

The Secret of Contentment

Philippians 4:10-13

The nature of Christian Contentment is trusting and resting in the good, wise, and sovereign providence of God.

LTS: Rom 8:28-39

One of the things I love about expositional preaching is that when you are committed to studying the text of Scripture verse by verse you're sure discover things you would have missed otherwise. If I only preach the topics that interest me or those I think will interest you, we will miss so much of what God has to say. But when you carefully dig through the rich earth of Scripture you often discover diamonds. That was the case for me last week when we came together to study Philippians 4:8-9. I discovered things about loving God with my mind that I can't remember ever thinking deeply about before.

There are other occasions, however, when preaching verse by verse leads us into a topic that seems relatively familiar. This morning the H.S. apparently wants us to think about the issue of Christian contentment. Clearly, this topic is NOT an enigma. It doesn't strike us as uncommon, or especially deep or theological. We are all familiar with the idea of contentment. It is so familiar to, us in fact, the word hardly requires a definition. But let's think couple anyway.

In simplest terms we can say that To be content means to be satisfied with what we have. Not a difficult concept, to be sure. Nevertheless, while it may be simple to understand the idea of contentment in abstract terms, it is quiet another thing to live it out in the practical difficulties and windfalls of life.

17th Century pastor, Jeremiah Burroughs, in his famous book *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, offers a more robust and challenging definition of contentment when he writes,

Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and Fatherly disposal in every condition.¹ (if you didn't get that written down, don't worry. I have a simpler version just ahead.

For as long as men have attempted to understand the inner-workings of the human heart we have wrestled with the virtue of contentment. Ancient Greek scholars

¹ Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewell of Christian Contentment*, (Edinburgh, UK. 2013), 19

(especially the Stoics) spoke much of contentment. Plato taught that contentment is the state of one who supports himself without aid.² Generally speaking, however, most honest thinkers have had to admit that achieving contentment is a lot more difficult than pontificating about it.

For example, Martin Luther wrote: Next to faith this is the highest art – to be content with the calling in which God has placed you. I have not learned it yet.”

Likewise, Benjamin Franklin once quipped, “Who is rich? He that is content. Who is that? Nobody!”

Now that may strike you as cynical but think about it. Are you truly a contented person? Are you satisfied with your lot in life, or do you find yourself frequently disenchanted and disappointed with how things have worked out for you so far? In biblical usage, the word contentment simply means "an inner sufficiency that keeps us at peace despite outward circumstances."³

Before we learn about contentment, let’s take a moment to read our text for this morning. Now, I’m only going to preach through verse 13, but let’s take the time to read Paul’s entire thought.

Read Phil. 4:10-19

In verses 10-13 I want us to see four things:

- I. The Need for Contentment
- II. The Nature of contentment
- III. The Circumstances of Contentment
- IV. The Secret of Contentment.

I. The Need for Contentment:

1. I want you to notice that nowhere in this text does Paul command the Philippians to be content. Rather, we find Paul modeling for us what it is to practice true contentment. He models what it means to possess an inner sufficiency that keeps him at peace despite outward circumstances

2. If you have been with us for more than a few weeks you will probably remember that in 3:17 Paul commands the Philippians to imitate his way of life. By the power

² Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). The Bible Exposition Commentary (Vol. 2, p. 235). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

³ Ibid.

and wisdom of the Spirit he was striving to live in a manner worthy of the gospel (1:27). His was a life that placed a high value on Christian unity, and one that worked hard at establishing a gracious reputation. It was a life that defeated anxiety with prayer, and enjoyed the peace of God as a result. Paul sought to be a person who loved God with his mind and delighted his soul by rejoicing in the Lord no matter what. Now, however, he wants the Philippians (and us) to know that his was also a life characterized by contentment.

3. Paul isn't interested in merely telling us how to live. He's committed to showing us. Hence he writes (4:9) "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me – practice these things.

4. Clearly, then, one of the virtues that he sought to model for us is true Christian contentment as the normal posture and attitude of life.

5. Now, we need to be careful NOT to conclude that since Paul was merely modeling contentment in this letter he may have thought of it as an optional virtue. To the contrary, Paul's language on contentment is very strong in the NT.

6. To his young protégé, Timothy, for example, Paul says, (1 Tim. 6:6–10)

But godliness with contentment is great gain, ⁷ for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. ⁸ But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. ⁹ But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.

7. In this context Paul is contrasting contentment with covetousness. One of the things a good student of the Bible will do is to take a key word in a text and consider its opposite. In this case, the opposite of being content is being covetous. To be covetous is to NEVER be satisfied with what God has allotted to you but to have a heart that is constantly on the search for something in this world that will satisfy.

8. The book of Proverbs warns of this disposition when it says (Prov. 30:15–17)

The leech has two daughters: Give and Give. Three things are never satisfied; four never say, "Enough": ¹⁶ Sheol, the barren womb, the land never satisfied with water, and the fire that never says, "Enough."

9. This is what the covetous heart is like. It never gets enough to satisfy its desire. It often doubts God's goodness and is frequently discontent.

10. The author of Hebrews likewise picks up on this theme and intensifies it when he writes, (Heb. 13:5) "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

8. What I want you to see is that Paul's example of contentment demonstrates that it should be the normal disposition of the regenerate heart. Christians should be known for possessing an inner sufficiency that keeps him at peace despite outward circumstances.

9. The is the Need for Contentment...

II. The Nature of Contentment:

1. The nature of Christian Contentment is trusting and resting in the good, wise, and sovereign providence of God. And I would submit to you that this is what we see in Paul's letter to the Philippians.

