

Searching for Happiness



*How Generosity, Faith,
and Other Spiritual Habits
Can Lead to a Full Life*

MARTIN THIELEN

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

CONTENTS



Preface	ix
1. Contented People Know That External Circumstances Don't Determine Happiness	1
<i>"I kept my heart from no pleasure. . . . I . . . had great possessions. . . . I made great works. . . . Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind."</i> (Eccl. 2:10, 7, 4, 11)	
2. Contented People Use Trials as Growth Opportunities	19
<i>"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."</i> (James 1:2–4 NIV)	
3. Contented People Cultivate Optimism	33
<i>"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."</i> (Phil. 4:8 NIV)	

4. Contented People Focus on the Present	45
<i>“So don’t be anxious about tomorrow. God will take care of your tomorrow too. Live one day at a time.”</i> (Matt. 6:34 TLB)	
5. Contented People Practice Forgiveness	57
<i>“Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.”</i> (Luke 11:4 NIV)	
6. Contented People Practice Generosity	75
<i>“A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water.”</i> (Prov. 11:25)	
7. Contented People Nurture Relationships	87
<i>“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up.”</i> (Eccl. 4:9–10 NIV)	
8. Contented People Express Gratitude	99
<i>“Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you.”</i> (1 Thess. 5:18 NIV)	
9. Contented People Care for Their Bodies	111
<i>“Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.”</i> (1 Cor. 6:19–20 NIV)	
10. Contented People Care for Their Souls	121
<i>“Remember your creator. . . . Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone.”</i> (Eccl. 12:1, 13)	
Conclusion	133
Guide for Study and Reflection	135
Notes	161
About the Author	167

PREFACE



Years ago a successful, affluent, attractive woman with a picture-perfect family came to visit me. Her name was Sarah. A few minutes into the visit, Sarah began to cry her heart out. She told me that she had serious marital problems, major conflicts with her grown daughter, and overwhelming stress at work. During the conversation I asked her, “What do you most want out of life?”

With tears rolling down her face, Sarah said, “I just want to be happy.” After she regained her composure, we sat in silence for a moment. I could sense a debate going on in her mind. Finally, she decided to risk complete vulnerability. Sarah said: “I make a lot of money. I’m successful in my profession. And people tell me that I’m attractive. Yet I’m terribly unhappy. So I want to know—if money, success, and beauty don’t make you happy, what does?”

My conversation with Sarah occurred over twenty years ago. Since then I’ve discovered important insights into what makes people content. I’m now ready to answer Sarah’s question with a strong degree of confidence. For example, I’ve learned that although it sounds counterintuitive, Sarah is correct. Money, success, beauty, and other external circumstances don’t make people happy. Although that statement is a hard sell in America, in chapter 1, we’ll

see why it's true. In chapters 2–10, we'll explore nine things that actually do make people happy. However, before we begin, it's important to clarify that happiness is *not* the ultimate goal of Christianity. It does not rate up there with the Ten Commandments, the prophet's call for justice, the Great Commandment, or advancement of the kingdom of God. But the quest for authentic contentment—which every heart longs for and every person seeks—leads us to significant Christian themes, including relationships, generosity, forgiveness, gratitude, and faith, as we'll see in the following pages.

The conclusions in this book about achieving life satisfaction come from three primary sources: (1) theological and biblical teachings, especially from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes and the New Testament book of Philippians, (2) scientific research from the emerging discipline of “positive psychology,” and (3) my own experience, both professionally and personally. This book contains more personal disclosure than anything I've ever written before. However, I've learned a lot about contentment over the past few decades, and I want to share some of those insights. In short, this book will explore what Scripture, science, and my own experience teach about contentment.

Each chapter will include questions for study and reflection along with a challenge activity. At the back of the book is a brief study guide to help you use this in a group setting.

Before proceeding further, a brief clarification needs to be made. Throughout the following chapters I use the terms “happiness,” “contentment,” and “life satisfaction.” For the purposes of this book, these words are interchangeable. Rather than offering nuances of meaning, their only purpose is to offer variety in language. However, it's important to note that in every case, these terms refer to *internal*

well-being rather than *external* well-being, as chapter 1 fully explains.

So turn the page and let's explore Sarah's provocative question, "If money, success, and beauty don't make people happy, what does?"

