousand years. In the latter half of King David’s life, he longed to present to the Lord a great gift of grateful love. The Lord had brought him from tending sheep for his father to leading what had become the most powerful nation in the Middle East. He had become king of the nation that would ultimately bring into the world the Savior of all people.

It appears that the new aspiration of King David’s heart came one day as he was walking through or sitting comfortably in his plush palace. A wild thought occurred to him. He mused, “I’m living in this luxurious palace, and the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD, the symbol of God’s presence with His people Israel, is sitting inside a tent. What’s wrong with this picture?”

The inspired author of 1 Chronicles gives us the setting and the story. Let’s look at it together and come to understand just a bit better how we must learn both to aspire for more and

to be willing to be content with less. We will also find a powerful parallel in the teaching of Paul, but let's not get ahead of ourselves.

¹ *Chronicles 17:1-15*

Now, mark your place in 1 Chronicles 17 and turn also to Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 3.

Take a closer look.

I. GODLY ASPIRATION MUST BE THE NORM FOR US AS GOD'S PEOPLE. See Philippians 3:12-16.

1. *Aspiring for more requires an honest assessment.* King David realized that there was much more that he could do for the LORD. He recognized that his own temporal blessing, a large spacious palace, seemed greater than the honor that was given to God. He lived in a palace of cedar while the Ark of the Covenant was sitting in a tent. He assessed the situation with humility and honesty.

Prior to chapter 3 in the letter to the Philippians, Paul had laid out his burning passion to identify with Jesus Christ our Lord in every manner. He wanted to share in His suffering so that he might also share in the power of His resurrection. But he moved right from this passion to the reality of his life. He shows us how godly ambition should be expressed.

Paul was willing to admit that he had not "arrived" yet. "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect..." (v. 12). "Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it" (v. 13).

A—Are we willing to make such an honest assessment today? Will we admit that we haven't arrived, that each of us needs more of God's purposes at work in our lives today?

We have not arrived! [Say it with me!]

I—Sometimes we just need to face the facts, to admit our need before God for recovery and growth.

I can identify with the poor pitcher who was struggling on the mound. When the coach came out, the young man didn't want to head for the showers yet. The coach pointed to the score and the fact that the bases were once again loaded. The determined pitcher said, "Yeah, but I struck this guy out last time he was up." The coach quietly took the ball out of his glove and replied, "I know, Son, but that's the only out we have in this inning."¹

An honest assessment keeps us from walking batter after batter until our arm falls off and we become useless for the season. God wants us to be ready when we alone can do what needs to be done.

2. *This requires a clear goal.* It is obvious from the story that King David had nothing else to prove in the world. His goal was clearly to glorify God.

¹ *In Other Words*, Spring 1999, p. 23.

Paul made it clear what his life was about. He wanted to “take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of” him. Paul wanted to **fulfill His calling**. He also wanted to receive the reward of being faithful to that calling all the way to the finish line. [see v. 14]

A—Are we willing to seek and affirm the calling of God for our lives?

Are we motivated for the glory of God, or are we more moved by the pursuit of our own comforts and pleasures? Whose “house” are we building, ours or God’s?

3. *This requires **earnest effort**.* It seems clear that David was ready to work hard at building a temple for the LORD. He had never held back on his devotion to God, even when he struggled with his own character. And as we know from reading on after the time of 1 Chronicles, he struggled to live the godly life that God had called him to live.

Paul’s refrain in Philippians is **11** “I press on” He says that he applied his earnest effort in three ways:

a. *“Forgetting what lies behind”* This included the false goals of his former life in Judaism. It would also include his past failures. It would also include his past successes as well. This is simply a clear reminder that we must not *live* in the past.

b. *“Straining toward what is ahead”* Here is godly aspiration as a disciplined practice. The goal of the marathon runner is not just to start off as the gun sounds, not just to have run in the race, not just to take home the commemorative t-shirt, but to *run with perseverance all the way to the finish line*.

c. *“Living up to “what we have already attained”* Paul at least wanted to retain all that God had already brought about in his life, even if progress was negligible. It takes progress in the Christian life to maintain, doesn’t it? These three taken together describe a life of earnest effort. Paul was not trying to earn his salvation, as if his own devotion could merit God’s favor. He was trying to live fully as a devoted child of God for the purpose to which God had saved him.

A—Are we willing to invest the time, the money, the sweat that it will take to cooperate with God for His purposes to be fulfilled in our lives?

