

I. As we continue our series on deepening relationships, it probably wouldn't surprise you if I said that our relationship with God is central to all the other relationships

A. Often when we talk about our relationship with God, the talk quickly turns very personal and individually oriented

1. After all, relating to God feels very subjective: I can't speak for what you think of God or how YOU experience God (if you do)
 - a) Some people prefer to call this God thing "divinity" or "the Great Spirit" or a "higher power" or some other label
 - b) Regardless of what I call it, I can only reflect on my relationship with God based on my own thinking and personal experiences with God
2. For me, part of that experience is my choice to consider the Bible as a very unique and privileged source of revelation about who God is and what God does
 - a) Not everyone who talks about God gives special authority to the Bible, but as a Christian that is an essential starting point for me
 - b) But having said that ... the Bible itself is not God ... You can have a relationship with God even if you know very little about the Bible ... or even if you're quite skeptical about the Bible

B. So today I'm drawing unapologetically from my own experiences of how I relate to God ...

C. To be sure, there are some biblical bases for what I'm sharing ... But I prefer to start off with a story of something that happened to me almost two months ago. [back to pulpit]

II. I was meeting with my spiritual director, as I do about every 5 to 6 weeks

A. His job is not to decode what God is telling me, nor to direct me exactly what to do in my spiritual life

1. His job is to listen well, ask a few purposeful questions about my spiritual beliefs and practices, and then to help me see for myself what God is doing
2. In talking with him in May, I was pondering my own spiritual life and my pastoral ministry, now in my 14th year at Waterford

B. He asked what I fear, and what I desire

1. I said that I fear complacency ... getting stuck in a rut, doing the same old thing, losing passion for God's kingdom in this world and simply taking the path of least resistance

2. I also said that I desire contentment ... to be satisfied with my limitations under God's grace ... to be able to say that my life and my ministry are making a difference and to feel at peace about the path I'm on, even with the stresses and disappointments

C. Complacency and contentment:

1. I began to wonder what the difference is between these 2 ... What is the relationship between them? That's what I want to explore this morning relative to our relationship with God

2. First I realized that complacency and contentment are not opposites

a) In terms of our human energy and activity levels, the opposite of complacency is not contentment; it's more like hyperactivity ... or superproductivity

(1) I'm not talking about hyperactivity in a clinical sense that people sometimes get diagnosed with

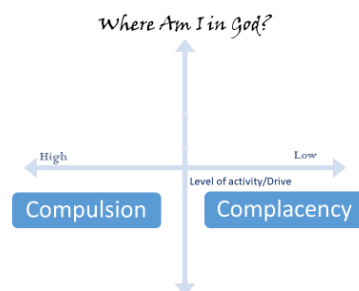
(2) I'm talking about the need to be productive, to always be doing something or making something ... the characteristic of being easily bored and always needing a challenge or a thrill

b) I struggled to name what I was thinking of ... this opposite of complacency, until it finally came to me: it's compulsion (the 3rd big C)

3. But if compulsion is the opposite of complacency, then how do I arrive at what I really desire, which is contentment? I wondered, "What does contentment have to do with these other 2 C's?"

III. That's when I realized, with my spiritual director's help, that contentment is really about where your center is

A. So to make sense of all these values and how they relate to me & God, I began to visualize them as part of a matrix, with 2



different axes

d) When I'm in the lower half of this diagram, if God is even considered, I make sure that either God doesn't take control & slow me down from my own path, or I make sure that God's path doesn't make me uncomfortable.

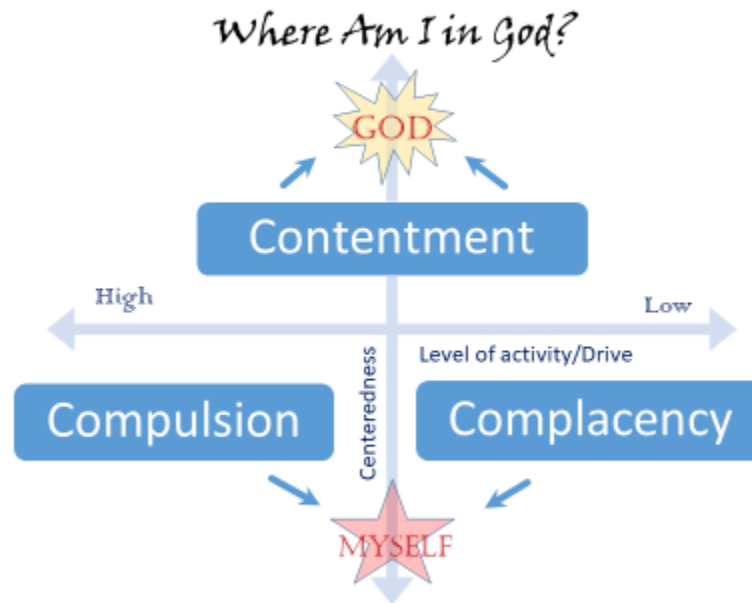
C. Summer is here & some of you are going to be taking big road trips. Just imagine for a moment that the spiritual life is like traveling in a car:



What happens when Christian complacency & Christian compulsion take a road trip together?

1. Compulsive persons have a hard time seeing God involved in the trip because they refuse to give up the driver's seat or the stereo or the GPS
2. Complacent persons don't mind if God drives AS LONG AS: the air conditioning works, the seats are cushy and headphones are available to cover up other people's annoying sounds on the trip!

D. OK, so this is a nice visual concept that I cooked up



, but you

may wonder if there's anything biblical about this?