CHAPTER 1



CONTENTED PEOPLE KNOW THAT EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES DON'T DETERMINE HAPPINESS

*I kept my heart from no pleasure. . . . I . . . had great possessions. . . .
I made great works. . . . Then I considered all that my hands had done
and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a
chasing after wind.*

—Ecclesiastes 2:10, 7, 4, 11

A familiar voice on the other end of the phone said, “Hi, Martin. It’s Larry. I’m in Nashville for a few days at a conference, and I wondered if we could have lunch together.” Larry, a clergy friend, serves as senior pastor at a large church in the South. At the time of his call, I worked at the denominational headquarters of my old church. The next day we met at a Mexican restaurant in West Nashville. We talked a long time about our work, our families, and the politics raging in our denomination.

The time quickly passed, and I assumed our visit was nearly over. But then, in a rare moment of transparency and honesty, Larry shared something that caught me completely off guard. He said, "For the past several years, I've been struggling with a strong spirit of discontentment." That revelation surprised me. From my limited perspective, Larry lived a charmed life. A handsome, intelligent, and outgoing man, he served a large and respected church in his home state. His wife, an attractive woman who sings like an angel, is smart, kind, and exceptionally funny. They have two beautiful and gifted children. On top of all that, Larry's wife came from a wealthy family, so money never posed a problem. And yet, in spite of all those blessings, Larry told me he rarely felt satisfied and had no inner peace. Concerned he might have clinical depression, he went to see a psychiatrist. However, the doctor told him he did not suffer from clinical depression and did not need antidepressant medication. Still Larry struggled daily with restlessness and discontentment.

An Inside Job

Larry told me that at first he assumed the problem was his church. He thought, *If only I could get a bigger and better church, then I would be content.* But Larry got a bigger and better church, and it didn't help. As soon as the initial excitement wore off, Larry felt just as discontented as before. Since the problem wasn't his church, Larry figured the problem must be his career. He thought he must be in the wrong profession. So he went to a top-flight career counselor, took a battery of aptitude tests, and engaged in numerous vocational interviews. But in the end he realized the problem wasn't his career. In fact, he discovered he was extremely well suited for pastoral work. After extensive evaluation,

Larry's career counselor told him, "I can't think of a better vocation for you than serving as a minister."

Larry finally said to me: "It's taken several years and numerous counseling sessions, but I've learned something extremely important. I've finally figured out that the problem is not my church or my vocation—but *me*. I've learned that my restlessness and discontentment are not an external problem but an internal problem. I've learned that happiness is an inside job."

Although it took significant effort, my friend Larry learned that external circumstances, including our jobs, have little impact on overall life satisfaction. In fact, external circumstances, including our job, money, house, and personal appearance, account for only a small fraction of a person's happiness. I know that's hard to believe, especially in America, but it's absolutely true. Science, experience, and Scripture all clearly teach that happiness is indeed, in Larry's words, "an inside job." However, given the counter-intuitive nature of this claim, I don't expect you to accept it at face value. So let's explore the evidence.

The Scientific Evidence

Like many of you, I vividly remember my freshman year of college. One of my first classes was Psychology 101. In that class we studied clinical depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, dysfunctional families, eating disorders, addictions, and other cheery topics! Over the past fifty years, the science of psychology primarily focused on pathologies—things that make people sick and miserable. But in recent years a growing number of psychologists have been studying what is called "positive psychology." Positive psychology focuses not on pathologies but on what makes people healthy and happy. For almost two decades,

leading psychologists at highly respected institutions like Harvard, Stanford, and the University of California have carefully studied happiness. For a comprehensive overview of this fascinating research, I recommend that you read *The How of Happiness: A New Approach to Getting the Life You Want* by Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky, professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside, whom I will cite extensively throughout this book. She's written a follow-up book called *The Myths of Happiness: What Should Make You Happy but Doesn't, What Shouldn't Make You Happy, but Does*.¹

The most interesting conclusion of positive psychology research is how little external circumstances impact life satisfaction. Most people believe life circumstances are the primary key to happiness. For example, if we took a survey of average Americans and asked, "What would make you happier?" they would likely list things like:

- Find a better job.
- Make more money.
- Own a nicer house.
- Have a more loving partner.
- Lose a lot of weight.
- Have a child.
- Be more physically attractive.
- Be a prominent member of the community.
- Inherit a large estate.

Most people believe that if we can get our circumstances just right, happiness will follow. However, positive psychologists have discovered this is a myth. Circumstances play a small role in happiness. In fact, life circumstances—including income, health, physical appearance, and marital status—account for only about 10 percent of a person's overall life satisfaction.

