

# Happiness, Contentment, and Charity

by  
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*Recently, the members of the Young Marrieds Class at our church began discussing their philosophies of material wealth. The first night was quite interesting. However, we were not able to attend class the following week when the main discussion was to take place. Therefore we wrote the following letter and gave it to our minister who was teaching the class so he could share it with the class. He later told us he enjoyed the letter and thought we were right on the mark.*

Dear Young Marrieds Class:

We enjoyed class last week and were looking forward to discussing our philosophy of material goods this week. However, we found out on Thursday that we would not be able to attend. Therefore, we decided to write this note about some of our ideas just in case they are appropriate for the class. The reason we were greatly interested in this topic is that we have, over the last year and a half, discussed our philosophy of material goods quite a bit. Some of our ideas are presented here in brief. We will be glad to discuss these ideas further with anyone who wants, or perhaps they can be discussed further in a future class.

After class last Wednesday, we discussed an idea presented by Linda. She was saying, in essence, that when you are newly married and don't have a lot of material goods, things such as houses, cars, furniture, etc. are important, but once you own these things you realize they are not as important as you thought. Happiness and contentment need to be discussed in this context. We believe that *happiness* generally comes from *pursuing* and *reaching* an attainable goal. However, after the goal is attained, happiness is replaced with *contentment*. Contentment is usually not as exciting as happiness and therefore can be misconceived as being less important. We would venture to say that if the goal, let's say a house, were taken away, it would once again seem important. In fact, this is likely the reason that we don't get rid of the house during the contentment phase. It is still important to us.

We believe that every person has his or her own comfort level of material possessions. When this level is attained, it becomes less important to the person to have more possessions. For some people, this comfort level only comes after acquiring great wealth. For others, a very meager amount of material goods is satisfactory. Once this level is reached and a person is content with his accomplishments, other things besides acquiring material goods become more important. These things could include: studying the Bible in more detail, doing volunteer work, pursuing an education, or raising the kids. We, meaning the Finch family, have essentially reached our comfort level. There are a few things that we would still like to have, but these things are not nearly as important to us as the things we currently own were a few years ago. I have a friend who says he has exceeded his comfort level but his wife has not.

When it comes to determining how much a person should use his wealth to help others in

need, Kathy and I believe that this is strictly an individual decision. The Bible does not spell out exactly how much of our wealth we should give to others, therefore it is left up to each person to decide. We believe the proper way is to give on a value-for-value basis. In other words, we must determine if what we receive from our giving is of equal or greater value to us than what we give. Don't confuse value with material goods. We can value our religion, our philosophy, or a good feeling. Thus, it could be that the good feeling we get from helping a disadvantaged child is worth more than the \$20 per month we donate. Even if you disagree with this philosophy, you probably live by it anyway. In fact, if you own any luxuries at all, you are living by this philosophy to some extent. There are enough needs in this world to consume the value of every luxury you own if you chose to sell them and give the money away. Yes, you may help needy people, but this only means that those you help are more important to you than what you *could* have used the money for. The fact remains that you still own a nice house, cars, TVs, stereos, and other luxuries. Why? Because these things are more important to you than *other* people you could have helped (see Randy's poem "Brothers' Keeper" at the end of this letter). For example, let's say you have \$10,000 in a savings account and a stranger comes to you and says that his son is seriously ill and needs an operation costing \$10,000. Would you give him your entire savings account? Probably not. Most likely you would give the man some lesser amount. What if your own child became ill and needed the same operation? You would not hesitate to empty your savings account. Why? Because you value your child more than the \$10,000, but you only value the stranger's child at the lesser amount. On a personal note, we used to give a certain percentage of our income to charity. After our son was born, we decided that he was more important to us than some of the charities we supported. Therefore, Kathy quit work to be a full-time mommy. We have greatly curtailed not only the amount, but the percentage of our income that we give to charity.

So what are we to do about the suffering in the world. There are entire countries living in abject poverty. Should we give all we have to help them? We do not believe so. Helping other people with material goods can be a good temporary measure but it can never solve the problem. Most of the poor living conditions in other countries stem from religious and/or political oppression. Until this stops, poverty will continue to be a pervasive problem. History has shown that capitalism is the only system that can create true wealth. Other systems such as socialism, fascism, communism, etc. have failed everywhere they have been tried. In fact, most of the poverty in our own country can be attributed to the degree in which our capitalistic system has been infiltrated by these other economic and political systems. The best thing that we can do to help people in poor nations materially is to assist them in implementing a proper political and economic system that gives them the freedom to create wealth just as we have in this country. Remember that the amount of wealth in the world is not a constant to be divided up like a pie. Wealth is created by free people working to better their lives.

**BROTHERS' KEEPER**

by  
Randy C. Finch

As I sit and ponder  
the universe so deep,  
I wonder if the things I sow  
are what I'll really reap.

Is the helping of other people  
the purpose of my life?  
Is this the way to happiness  
and the avoidance of strife?

But if what I give to others  
is returned a hundred fold,  
is not selfishness my motive  
and not whom I behold?

So what's the moral answer  
to helping those in need?  
Should I give to them aplenty  
or just a starting seed?

Should I give until it hurts  
or give 'til it feels good?  
Must I give until I'm needy  
and beg another's goods?

Perhaps it is the value  
of another in my sight  
that determines the 'mount of giving  
that is moral and is right.

For what if the stranger I rescue  
a murderer would be?  
Would I be in part responsible  
for the survivors that will grieve?

But then again the one I save  
might be the man who would  
make the world a better place  
and promulgate the good.

So how do I strike a balance  
between others' needs and mine?  
Should I possess a vineyard  
while you possess a vine?

I must admit that though I help  
others who have need,  
I still own a nice big house,  
two cars, and two TVs.

Although I put some men's misery  
above things I could possess,  
I put stereos and computers  
above others who are left.

Is the lap of luxury  
upon the knees of Satan  
or just a place that those with need  
love to direct their hate at?

With all the things that I've just said,  
how do I decide  
what to keep and what to give?  
How's this moral law applied?

If giving all is good and nothing sin,  
then where's the dividing line?  
Exactly how much should I give  
to be a moral man?

Or perhaps the poor among us  
should get the powers that be  
to forcibly take from those with much  
and give to those in need.

But consider that coercion  
does not moral giving make  
'cause charity in its truest form  
is freewill give and take.

So how should we divide our goods  
whether all or just residuals?  
The only moral and proper way  
is to leave it to individuals.