



Caroline: There are two words that we wouldn't necessarily put together. They are ambition and contentment. So how do we navigate the uneasy space between ambition and contentment?

Victoria: If as a Christian, I should be content. Then when I am ambitious, is that a sign I am not content? Can we be both content and ambitious at the same time?

Caroline: Hello again, welcome to an episode of the Her Work podcast. I'm Caroline Spencer, and it's great to have you with us. Here at the Her Work podcast, our tagline is Reframed by Jesus. We want to have conversations about work and what it means as workers to work well in God's world. This podcast is brought to you by City Bible Forum where I'm a trainer and mentor. Sitting across from me, my conversation partner for today, is Victoria. Victoria is a barrister, a wife, and a mother of a teenager and a tween. Welcome Victoria.

Victoria: Thank you Caroline.

Caroline: I'm looking forward to our conversation today. It is a conversation, not an interview, and that gives us both the opportunity to contribute to the conversation in different ways. Today, we're going to be talking about how to navigate that uneasy space between ambition and contentment. I might start with you, Victoria. Can you share some examples of where you've experienced that tension between ambition and contentment?

Victoria: I can think of a couple of different ones in different aspects of my life.

First of all, I felt it very acutely years ago now when I was returning to work after having my first child who was 6 months old and then again, when I returned after having my daughter, who was also 6 months old. I just felt the pull of home very strongly. But at the same time, I didn't want to give up my old job, which I'd invested a fair bit of time, energy, and money into. I just felt that perhaps I wasn't doing the right thing by trying to keep up with my old life, to do this job, which, although I'd invested a lot into, also demanded a fair bit of me, when I now had a totally different life change with these little people to look after. And so I wondered, although I'm not sure I viewed it in these terms, but I thought a lot about this and came to think about it in this way in the years since, whether by being ambitious in the sense of wanting to hold on to my old job and progress that, that meant I wasn't being content with my new life circumstances.

And then the second more current example I've been thinking of is that I've realised that in my leisure time, I'm someone who likes to set goals for myself. Which I know a lot of people do, and I think I'm good at relaxing as well. But for instance, in the holidays that we've just had over January, I had a few weeks off work and I wanted to read a lot, which was fine. I also felt the need for a goal and so decided to try and read the complete works of William Shakespeare. And I rather ambitiously thought that I would get through that by the end of January while also, you know, lying on the beach and doing other things and reading other books. I have not, so I've extended my goal to the end of the year. And



similarly with exercise - I like to exercise. Like most people, it's good for us. I like being outside. It's very different from my work. I'm not someone who can just go for a walk or even just go for a run. I have to have a goal. And so in recent years, I've been running a couple of marathons or ultra marathons a year. And I've thought a bit about that. What is that about me that makes me want to do that? Why am I ambitious even in my leisure time? Does that mean I'm not content with the rest of my life?

Caroline: They're great examples. Thanks for sharing.

Victoria: My pleasure.

Caroline: I think to explore this uneasy space between ambition and contentment, it's probably good to start by defining our terms. So what do we mean by ambition and what do we mean by contentment?

Ambition - we actually talked a lot about in the previous episode that we did together. That was called *When Should I Lean into Ambition and When Should I Lean Out?* And listeners, if you want to dig into ambition a bit more, then that would be worth a listen. In that episode, we defined ambition as having goals and working towards them. So we define ambition quite broadly and positively.

Contentment is our other term. How do we define that? Well, contentment is being satisfied with what we have.

And it's interesting because contentment is often confused with complacency because they both look like there's not much activity going on. But they're actually quite different. So here's the difference, if I put it quite simply. If you're content, you like the situation that you're in. If you're complacent, you tolerate the situation you're in. But both can look like there's inactivity because you're not about to change the situation, but one is positive and one is negative.

So Victoria, I'd love to ask you - can you think of an example where you thought you were content, but now that you think about it, you were probably just complacent?

Victoria: Yes. A little day-to-day example. I realised over the last couple of years that the time I've been arriving to work has been creeping back. And in a sense that doesn't matter. I'm self-employed so as long as I'm not due somewhere at that time, it doesn't really matter what time I start. And so that could look like, I've got ownership over the time I arrive, isn't that good? But actually, I'm not very happy about that because I think it's meaning that I'm not having enough time and enough good time, because I find it works very well early in the morning to work. And so, actually, I think I was just complacent in that scenario and it's something I'm continuing to work on.