Take money, for example. Many people think, *If I can just get enough money, I'll be happy*. But that's not true. Extensive research has proven that after our basic needs are met, additional money has minimal impact on our happiness. In his book *Flourish*, Martin Seligman, a psychologist and an expert in happiness studies, cites amazing research. Pennsylvania Amish, Inuit people in northern Greenland, and African Masai — people who have minimal income and few material assets — have virtually the same levels of life satisfaction as *Forbes* magazine's richest Americans.² In spite of beliefs to the contrary, after our core necessities are met, money does not make people happy.

Neither does physical beauty. Although many of us believe beautiful people are happier than plain people, research has proven otherwise. Numerous studies have shown that attractive people are no happier than average-looking people. For example, one psychologist tells about a woman who had major cosmetic surgery on her face, including eye lifts, a face lift, a nose job, liposuction under her chin, and laser resurfacing of her skin. The surgery made her look younger and more attractive. But a year later she said: "I do have to say it's nice to have less wrinkles. But it didn't make me happier. The makeover is nothing compared to *real* happiness."³ Beauty, like money, does not make people happy. Neither does fame, children, a status job, youthfulness, or intelligence. Even good health doesn't make people more appreciably happy. In the end, external circumstances have minimal impact on happiness. It accounts for only about 10 percent of overall life satisfaction.

Although I'd like to go into far more depth on this subject, we have much more to cover. However, in order to give you a taste of the fascinating research on this important topic, I've listed the following quotes from three leading experts on the subject of happiness:

Lyubomirsky, in *The How of Happiness*, says:

- “The things most of us think create happiness—wealth, fame, beauty—don’t really matter all that much.”⁴
- “Changes in our circumstances, no matter how positive and stunning, actually have little bearing on our well-being.”⁵
- “Not only does materialism not bring happiness, but it’s been shown to be a strong predictor of unhappiness.”⁶
- “Beautiful people are not happier than their plain-looking relatives, colleagues, and friends.”⁷
- “Although you may find it very hard to believe, whether you drive to work in a Lexus hybrid or a battered truck, whether you’re young or old, or have had wrinkle-removing plastic surgery, whether you live in the frigid Midwest or on the balmy West Coast, your chances of being happy and becoming happier are pretty much the same.”⁸
- “Trying to be happy by changing our life situations ultimately will not work.”⁹

Richard Layard, economist, happiness expert, and author of *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, states:

- “Most people want more income and strive for it. Yet as Western societies have got richer, their people have become no happier.”¹⁰
- “For most types of people in the West, happiness has not increased since 1950. In the United States people are no happier, although living standards have more than doubled.”¹¹
- “When whole societies have become richer, they have not become happier.”¹²
- “Depression has actually increased as incomes have risen.”¹³

- “We have in the First World a deep paradox—a society that seeks and delivers ever greater income, but is little if any happier than before.”¹⁴
- “We can begin with five features that on average have a negligible effect on happiness . . . age . . . gender . . . looks . . . IQ . . . education.”¹⁵

Martin Seligman, who also wrote *Authentic Happiness*, claims:

- “The less fortunate are, by and large, just as happy as the more fortunate. Good things and high accomplishments, studies have shown, have astonishingly little power to raise happiness more than transiently.”¹⁶
- “Rich people are, on average, only slightly happier than poor people.”¹⁷
- “Physical attractiveness . . . does not have much effect at all on happiness.”¹⁸
- “Objective physical health, perhaps the most valuable of all resources, is barely correlated with happiness.”¹⁹
- “Once a person is just barely comfortable, added money adds little or no happiness. Even the fabulously rich—the *Forbes* 100, with an average net worth of over 125 million dollars—are only slightly happier than the average American.”²⁰
- “Surprisingly, none of them (education, intelligence, climate, gender and race) much matters for happiness.”²¹

The research is clear. In the end, external circumstances have little impact on life satisfaction. Of course, they can make a short-term impact on our happiness. If we win the lottery, we will be extremely happy but only for a short while. For example, a classic study of Illinois State Lottery winners (people who won between fifty thousand and one million dollars in 1970s dollars) revealed an amazing

fact. Less than a year after winning the lottery, winners were no happier than regular folks who did not have the good fortune of receiving a windfall of money.²² The same dynamic is true with getting a new house or car, getting engaged or married, having a child, or getting a promotion. These things will briefly raise our happiness, but it wears off rapidly. Bottom line: psychological research has proven that circumstances do not significantly increase long-term contentment.

