

## Keeping Up with the Joneses | Amy Simpson

I'm as guilty of me-too-ism as the next person, but what does that really say about my commitment to be a person of transformative contentment?

My 10-year-old daughter wants a mobile phone. She knows she's not getting one anytime soon, but she keeps asking anyway. When I ask her why she wants a phone, she basically says, "Because everyone else has one." (When I ask her who "everyone else" is, she can name only a few people, but that's beside my point.) When I ask what important purposes her phone would serve that the family phone doesn't, she pretty much draws a blank. She just wants to have what other people have. She's so like the rest of us.

I'm as guilty of me-too-ism as the next person, and as I've paid attention, I've noticed three activities in particular fuel my sense of discontentment: watching TV, watching my neighbors, and taking even one step inside a mall. As far as I know, I have no actual Joneses living in my neighborhood. But I'm surrounded with people who might as well be Joneses, because I want to keep up.

We are motivated by competition, and acquiring possessions feels good (at least temporarily). As long as we're surrounded by advertising that appeals to our desires, we'll lust for more. As long as people around us have things we don't have, we'll not be content. And as long as we feel that lack of contentment, we'll fool ourselves into believing that "one more" will satisfy us.

Not only are we surrounded by fuel for our discontentment; in these economically troubled times we're actually told to consume more for the sake of our system, which apparently is so deeply grounded in greed and unchecked consumption, it can't withstand the shock of people living within their means. Apparently, discontentment fuels a better life for all of us (or at least those of us who are "haves"). It also fuels chronic and widespread unhappiness with the "better life" we lead. It fuels workaholicism, greed, griping, theft, oppression, obsession, exploitation, and destruction.

Cue the spiritual discipline of expressing gratitude. In a society like ours, in times like these, this actually may be one of the most difficult spiritual disciplines to exercise with consistency and authenticity. And yet every moment that we let God's Spirit lead us to focus on his goodness is a transformative moment for us.

Is Jesus Unfair?

Jesus' parable in Matthew 20 illustrates what happens to us when we focus on what other people have. In the parable of the Vineyard Workers, a landowner hires men to work in his vineyard, agreeing on a price for their work. A few hours later, he finds more workers and sends them to his vineyard. He does this again a few hours later, and again. And finally at five o'clock (one hour before "quitting time"), he hires more workers and sends them into the vineyard.

When the time comes to pay the workers, the laborers who began working first are shocked when the landowner pays every worker the same wage. He pays them the wage they had agreed

to, but when they see that the men who worked only one hour receive the same amount, it doesn't seem like enough for themselves. The landowner's response: "Friend, I haven't been unfair! Didn't you agree to work all day for the usual wage? Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am kind to others?" (Matthew 20:13-15). Ugh. I think I recognize myself here.

Jesus told this parable as an illustration of the kingdom of heaven. And what a fitting illustration of how we tend to respond to others' blessings. Rather than focusing on how God has blessed us, we want more money, more impressive gifts and talents, and more comfortable circumstances.

Many of us tend to live as if we believe we never have enough. We deserve more, better, and easier. We *need* what other people have. These beliefs are built on lies and pave a path to misery. Gratitude, on the other hand, changes our focus from our neighbors to God. From what we don't have to what God has done. From our desires to our blessings. Gratitude can even move us to focus on—and meet—others' needs, especially if we take the step of purposely spending time with people who have less than we do. God can overwhelm us with a sense of his goodness. And that sounds a lot like contentment to me.