

Living With Contentment

Philippians 4:10-20

¹⁰ But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity. ¹¹ Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: ¹² I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. ¹³ I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Introduction:

We live in a materialistic world. This western world we live in views the physical as all that there is, so they live that way. So if a person believes there is no God, no after life, nothing beyond this physical existence, it stands to reason that they will be materialistic. I mean, if there is nothing else...what else really is there to live for? The materialist will measure his success in life by what he has, how big his house is, what kind of hardwood floors he has, what kind of vehicle he has, his designer clothes, fancy vacations, comforts and hedonistic pleasures. Materialism inevitably leads to greed...that 27" TV is never enough...we upgrade to a 32" then a 42" then a 50" and so on, that model of cell phone is not good enough, we

need the latest, greatest operating system with highest resolution camera and fastest download speeds, that car is not fast enough, the truck is not big enough, the van does not have enough toys on it, and on it goes, the endless pursuit of material things.

Materialism is one of the most subtle and slippery vices in the modern church. We human beings are powerfully able to rationalize it. Indeed, over-consumption and over-reliance on material wealth and possessions would be very hard to resist if not for Jesus' extremely clear warnings against it. He demands our devotion to Himself alone.

This Materialism is the fruit of a lack of contentment. We truly believe we need more and that what we do have is not enough.

David Platt has a new book out called [Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream](#), in which he accuses the American church of manipulating Christianity to fit its consumeristic culture.

On the whole, it seems that Platt's main criticism has to do with **materialism**: American Christians have become wrapped up in wealth creation and individualistic pursuits and have in the process **confused their worship of Christ with a worship of themselves.**

Steven Cole points out that the **lack of contentment** that marks most Americans is reflected in many ways.

- (1) We see it in our high rate of consumer debt. We aren't content to live within our means, so we go into debt to live just a bit better than we can afford, but then we suffer anxiety from the pressure of paying all our bills....
- (2) Our discontent is reflected in our high rate of mobility. People rarely stay at the same address for more than five years. We're always on the move, looking for a better house, a better job, a better place to live and raise a family, a better place to retire.
- (3) Our discontent rears its head in our high divorce rate. We can't find happiness in our marriages, so we trade our mates in for a different model, only to find that the same problems reoccur.
- (4) Our lack of contentment is seen in our clamoring for our rights, all the while claiming that we have been victimized. If we can just get fair treatment, we think we'll be happy. We are suing one another at an astonishing rate, trying to get more money so we can have more things so that life will be more comfortable. We spend money that we can't afford on the lottery, hoping to win a big jackpot that will give us what we want in life. But even those who win large settlements in a lawsuit or a lottery jackpot are not much happier in the long run....

A Definition of Contentment

The **1828 Webster's Dictionary** defines "**content**" as Rest or quietness of the mind in the present condition; satisfaction which holds the mind in peace, restraining complaint,

opposition, or further desire, and often implying a moderate degree of happiness.

Contentment - “The acceptance of ‘things as they are’ as the wise and loving providence of a God who knows what is good for us, who so loves us as always to seek our good” (Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible)

Jeremiah Burroughs’ 400 year old **PURITAN CLASSIC**,

Jeremiah Burroughs describes **CONTENTMENT** as that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition

A W Pink writes that

Contentment is the product of a heart resting in God...It is the blessed assurance that God does all things well and is, even now, making all things work together for my ultimate good.

In **Philippians 4:11-12**, Paul said, “I have learned to be content . . . I have learned the *secret*.” Here he used a Greek term pregnant with meaning—an allusion to the mystery religions of Greece. Initiation into those pagan cults involved becoming privy to certain religious secrets. Paul became privy to the secret of contentment, and it’s one he passed on to all who have been initiated by faith in Jesus Christ.

1. Confidence in God’s Providence

Paul said, “I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that . . . you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned before, but you

lacked opportunity” (v. 10). Let me give you some background. About ten years had passed since Paul was last in Philippi. Acts 16 relates what happened during his first visit.

Paul and his traveling companions met a businesswoman named Lydia and preached the Gospel to her and her companions. Their conversion resulted in the formation of a church. During the early days of that church, Paul cast out a spirit of divination from a slave girl. The girl’s owners—livid over the loss of the income they had derived from her fortune-telling abilities—had Paul flogged, thrown into prison, and locked in stocks. Instead of complaining about the miserable situation in which he found himself, he praised God through thankful prayer and song far into the night. God responded in an amazing way: He shook the foundations of the prison so violently that all its doors opened wide and the chains fell off the prisoners’ feet and wrists. That incredible experience, plus Paul’s incredible response to his dismal circumstances, led to the salvation of the jailer—and the jailer’s entire household. As the church at Philippi grew, it’s apparent they helped fund Paul for further missionary outreach.