The Experiential Evidence

As we've seen, psychological research reveals that external circumstances do not impact happiness in any significant way. Experience also supports that conclusion. Many rich, beautiful, and famous people live miserable lives of broken relationships, substance abuse, and crippling, sometimes suicidal, depression. For example, while I was writing this book, the talented and wildly successful comedian and actor Robin Williams tragically took his own life. On the other hand, a lot of simple, economically modest, and average-looking people live lives full of joy and happiness. No significant correlation exists between external circumstances and life satisfaction.

I've worked in pastoral ministry for over three decades. I've served small churches with hundreds of members, large churches with over a thousand members, and a megachurch with ten thousand members (adults and children). My profession constantly puts me in close contact with large numbers of people. After decades of pastoral experience, one thing has become overwhelmingly clear to me: external circumstances like money, status, success, popularity, beautiful homes, personal appearance, education levels, and IQ have little impact on life satisfaction. Some

of the most miserable people I've known are rich, successful, attractive, well educated, and prominent. On the other hand, some of the happiest people I've known have few financial assets, minimal social status, average physical appearance, and even poor health. After decades of being in the people business, I've seen firsthand the extremely small correlation between external circumstances and contentment.

Not only has this been true in my professional life, but it's also been true in my personal life. In one of my previous books, *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?*, I confessed that in my early adult years I chased after money in the business world and then chased after success in the church world. Although I attained some degree of wealth and success, it never satisfied my desire for contentment. Finally, through a series of life-changing events and a powerful epiphany, I finally realized, like my friend Larry, that contentment is not dependent on external circumstances but is "an inside job." For over twenty years I've been highly content, regardless of the circumstances.

Instructively, the least contented professional experience of my life—although I still maintained a good bit of personal contentment—occurred during a two-year stint as senior pastor of a megachurch. It was the largest church of my denomination in my state and one of the largest in the nation. It represented the pinnacle of my career—an extremely high-status and high-salary job. The church enjoyed exceptional facilities, a massive staff, a huge membership, and impressive ministries and programs. The job even came with a company car. I had "arrived" in my profession. Ironically, I did not like the job. The shift from a pastoral role to a CEO role proved a difficult fit. The daily complexities of leading a huge organization exhausted me. The sky-high expectations to be an ideal preacher, leader, and pastor felt impossible to fulfill. Conflict, inevitable in all

congregations, grows exponentially with size and took away much of the joy of ministry. Finally, the relentless criticism that comes from being in such a public and high-profile job took a toll on me. It didn't take long in that setting for me to realize that I enjoyed smaller, less status, and less paying pastorates far more than the megachurch. I vividly learned through that experience that *external circumstances like status and salary have virtually no bearing on happiness*. I know from both professional and personal experience—external circumstances do not make people happy.

The Scriptural Evidence

Both science and experience affirm that external circumstances do not make much of a dent in personal happiness. Scripture teaches the same truth. Although many examples could be given, perhaps the best come from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes.

The writer of Ecclesiastes reminds me of an unusual cartoon I once saw. The cartoon depicts a cow wearing fine jewelry and drinking a cocktail with her husband, a bull named Wendell. She tells him, “Wendell, I’m not content.” That’s the story of Ecclesiastes. In spite of positive external circumstances—like affluence, status, and power—for most of his life, the writer of Ecclesiastes (who is not identified in the book) was not happy. Instead, he felt exceptionally unhappy. Why? Because he sought contentment through external circumstances, including education, entertainment, possessions, and career success. Thankfully, the writer of Ecclesiastes—called “the Teacher”—eventually realized that happiness was “an inside job,” and he turned to more fruitful contentment strategies, which we will explore later in this book. But before traveling down these more productive

paths, he unsuccessfully searched for happiness in all the wrong places.

Ecclesiastes begins by reviewing four popular but ultimately dead-end paths people often travel in their quest for a contented life. The writer of Ecclesiastes spent most of his adult life walking down these four paths. However, these external efforts to find happiness did not satisfy him, so he warns his readers not to follow his example. If we'll heed Ecclesiastes' warning to steer clear of these paths as a means for finding happiness, we can avoid a lot of unnecessary pain and wasted time. Let's review all four paths.

1. *The Path of Philosophy.* In chapter 1, the writer of Ecclesiastes said, "I said to myself, 'I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge'" (v. 16). In his quest for happiness, Ecclesiastes turned to education, wisdom, and knowledge.