IV. Actually, there are some examples of contentment, complacency & compulsion showing up in the NT

A. One of the best examples Jesus gave us of a deeply rooted human relationship with God is that powerful scene in the Garden of Gethsemane on Thursday night of Holy Week

1. After their last Passover meal together, Jesus leads his disciples down from Jerusalem to that olive grove called Gethsemane.
2. He feels the crushing weight of the looming conflict between God's nonviolent way of redemptive sacrificial love, and the coercive power-hungry way of the Jewish leaders and the Romans
3. But Jesus doesn't give in to compulsion or complacency
 - a) He could have taken some compulsive options into his own hands ...
 - (1) Either aligning himself with the zealots, in order to resist the Romans with violence ... OR
 - (2) Listen to his own words a few verses later in Matt. 26, "*Do you think I cannot call on my Father and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?*" That too would be a compulsive response, to take charge himself.
 - (3) In that pivotal moment, he does not respond with compulsion
 - b) But neither does Jesus turn to complacency

(1) We don't see the Son of Man as a doormat, a mere instrument being wielded within his heavenly Father's plan

(2) Jesus doesn't just "play nice" here ... he doesn't silently "go along with the salvation game"

(a) He certainly doesn't pray to God, with a "Yes, Father. Of course, Father. Whatever you say, Father." ...

(b) Instead there is an agonized pleading, "If it is possible ... let this cup pass from me!"

4. Jesus is obedient, but he is not complacent! Instead, he is centered on God's will at that moment, which I believe provides a peculiar kind of centeredness, apart from whether he feels joyful

B. Another NT example of these 3 C's is in the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians, in chapter 3

1. Paul is in a Roman prison when he is recounting all his possible bragging points within Judaism ... These are reasons for why he could take pride in his own righteousness if he wishes

a) Yet he counts all these gainful things as loss, for the sake of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ his Lord!

b) If Paul wanted to be compulsive, he would hold on tightly to those religious badges of honor he has just named ... but he doesn't

c) Yet complacency is not Paul's stance here either:

(1) A complacent person is not seeking after some new power ... as Paul describes longing for the power of X's resurrection

(2) A complacent person does not seek to participate in someone else's suffering, nor to imitate how someone died

2. Yet Paul says he presses on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called him heavenward. Being centered in God, he says that nothing else is more important than knowing Christ Jesus!

C. As for contentment, although that word does not show up explicitly in Philippians 3, it is featured later in Paul's letter, in chap. 4, the 2nd half of verse 11 to v. 13 (read NIV)

1. As for me, I am challenged every day to surrender my attitude and my actions to God, to be centered more in God than in myself

a) But I admit it's fairly easy for me to promote contentment as being centered in God ... easy for me to come up with this handy diagram

(1) I'm a white, married straight man in a comfortable job living in a comfortable house. I'm in fairly good health with no major crisis

in my life

(2) Why shouldn't I be content?

b) But Apostle Paul when he's writing this does not have a wife and kids to support him ...

(1) He is in prison, in chains, so he can't support himself and has to depend on the charity of friends ...

(2) In fact, he knows that his prison stay might end with his being executed rather than being freed

2. How amazing then, that Paul has learned the secret of being content in any circumstance!

a) Whether he's comfy and well-fed, or whether he's starving and behind bars, he is content! (I doubt all of us could say the same thing!)

b) I believe it's precisely because Paul knows Christ ... because his life, his value and his destiny are all centered in God rather than himself

V. Today we're focusing on our relationship with God ... So what about you, brothers and sisters?

A. I know this matrix isn't the only frame thru which you can look at your relationship with God ... but can you find yourself somewhere in this diagram?

1. Maybe compulsion is your struggle ...

a) not talking merely of being active and busy, but having a strong insistence, an obsession with activity ...

b) If you had to suddenly go on a weeklong spiritual retreat by yourself in silence, would that scare you, or drive you nuts?

2. On the other hand, compulsion may not be your spiritual shadow side at all ...

a) maybe it's comfort and complacency that you need to guard against ...

b) When the Holy Spirit is stirring, calling people to step up for the kingdom of God, do you find yourself drowning out that internal voice? ... coming up with excuses why it doesn't apply to you?

B. Either way, whether you like to actively make things happen or patiently let things happen, the invitation is to move toward contentment by being more centered in God

1. Contentment is not just a switch that you flip on ... It is a way of living that you cultivate by your outward and inward habits

2. There are many practices that can help you move toward contentment. Let me name a few:

- a) Simply doing **regular Bible reading** can move you toward contentment because it implants God's words & God's desires in your mind, instead of relying only on your own self-based instincts
- b) Try a frequent **prayer of surrender** during your day: consciously offering all of your decisions big & small to God's direction & influence ... especially doing this when feel stress or anxiety rising up inside
- c) As I mentioned a few years ago, some people use a way of contemplative practice called **Centering Prayer**, which is more about silence and attentiveness in the moment, than it is about talking to God
- d) I would be remiss not to mention some of the special practices we are encouraging @ WMC during Cindy's sabbatical this summer:
 - (1) **Prayer of examen** ... now can even use sabbatical notebooks
 - (2) **Group contemplative prayer** Thursdays here at 6:30 pm
 - (3) **Prayer stations** on our wetlands trails

VI. Conclusion:

A. As we continue in our series on relationships, **let this primary relationship with God the Creator, Redeemer & Sustainer be the grounding force for all your other relationships**

B. **May these words from Scripture keep ringing in your heart and mind as you go out from here this week:**

Words for centering your life

- ❖ *Father, not my will but yours be done.* Matt. 26:39
- ❖ *I consider everything a loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.* Phil. 3:8
- ❖ *I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.*
Phil. 4:13

1. “Father, not my will but yours be done.”
2. “I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”
3. “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength”

C. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock & our redeemer!