I—Do you ever get too old to keep working at fulfilling God’s call for your life? Do you retire from such a calling? No, we may quit our jobs, but we never retire from the calling of God. My brother retired after 30 years in his career with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). I could no longer tease him about being “My brother, the bureaucrat.” What completely blew my mind, as we say, is that almost immediately after his retirement from the BLM, he was called to be the pastor of the church where he had been an active member, music leader, and deacon for many years. As I have told some of you, then my joke went something like this: “It’s about time you quit working for the devil and went to work for God!” The truth is, he had been working for God all his years—dare I say, even in the BLM?—and this new twist on the expression of that servant-life was as a pastor. My other joke is, this confirms that insanity truly runs in families (because our father was a pastor, too, and now two of my sons! We are a whole family line of crazy people!). Now on the more serious side, I commended my brother for his willingness to do what God led him to do. It made me admire him even more than I did

already. He began taking seminary classes also (in his “retirement”). We even took classes from the same, and he did well. What an amazing redirection of his life at the age of 59! May his tribe increase! My brother served faithfully as the pastor of that church for 12 years, until he passed on the reigns to a younger man who kept it going until it merged a year or so back with another local and growing congregation. Unexpectedly, my brother left this life just under 2 years ago in a freak ranching accident. He had “fought the good fight,” he had “finished [his] course,” and he had “kept the faith” (see 2 Timothy 4:7).

King David did not just settle in and retire from his service to the LORD, just because he could and just because the nation had become established and strong. Neither should we. “Contented with less” doesn’t mean that we quit aspiring for more. Well, this is what it means.

II. THE SPIRIT OF GRATEFUL CONTENTMENT MUST ALSO BE THE NORM FOR US AS GOD’S PEOPLE. See **Philippians 4:10-13.**

God sent a message to David on the very night after he began to hatch the whole scheme of building a temple for the LORD. The first sentence of the prophecy was clear: **17** “*You are not the one to build me a house to dwell in*” (1 Chronicles 17:4, NIV). As you listen on through the first few sentences of that prophecy (vv. 4-6), it seems like a hard message. “I haven’t asked anyone else to build such a House,” said the LORD. “I am not asking you to do so, either.” I can imagine his heart sinking deeper and deeper with every prophetic word from Nathan [As an aside, what a courageous prophet! Nathan was also the one God later sent to confront King David over his adultery with Bathsheba.]

Rather than becoming despondent, David kept listening, and he received a blessing from God that he could never have imagined. Note 1 Chronicles 17:8-14. Here is what God promised to David:

- (1) A “name like the names of the greatest men of the earth” (v. 8).
- (2) “A place for my people Israel” from which they would not be uprooted (v. 9). [Simple reminder in our present world-situation: God gave the land to Israel’s descendants, and He has not take it back. Any other claim on that land is illegitimate. The real colonizers in the Middle East are the Islamists who seek to ultimately rule the world. Now back to King David.]
- (3) That He would “subdue all [David’s] enemies” (v. 10).
- (4) That the LORD would “build a house for” him (vv. 10b-14).

Can you believe it? David aspired to build a house for the Ark of the Covenant. As an ironic play on words by the LORD, he said to David, “I will instead build a *house* for you,” a lasting *dynasty* for the generations to come (v. 14). David aspired to build a physical house for the Ark, and God gave him instead a lasting dynasty. His rule became for all the generations that followed the standard by which all others were judged. If they served faithfully and well, they were called “good,” *just like* David. If they were unfaithful, they were called “bad,” *unlike* David. His rule became the Old Covenant typology for the rule of the ultimate King of kings and Lord of lords, the Messiah, the Christ.

Philippians 4:10-13 provides the balance point for all that Paul revealed in our first passage. Was Paul *driven*? Did he “refuse to lose” as the T-shirt slogan says? I don’t think Paul would have worn such a slogan on his toga.

1. *We must not focus on personal need.* Paul commended the Christians in Philippi for renewing their interest in Paul and even for sending him help. He wanted them to understand that he was not whining in any way. He says, “I am not saying this because I am in *need*.”

2. *We must learn to be content.* This is an important insight. Paul had been through all sorts of experiences, those that represented the highs and lows of human and of Christian life. He described them in 2 Corinthians 11, in a passage where he defends his call to serve God as

an apostle against those who challenged him. It runs the gamut from flogging, to shipwreck, to betrayal, to hunger and thirst, and confirms that he saw the power of God at work in every experience, whether elating or painful. He had “learned to be content whatever the circumstances.” He knew “what it is to be in need,” and “what it is to have plenty.”

Apparently, Paul was able to handle either of these possibilities. When in need, he was not overcome by *bitterness* against the Lord for not providing as he wished Him to do, nor was he paralyzed by *fear* that the Lord would not come through this time. When in plenty, Paul was neither overcome by complacency, forgetting Who provided the abundance, nor by greed, thinking that his abundance was meant solely for himself and not rather to share with others in Christ’s name.