Philosophy is still a popular path to follow today. Many people believe they can find ultimate meaning in life through education and knowledge. But as we've already seen, the path of philosophy has little impact on life satisfaction. As Seligman notes in his book *Authentic Happiness*, intelligence and education make almost no positive impact on happiness levels. His research shows that education "is not a means to higher happiness . . . nor does intelligence influence happiness in either direction."²³ The Teacher of Ecclesiastes came to the same conclusion. As he reflected on his efforts to gain knowledge and wisdom, he said, "For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow" (1:18). Since he could not find happiness in his mind, the Teacher tried to find it in his body, as we'll see in the second path he followed on his quest for contentment.

2. *The Path of Pleasure.* In chapter 2 the writer of Ecclesiastes said, "Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself.' . . . I searched with my mind how to cheer my

body with wine. . . . I got singers . . . and delights of the flesh, and many concubines. . . . Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure” (2:1, 3, 8, 10).

In his quest for contentment, the writer of Ecclesiastes looked to numerous forms of pleasure. For example, he indulged in wine, music, and women. Today people still turn to pleasure to find contentment. And they still look to wine, music, and women—and a host of other pleasures, both healthy and destructive. However, in the end this path does not deliver on its promise to bring happiness. As Seligman said, “The ‘pleasant life’ might be had by drinking champagne and driving a Porsche, but not the good life.”²⁴

When my son, Jonathan, was a boy, I took him to the county fair. He talked me into riding the Tilt-A-Whirl. For a while it was fun. But the ride went on and on. People frantically screamed at the ride man to stop the ride. But he just sat there, staring at us with a sadistic smile. He kept spinning us around for what seemed like hours. Jonathan and I felt desperately sick. Finally he stopped the ride. If I hadn’t been so sick and if I hadn’t been the pastor of First Church, I would have punched this guy out! Pleasure works the same way. It’s enjoyable for a while and can even be good and healthy. We all need diversions and fun. But if all we have is another trip to the fair or another vacation to plan or another football game or concert to attend—if pleasure is all we have—it’s like a carnival ride that never ends, leaving us dissatisfied and ill. As the writer of Ecclesiastes said sarcastically, “I said of . . . pleasure, ‘What use is it?’” (2:2). Pleasure, by itself, is not enough. Since pleasure did not satisfy his deep longing for contentment, the Teacher of Ecclesiastes tried a third path.

3. The Path of Possessions. The Teacher of Ecclesiastes said, “I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I

also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings” (2:7–8).

In America accumulating possessions is a highly popular path for finding contentment. Somehow we believe acquiring more things will add meaning to our lives. We think if we can just get a bigger house, a newer car, a home theater system, or a bigger stock portfolio, then we’ll be happy. But as we’ve already seen, the path of possessions doesn’t work. For example, social scientists have long studied contentment levels among nations. Fifty years ago Americans were the most contented people on earth. Since then we have raised the standard of living in this country in amazing ways. We are the most affluent people in the world. We live in big houses, drive high-quality cars, have TVs and computers in every room, own closets full of clothes, and own every electronic gadget imaginable. But in recent years major studies have revealed that America is no longer the most contented nation on earth. In spite of all the stuff we’ve purchased, America has fallen from the most contented nation in the world to a far less contented country. In spite of all our consumption, and the environmental damage it took to produce it, we are less satisfied with life, not more. Having lots of possessions does not lead to contentment. No matter how much stuff we get, contentment remains elusive.

I’m not naive about money. We are economic creatures and need at least some possessions. Nobody can live a quality life without having basic needs met. But once our core necessities are met, more stuff will not satisfy the deep longing in our souls for meaning and satisfaction. The idea that more stuff buys happiness is an American myth and lie that the American church needs to challenge. In short, materialism just doesn’t work. The writer of Ecclesiastes learned that. He said of all his possessions, “Everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (2:11 NIV).

In chapter 5 he adds, “Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income” (5:10 NIV). So far the writer of Ecclesiastes has tried three paths in his quest for a meaningful life. None satisfied his longing for purpose, meaning, happiness, and contentment. So he tried a fourth path.

4. *The Path of Production.* The Teacher of Ecclesiastes said, “I made great works. . . . I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem” (2:4, 9). Since philosophy, pleasure, and possessions did not bring him contentment, the Teacher looked to his career, his successes, and his accomplishments. He said, “I made great works.”

