

Contentment & Ambition? Navigating Competing Virtues

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An Us Problem, Not a God Problem

For God, virtues do not exist in tension. God's holiness is all of God's attributes existing in perfect harmony.

For us, virtues do exist in tension. I often feel like being gracious comes at the cost of forsaking justice (or vice versa). We are finite, we are broken, we are sinful, and we have partial understandings.



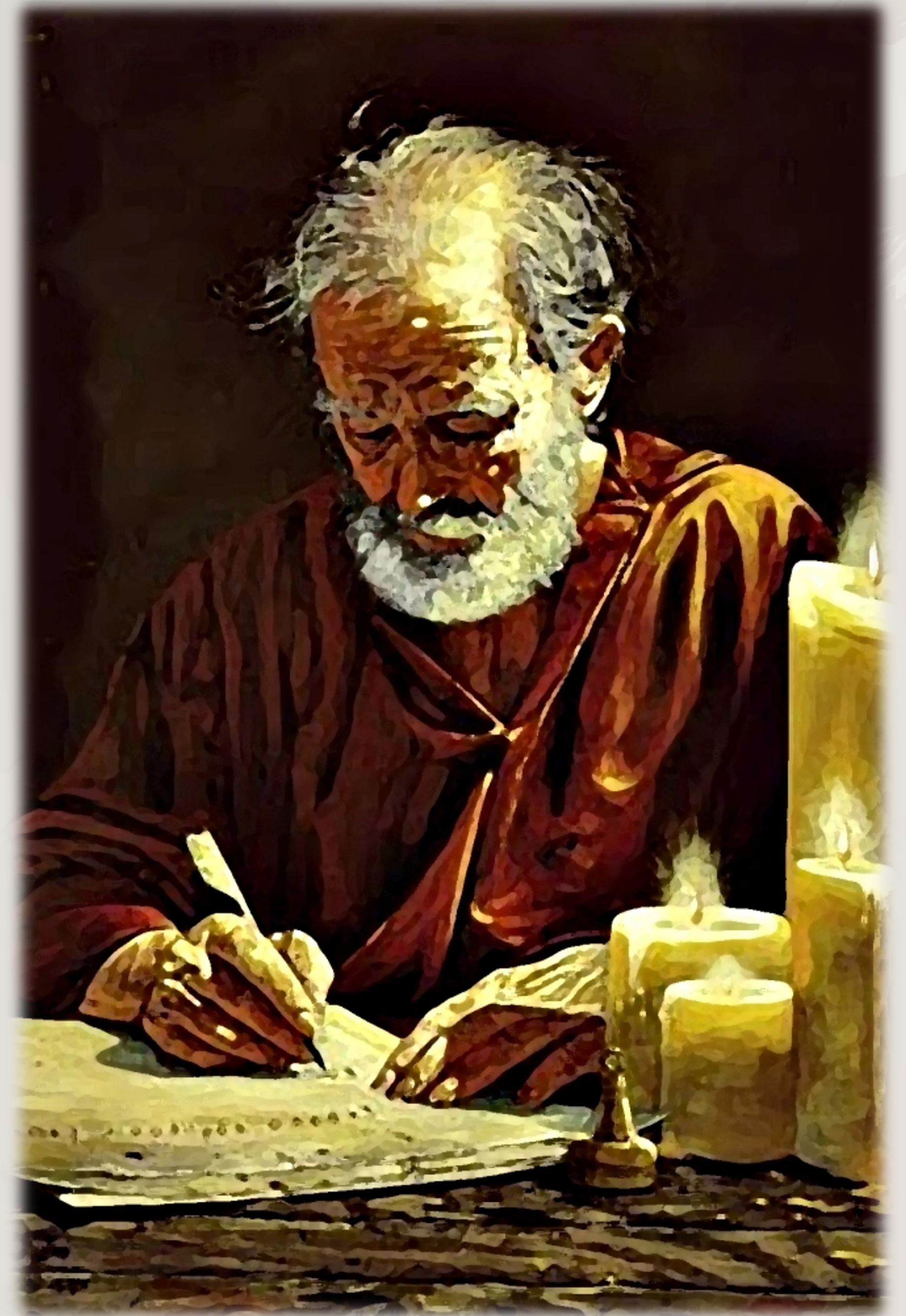
Questions: Contentment vs Ambition

- Is **contentment** at odds with trying to make things better?
- Does **ambition** necessarily reveals a lack of appreciation for God's provision?
- What happens if we just "choose a side"?
 - We moralize and vilify our non-preferred virtue.
 - Ambition gets reduced to pride or grandiosity.
 - Contentment gets reduced to laziness or lack of motivation.
- These vices do exist. We should avoid them.
But oversimplified binaries don't serve us well.

Paul, a Humble Visionary

“Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be **content**. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to **abound**. In any and every circumstance, *I have learned the secret* of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.”

Philippians 4:11-12



"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

Philippians 3:12-14

Ambitious Paul

“But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.”

I Timothy 6:6-8
Contented Paul

“It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation. Rather, as it is written: ‘Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand.’”

Romans 15:20-21

Ambitious Paul

"But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

II Corinthians 12:9-10

Contented Paul

Philippians: A Biblical Case Study

- **1:15-18** // Paul doesn't vilify those who misinterpret the reason for his suffering. *Take the mission seriously, don't take yourself too seriously.*
- **3:2-11** // Paul is bold in speech against those who misrepresent the gospel. *When ambition overtakes contentment, we're bold about everything.*
- **2:19-30** // Paul doesn't care who gets credit and is willing to see his dreams fulfilled through others. *Don't let your temporal role (ambition) distract you from the eternal mission (contentment).*
- **4:9** // Paul is willing for his weakness and subsequent struggle to be an example. *When contentment and ambition are in balance authenticity and vulnerability are nonthreatening.*

Counseling Implications

- **Self-awareness** // Know your bent (counselor)... *a counselee who lacks self-awareness will moralize their preferences.*
- **Perspective Taking** // Underrated interpersonal skill... *learning to see and value other people's "why" even when we disagree with their "what" (counselor and counselee).*
- **Cross pollinate** // Look for what is different AND good... *example: how is a social workers role different and good?*
- **Process over Outcome** // Don't always take the shortest route... *be ware of the distorting influence of pastoral efficiency.*