3. We must find our strength in the Lord, whatever the need. Verse 13 defines Paul’s secret. This is also the secret of King David’s contentment.

A—Are we willing to be content with whatever God has provided us? Can we draw our strength from the Lord, whether in want or in plenty, so that the times of want don’t cause us to lose our faith and the times of plenty don’t cause us to think we don’t need God after all?

I—Some of the great men and women throughout Christian history have learned all these same things through the ups and downs of life. Never forget the example of Gladys Aylward. I have a chapter in my upcoming book about her. Let me summarize some of her life for you. Gladys was born in 1902 and grew up in a Christian home in England. As she got to her teen years, she grew impatient and lost interest in things Christian. She wanted to be an actor on the stage, and she loved to dance. One evening, all that changed when she found herself swept by a crowd on the street into an evangelistic meeting. She was too shy to get up and leave. That evening, she heard how much Jesus loved her and that He had a spiritual claim on her life. At the conclusion of the service, she put her confident faith in Christ.

She then got involved in the Young Life Campaign and began to read literature about China, a vast country with few to bear witness to Jesus. She tried to convince family and friends to go there as missionaries. No interest. Finally, she concluded God wanted her to go. She attended the China Inland Mission school in London, but after 3 months, the admissions director sent her away. She just wasn’t qualified to serve in China, he thought. But she could not shake her sense of calling. She finally saved money from her housekeeping job and bought one-way fare by train across war-torn Europe and Asia, arriving in Yancheng with less than she had when she left England. She worked with a 73-year-old widow for a year, who had the crazy idea of running an inn for the leaders of mule trains: *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*. A movie by that title was made about Gladys in 1958 that starred Ingrid Bergman.

As war between China and Japan raged, the inn became a mobile aid station and then an orphanage of sorts. Gladys had never married, but she became the mother to many Chinese children whose parents had been killed or who could not take care of their children. A Chinese partner in the mission named Mr. Lu led 100 children to safety across the nearby mountains, but soon there were another 100. Gladys set out with them by herself for a journey of several weeks across mountains and the Yellow River to take them to safety. She fell ill for months afterward from the strain of that trip. The story was heard by a journalist visiting the area, and he wrote about it. This became the background for the movie that came later.

Many other adventures awaited Gladys, but God had provided for her and had empowered her witness for Christ. She left China only when the communist government under Mao forced missionaries and other foreigners to go. She continued to serve and inspire missionary support and involvement for the balance of her life. She even returned to Hong Kong and Taiwan, where she established an orphanage for Chinese refugee children. She concluded the story of her life

with this simple observation: "My heart is full of praise that one so insignificant, uneducated, and ordinary in every way could be used to His glory and for the blessing of His people in poor persecuted China."²

King David could have said the same thing that Paul said, which is the same thing that the Gladys Aylward realized: "I will press on to fulfill my calling before God. But, I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." They both learned that we all must draw our strength from the Lord.

I—King David's prayer expresses this well (see 1 Chronicles 17:16-27). David expressed the following perspectives as he offered what can only be described as a prayer of grateful contentment:

(1) "Who am I, O LORD God, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?" (vv. 16-17). And, "You have honored me, your humble servant, beyond my deserving" (vv. 18-19). David realized that every blessing in his life was a gift of God's grace.

(2) There is "no God but You" and no nation like Israel, "the one nation on earth whose God went out to redeem a people for himself" (vv. 20-22). David recognized what is repeated throughout salvation-history. God is the Redeemer; He alone can buy people back from oblivion and bring them into His eternal purposes.

(3) May the house you establish for me be for your glory alone (vv. 23-27). "Then men will say, 'The LORD Almighty, the God over Israel, is Israel's God!' (v. 24). David found the courage to pray because of the grace of God expressed to him.

Take it home (applications).

I. Where does our strength lie today?

1. Will we be self-sufficient and self-directed, driven to obtain our own selfish goals, no matter what?

2. Or, Will we be dependent on the Lord for our sense of direction and the strength we need to move resolutely down that path?

II. On what side of this balance does the Lord need to work in our hearts today?

1. Aspiring for more? How do our lives need to display godly aspiration for the purposes of God? Let's take a forward look. How does God desire to bring into our experience something of His eternal purposes?

2. Contented with less? How do we need to express grateful contentment to God for all that He has given and all that He has provided? Let's take a backward glance. How has God met our needs despite the lack of our perfection? How has God given us guidance? How has He brought us by His grace to this moment in time?

² Gladys Aylward and Christine Hunter, *Gladys Aylward: The Little Woman* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1970, 1999), p. 153.