Production is probably the most popular path Americans follow to find contentment. They constantly try to find meaning and happiness through their careers. But once again this path does not work. As Seligman notes, “High accomplishments . . . have astonishingly little power to raise happiness more than transiently.”²⁵ The writer of Ecclesiastes learned the hard reality that career success, in spite of its many benefits, does not bring happiness. He put incredible energy into the path of production. He made it to the top. He produced. He became highly successful. But all that success did not give him the meaning and contentment he sought. In one of the saddest verses in the Bible, he said, “When I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun” (2:11 NIV). In the end the Teacher finally realized that career production and success are not the secret of a contented life.

Late in his life the writer of Ecclesiastes realized that the four paths he had spent most of his life traveling—the paths of philosophy, pleasure, possessions, and production—were ultimately bankrupt in terms of producing happiness. They could not satisfy; they could not offer contentment. Each path promised far more than it could deliver.

Please don't misunderstand what I'm saying. I'm not suggesting that these four things are unimportant, because they are. Everyone needs some education. Everyone needs some pleasure in life. Everyone needs at least some possessions. And everyone needs to be productive in some way. We all need to work, either on the job, at home, or in a volunteer capacity. Work is a crucial part of life. So while these four paths are all important, they are not the secrets of happiness. Why? Because contentment does not come from external circumstances. Instead, contentment is "an inside job."

Lost in the Forest

The Teacher's story reminds me of a rabbinical story about a man who went for a walk in the forest. After walking for a while, he became hopelessly lost. He wandered around for hours, going down one path and then the other, but none of them led out of the forest. Then abruptly he came across another hiker walking through the forest. He cried out: "Thank God for another human being! Can you show me the path that leads back to town?"

The other man replied: "No, I'm lost, too. But we can help each other in this way. We can tell each other which paths we walked down that led nowhere, and through the process of elimination, we can figure out the path that leads home."

That's exactly what the writer of Ecclesiastes does in his book. He tells us that the path of philosophy, pleasure, possessions, and production (external circumstances) are not the secrets of a contented life. Thankfully, Ecclesiastes also shares some right paths on the journey toward contentment, and we'll review those later in the book. But for now it's crucial to understand that external circumstances do not determine life satisfaction and happiness.

The 90 Percent

A few final notes are in order before moving on. We've already said that circumstances amount to only 10 percent of a person's happiness. That raises the question: What about the other 90 percent? Although some people are discouraged to learn it, genetics plays a major role in a person's happiness. In fact, research has shown that 50 percent of a person's overall happiness is genetic. Every person has a genetic "set point" of happiness that is inborn and does not change, regardless of circumstances or behaviors. While 50 percent is significant, thankfully it's not 100 percent. This means you and I still have a good bit of control in determining our overall life satisfaction.

The remaining 40 percent of a person's happiness levels is the direct result of our attitudes and behaviors, which, unlike genetics, we can control. Although 40 percent is not a massive number, it does mean we can have a major impact on our happiness. In short, the attitudes we foster and the behaviors we follow will make a significant impact on our contentment.

The rest of this book will focus on the 40 percent of happiness we can influence. Since we cannot control our genetics, there's no sense worrying about that. And since circumstances have such little impact on happiness and many of our circumstances are beyond our control, there's no use spending time on that either. But you and I have full control over the 40 percent. For example, let's say we have a low genetic set point for happiness, along with difficult life circumstances. If so, perhaps we have only a 30 percent happiness grade. Back when I went to school, that was an F minus on the grading scale. But, we can add 40 percent to that low score, bringing us up to 70 percent, which is at least a C minus! The point is that we can have a strong impact on our overall contentment level by intentionally practicing attitudes and behaviors that lead to happiness.

This 40 percent factor is what I find most interesting. After years of extensive research, psychologists have discovered at least nine practices—all of which are under our control—that lead to happiness. What I find especially compelling is that all nine of those happiness traits are taught in the Bible, as we'll see in chapters ahead. They are also confirmed by experience. So when it comes to overall life contentment, science, experience, and Scripture are in complete agreement. The following nine attitudes and behaviors make people content:

1. Contented people use trials as growth opportunities.
2. Contented people cultivate optimism.
3. Contented people focus on the present.
4. Contented people practice forgiveness.
5. Contented people practice generosity.
6. Contented people nurture relationships.
7. Contented people express gratitude.
8. Contented people care for their bodies.
9. Contented people care for their souls.

To these nine traits we will now turn our attention.