Caroline: Yes, I have to think about this question too, because I think it's always good when you ask a question to think about how I would answer it. And I got thinking about how I cook the and eat the same at dinner four nights in a row. And that could look like



I'm content to eat the same thing for dinner four nights in a row. But I actually think I'm being complacent. I just can't be bothered to be a bit more creative with my meals.

Victoria: That is very interesting to me because I cannot imagine eating the same thing for dinner four nights in a row. I understand the lack of willingness to do anything about it, but I think my desire for variety would trump my laziness.

Caroline: Thinking about this difference between contentment and complacency, does that help when we think about ambition? What are your thoughts?

Victoria: I think it does because I can see that complacency can drive ambition. So if you're not happy with the situation you're in, it drives you to do something to change it. But I've still wondering about how contentment fits with ambition because bearing in mind that contentment is liking the situation we're in, how does ambition fit with that? Can we be ambitious, if we actually like the situation we're already in?

Caroline: Yes, that's such a good question. I think what would be helpful to do first is to sharpen our definition of contentment a bit more.

In Hebrews chapter 13, and I've got the words here: *Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have because God has said, never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you.*

So I want to sharpen the definition of contentment from: contentment is being satisfied with what we have - to, contentment is being satisfied with what God has chosen to give us.

And the reason I want to sharpen it this way is because it shifts the focus slightly. It shifts the focus from what we have to the one who gives it to us. And I think that's helpful because I believe contentment is a byproduct of something else - we will come onto that a bit later.

Victoria: Interesting. So do you think we can be ambitious? In the sense of having goals and pursuing them and also be content with what God has given us.

Caroline: Yeah. I think we can. And I do think the example of Jesus is really interesting because Jesus has a goal and pursues it.

In Luke chapter 9, Luke writes *as the time approached for him [Jesus], to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.* So Jesus' goal is Jerusalem, where he knows he will be crucified.

And then on the night before his execution, Jesus says, *Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me, yet not my will, but yours be done.* That's Luke 22.

Now, are these words from Jesus's lips just words of resignation? I've been thinking about that. Jesus actually know the long game. So thinking about *Hebrews 12 for the joy*



set before him, he, Jesus, endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of God. So Jesus knows that the father's plan is a good one. And so I take it is actually able to rest content in that.

But here's a question for you, Victoria - How do you know when it comes to your ambition that you're also content?

Victoria: I think that's a very good question because I think, as we discussed a bit in the last podcast, it can be hard to know our own thoughts and motives in a really honest way because we're sinful and biased. I think it's good to ask: how am I going to feel if this doesn't work out? It's difficult in a sense because it is a bit hypothetical. We won't always know exactly how we will react, but I think if we can imagine ourselves in a situation where the thing that we want is taken away from us and ask how we will react, that's helpful.

So I think just an easy question to reflect on is: How will I react if it doesn't work out? Am I willing to let it go?

Caroline: That's a great question to be asking ourselves. How will I react? Am I willing to let it go?

I think it's a good point in the conversation to remind us that both our ambition and our contentment needs to be grounded in God.

In Ecclesiastes 2, the writer of Ecclesiastes says, *what do people get from all their toil and anxious striving with which they labour under the sun? All their days, their work is grief and pain. Even at night, their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless.* So the writer there is warning about anxious striving. And I take it that when we strive to find joy, meaning, purpose, in life without God, we actually don't find it, it doesn't last, it's a mist. It's ultimately meaningless.

When we look to our own ambition to fulfil only what God can provide, then that's anxious striving.

And the writer of Ecclesiastics goes on to say *a person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too I see is from the hand of God. For without him who can eat or find enjoyment.*

So finding satisfaction in what we have is actually a gift from God.

So both our ambition and our contentment should be grounded in God. Any thoughts on that, Victoria?

Victoria: I think that's really helpful. I can definitely identify with the anxious striving and it's not a nice place to be. That picture of even at night, people's minds not resting is something that I have experienced and it's awful, whereas the picture of finding



satisfaction in our work is actually a really pleasant, calm, peaceful place to be. And I think it's very helpful to remember that that is from God's hand.