Our text in Philippians makes it clear, however, that it had been awhile since they last were able to help support him in that endeavor. But that was fine with Paul. He knew it wasn’t that they lacked concern, but that they lacked “opportunity” (Gk., *kairos*). That’s a reference to a season or window of opportunity, not to chronological time.

In writing, “You have revived your concern for me,” Paul was using a horticultural term that means “to bloom again.” That’s like saying, “Your love has flowered again. I know it has always been there, but it just didn’t have an opportunity to bloom. Blooms are seasonal, and the right season hadn’t come along until now.”

The point is that Paul had a patient confidence in God’s sovereign providence. He was content to do without and wait on the Lord’s timing. He didn’t resort to panic or manipulation of others. Those things are never called for. Paul was certain that in due time God would order the circumstances so that his needs would be met.

We can have that same certainty today.

Until we truly learn that God is sovereign, ordering everything for His own holy purposes and the ultimate good of those who love Him, we can't help but be discontent.

That's because in taking on the responsibility of ordering our lives, we will be frustrated in repeatedly discovering that we can't control everything. Everything already is under control, however, by Someone far greater than you or I.

Providence is how God orchestrates everything to accomplish His purposes. Let me show you what that means by contrast.

There are two ways God can act in the world: by miracle and by providence.

A miracle has no natural explanation. In the flow of normal life, God suddenly stems the tide and injects a miracle. Then He sets the flow back in motion, just like parting the Red Sea until His people could walk across and closing it up again. Do you think it would be easier to do that—to say, “Hold it, I want to do this miracle” and do it—or to say, “Let's see, I've got 50 billion circumstances to orchestrate to accomplish this one thing”? The latter is providence. Think, for example, of how God providentially ordered the lives of Joseph, Ruth, and Esther. Today He does the same for us.

Contentment comes from learning that God is sovereign not only by supernatural intervention, but also by natural orchestration.

And what an incredible orchestra it is! Appreciate the complexity of what God is doing every moment just to keep us alive. When we look at things from that perspective, we see what folly it is to think we can control our lives. When we give up that vain pursuit, we give up a major source of anxiety.

Paul was content because he had confidence in the providence of God. That confidence, however, never led him to a fatalistic “It doesn't matter what I do” attitude. The example of Paul's life throughout the New Testament is this: Work as hard as you can and be content that God is in control of the results.

What is Sovereignty?

Sovereignty can be defined as having supreme authority, control, and power over all that has happened, is happening, and will happen in the future in all times across all history. Christians define it as the ruler of the universe, God, having the right, the authority, and the power to govern all that happens and what has, is, or will happen being in accordance to His divine will. He has the right to achieve His purposes and has the power to bring about circumstances that dictate whatever He wills to come to pass. He has complete control of everything and there is nothing that is done that is not done by or allowed through His will.

Psalms 135:6

Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps.

Psalms 115:3

But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.

Isaiah 46:10

Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure';

Daniel 4:35

"All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, But He does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no

one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, 'What have You done?'

Romans 9:19-21

You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?

Job 42:2

"I know that You can do all things, And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.

2 Chronicles 20:6

and he said, "O LORD, the God of our fathers, are You not God in the heavens? And are You not ruler over all the kingdoms of the nations? Power and might are in Your hand so that no one can stand against You.

Psalms 103:19

The LORD has established His throne in the heavens,
And His sovereignty rules over all.

PROVIDENCE

Genesis 45:5-8

"Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. "For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance.

Acts 17:26

and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation,

Matthew 10:29

"Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.

Psalms 145:15-16

The eyes of all look to You, And You give them their food in due time. You open Your hand And satisfy the desire of every living thing.

Acts 2:22

²² "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know—²³ Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death;

Acts 4:27

²⁷ “For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together ²⁸ to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done.

Romans 8:28

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

A NEW PERSPECTIVE - A Jewish man in Hungary went to his rabbi and complained, “Life is unbearable. There are nine of us living in one room. What can I do?” The rabbi answered, “Take your goat into the room with you.” The man was incredulous, but the rabbi insisted, “Do as I say and come back in a week.”

A week later the man returned looking more distraught than before. “We can’t stand it,” he told the rabbi. “The goat is filthy.” The rabbi said, “Go home and let the goat out, and come back in a week.” A week later the man returned, radiant, exclaiming, “Life is beautiful. We enjoy every minute of it now that there’s no goat—only the nine of us.” (Reader's Digest [12/81].) Contentment is more a matter of our perspective than of our circumstances, isn’t it!...