And so the other reflection I have on this too is that it's a good reminder that being content actually makes life more enjoyable, which apart from just being a very nice thing, helps us to actually do what we're meant to do on earth better because we're not frazzled and paralysed by our own anxious striving.

Caroline: Yes. And I think I'd also want to say it helps to keep us on the right path.

So I'm thinking of 1 Timothy 6 where it talks about *godliness, with contentment, is great gain*. And then he Paul goes on to write about contentment being the antidote to the love of money, which causes all kinds of harm and evil. So, yeah, contentment does keep us on the right path.

Victoria: So I think we agree that contentment in the Christian life is very important and we've discussed that we can take the temperature of how content we are by asking ourselves: How will I react? Am I willing to let this go? How do you think we work on our contentment? How can we be more content?

Caroline: It's a very good question. I think firstly, thinking back on that Ecclesiastes passage, that finding satisfaction in what we have is a gift from God. So we can work on our contentment. One way to do that is to actually pray for it - to pray that God would give us that gift.

And I was thinking about how that gets developed a bit further by the apostle Paul in Philippians 4 because he says there, *I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength*. So how does Paul learn the secret of being content? Well, it's through knowing the one who gives him strength. So as we look to God, then we can find ourselves content in whatever circumstances we're in.

And so that's why I said earlier that I think contentment is a byproduct of something else. That when our trust in God deepens, when we're convinced that whatever we have comes from his good and wise care of us, then we can actually find contentment.

We'll need to start wrapping this conversation up.

Victoria, if we go full circle and feed back on your opening stories. Your first one was as a mother of young children returning to work and I appreciate that was a while ago now. What are your reflections on that situation when it comes to ambition and contentment? I know you didn't think in those terms back then, but what were your reflections?

Victoria: Well, I think, in God's goodness, it worked out. So in a sense that's a form of proof that ambition and contentment can go together. I think that it's difficult to be entirely honest about this, but I like to think that if I had had to give up my job because it wasn't the best thing for our family or the care of our children, that while I probably wouldn't



have welcomed that, I would have accepted it and been content with that because from God's hand we see good. And sometimes we also see trouble. And not to suggest that giving up something good is necessarily trouble, but we can't expect that everything will go entirely in the way that we want it to and that all of our goals will be met and so on. So, I think my reflection on that time is that, um, while it hasn't all been smooth sailing, and there have been hard aspects, by trusting God, with all those things, and I mean, praying about it regularly. I don't think I prayed for contentment as such, but I did pray about my circumstances a lot and that I would do good in all areas of my life. By God's grace, I think, it has worked out positively in the sense that I was able to still hold ambitions for my work, while being content with the particular situation I was in.

Caroline: Now, your 2nd opening story, it's more current. It's about your passion for marathons, right? So where does our discussion that we've had take your thinking as far as your goals for marathon running goes?

Victoria: Well, I think it's been helpful. This whole process and thinking about this topic has helped me accept that my desire to have goals in my leisure time, I think in part is just part of who I am, and that's not a bad thing. And it's been helpful exploring this with you because it's helped me satisfy myself, I suppose, that it's not a bad thing to have ambitions and goals. It's really what we do with them and how we understand the context that they're in. Particularly today I have been reminded that it's important to keep acknowledging God as the one who gives me these things. So he gives me legs that can run and lungs that can breathe. And my enjoyment in pursuing those ambitions is something that is a good gift from him. But I am also conscious of the need not to hold too tightly to those things and to keep asking myself from time to time: Am I willing to let this go if I had to? To test whether or not I am discontent. And using marathon running, perhaps, or other things like reading Shakespeare as a way of dealing with discontent in other areas of my life.

Caroline: Victoria, I have really enjoyed our conversation today.

Victoria: I have as well. Thank you very much, Caroline. It's always a pleasure to be here talking to you about all things related to ambition.

Caroline: Listeners, just so you know, I have a variety of conversation partners on the Her work podcast. Each conversation explores a workplace related challenge. The episodes will drop twice a month and you can find them wherever you listen to podcasts. If you'd like to get in touch, please feel free to email me at caroline.spencer@citybibleforum.org. On the City Bible Forum landing page, you'll find the Bible references, and you'll also find some reflection questions. These have been designed so that you and a friend can listen to the podcast and use the questions as a springboard for a discussion around your own particular challenges. Until next time.