2. Satisfaction with Little

Here is another secret to **contentment** from Paul's life: "Not that I speak from want; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity" (Phil. 4:11–12).

He appreciated the revived generosity of the Philippian church, but wanted them to know he hadn't been coveting it. He kept his wants or desires in check, not confusing them with his needs. "Not that I speak from want" is another way of saying, "I really don't have any needs that aren't being met." Our needs as human beings are simple: food, clothing, shelter, and godliness with contentment. Scripture says to be content with the bare necessities of life.

That attitude is in marked contrast to the attitude of our culture. People today aren't content—with little or much. My theory is that the more people have, the more discontent they're apt to be. Typically, the most unhappy people you'll ever meet are very wealthy. They seem to believe their needs can never be met. Unlike Paul, they assume their wants are needs. They've followed our materialistic culture's lead in redefining human needs. You'll never come across a commercial or ad that tells you to eat food, drink water, or go to sleep. Mass media advertises items that are far more optional and discretionary, but you'd never know it from the sales pitch. The appeal isn't, "Wouldn't you like to have this?" but "You *need* this!" If you expose yourself to such appeals without thinking, you'll find yourself needing things you don't even

want! The goal of this kind of advertising is to produce discontentment and make a sale.

To protect yourself, pay careful attention to whenever you attach the word *need* to something in your thoughts or speech. Edit any use of it that goes beyond life's bare essentials. Paul did, and you can too. Thankfully regard any surplus as a blessing from God. You will be satisfied with little when you refuse to depend on luxuries the world redefines as needs.

3. Detachment from Circumstances

The one thing that steals our **contentment** more than anything else is trying circumstances. We crumble and lose our sense of satisfaction and peace when we allow our circumstances to victimize us. No doubt Paul was human and suffered that way too but then he learned a different way: remaining content no matter what his circumstances were. "I have learned to be content," he said, "in *whatever* circumstances I am" (**Phil. 4:11**, emphasis added). He really meant *whatever*, for in the next verse he ran the gamut of extremes from great poverty to great wealth. It's possible for us as Christians to learn to be content in facing any situation in life. And we don't have to wait for the next life to be able to do this. We do need to keep one foot in the next life, however. Paul said it this way: "Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth" (**Col. 3:2**). "Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (**2 Cor. 4:17–18**). Paul endured many horrific circumstances (note his summary in 11:23–33) but through them he learned to be content by having an eternal perspective.

Realize any circumstance you face is only temporary. The energy you're tempted to expend on it by getting anxious isn't worth being compared with your eternal reward. Learn to be content by not taking your earthly circumstances too seriously.

4. Being Sustained by Divine Power

Paul could face any earthly circumstance with this confident assurance: "I can do all things through Him who strengthens

me” (Phil. 4:13). He had learned that no matter how difficult things get in this material world, every Christian has a spiritual undergirding.

In saying he could do all things through Christ, Paul was referring to endurance, not miraculous provision. He didn’t mean he could go on forever without eating or drinking. He couldn’t be battered 5,000 times and still survive. There’s a limit to the physical hardships any human being can endure. Instead Paul was saying, “When I have come to the end of my own resources, then I experience the power of Christ to sustain me until a provision is made.” He believed in the promise of Isaiah 40:31: “Those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary.”

Contentment is a by-product of distress. It comes when you experience the sustaining power of Christ when you simply have run out of steam: “To him who lacks might He increases power” (v. 29). We do well to experience enough difficulty in our lives to see Christ’s power on display in us.

Do you know how a pacemaker works? It kicks in when the heart it’s attached to doesn’t work right. It’s a sustaining power. We as believers have a reservoir of spiritual power that moves into action when we have come to the end of our resources. Therefore we can “do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us” (Eph. 3:20).

You’ll learn **contentment** when you’ve stood in the valley of the shadow of death, when you’ve been at the brink, when you can’t resolve your problems, when you can’t eliminate the conflict, when you can’t change your work environment, when you’re unable to fight the disease that’s wracking your body. That’s when you’ll turn to God and find the strength to get through the situation.

To add an important qualifier, however, if you’ve been living a life of sin and you’re now at the bottom of the pit where sin has led you, don’t expect the Lord to step in, put on a dazzling display of His power, and make you feel content. What He’s more apt to do

is add chastening to the pain that your circumstances have naturally produced. There's no quick fix for a sinful pattern of living. Just like health is the result of right living in the physical dimension, so is power from God the result of being obedient in the spiritual dimension.