2. Paul truly believed with all his might that "behind the frowning providence their hides a smiling face." His contentment was fueled and fortified by a theology the declares that God is completely sovereign, Infinite in wisdom, and perfect in love. God in his love always wills what is best for us. In his wisdom He always knows what is best, and in his sovereignty He has the power to bring it about. Therefore, no matter where Paul found himself he cold confidently say, "I am in God's place, moving at God's pace."

3. Contentment, therefore, is nothing less than the heart of a man or woman exercising confident faith in God. To be content is to drop one's anchor upon the bedrock promises of future grace. On the other hand, discontent is nothing more than the heart of a man or woman exercising unbelief.

- It fails to believe that God is working ALL THING for good to those who love
- It fails to believe that God is faithful and will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able
- It fails to believe that every circumstance I face is carefully measure out by the hand of a loving Father

4. Let me suggest therefore, that what we see in Paul in this text is a man who possessed faith in God that was manifest in an inner sufficiency that keeps him at peace despite outward circumstances.,

Read 10-11

5. You know, I think if I had been the one rotting in jail for the past two years and someone from Philippi finally showed up with some support, I might be tempted to say, "Well its about time!" A discontented Paul would have been "put out" with the

Philippians for their slowness. But he wasn't put out with them. Rather, he rejoiced in the Lord that they had revived their concern for him.

- A. The word for "revive" here Lit means - "to bloom afresh." You caused your thinking of me to bloom afresh."⁴
- B. Paul believed that they had maintained their concern for him but, for unstated reasons, the timing was never right to send support. "Opportunity" comes from Kairos meaning season.
- C. Its as if Paul was saying that as far as he was concerned the flower of their concern came into bloom when the season was just right.

6. And notice how Paul, in the midst of his suffering, seemed to speak to them as those who are more important than himself. Rather than complaining about the conditions in jail he is careful to assure them that they had no need to worry about him. He says (11) "Not that I am speaking of being in need." Its as if Paul doesn't want them to chide themselves or feel guilty for not sending help sooner.

7. I think the principle here is that one who is content in Christ is able to put the needs of others ahead of his own even when he suffers.

A. Is that how you and I would have thought about the last couple years in jail; that we really had no need?

B. I would be thinking,

- I need to get out of jail!
- I need better food and more of it!
- I need a couple changes of clothing!
- I need money to pay the bills!
- I need friends who will stop pretending that I don't exist!

C. But no! Paul was content with what little he had. "I have food and clothing. With this I will be content." He wasn't anxious or fretful about the things he didn't have. He wasn't thinking back to the early days when he planted the church in Lydia's house, thinking, "O how much better it would be if I could be under house arrest THERE in her comfortable, beautiful home rather than in this miserable apartment. There was no hint of that. And he wasn't angry with the philippians for their delayed gift.

D. The nature of Christian Contentment is trusting and resting in the

⁴ Robertson, A. T. (1933). *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Php 4:10). Nashville, TN: Broadman Press.

good, wise, and sovereign providence of God

8. And that brings us to the third point:

III. The Circumstances of Contentment:

1. Think about the disconnect between Paul's circumstance and the attitude of his heart. It was no small thing for him to find himself in Jail (or at least under house arrest). He is literally a man in bondage. He's chained to a Roman guard and his freedom has been taken away. And why is he in jail? Not because he committed a crime but because he preaches Christ and Him crucified, risen, and coming again.

2. We should also remember that his life was on the line as he prepared to stand before Cesar. He didn't know what was going to happen. Would his case be dismissed or would he be executed. He just didn't know.

3. Nevertheless, Paul says...

Read 4:11-12

4. You may be thinking in your heart, Surely Paul had some kind of spiritual advantage that we don't know about. God must have reached down and zapped him with some kind of super grace that enabled him to practice such contentment in the midst of his trial.

5. But you know what? That's not how Paul explains it. He simply says, "I have learned in whatever situation I am in therein to be content."

6. He said,

- "I know how to be brought low" (and keep my contentment)
- "I know how to abound" (and keep my contentment).
 - By the way, we can just as easily lose our contentment in Christ when we receive an unexpected windfall as we can in the face of trial.
- How did Paul know how to remain content in Christ in any circumstance. He learned it.

6. Did you hear that? Paul had to learn how to be content. That means there's hope for you and me. Contentment is not something that simply comes to us when we put our faith in Christ. It's something that's learned. Yes, there is a certain contentment and satisfaction that we discover within our hearts when we are born again, but the contentment that Paul is talking about is the kind that can be learned

7. Paul wasn't born with a special contentment gene. He didn't receive it as a spiritual super power after suddenly being radiated by the glory of Christ in the Damascus road. No, he developed contentment in his life the same way you and I can – he learned it.

8. In fact I heard Pastor Legon Duncan this week suggest that

You are more apt to seek and find real gospel contentment when you have a lack of it than you are when your circumstances are providing a comfortable measure of satisfaction and ease.

9. This is why Jesus said it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Why? Because a rich man can confuse circumstantial contentment with contentment in Christ.

10. Dear Friends, if you are listening to my voice right now and you know the Lord Jesus Christ, you may be saying, “But pastor Dan, right now I am really struggling with discontent,”

- A. I have an illness that won't go away
- B. I have a husband who doesn't really love me as I want to be loved
- C. I really hate my job and wish I could get out of it
- D. I'm miserable about the state of my finances
- E. You fill in the blank. What tempts you to be discontent.

9. Listen, if you are struggling with discontent right now I've got news for you! You are more likely to seek real contentment And Find It than someone who is content in his or her circumstance. How?

10. That leads us to the final point...

III. The Secret of Contentment:

Read 12-13

1. Here is one of the most beloved verses in the N.T. “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”

2. Listen, the “secret” of contentment in Christ is really no secret at all. The key to contentment is abiding in Christ. Notice what Paul says, “I can do all things through Him (through Christ) who strengthens me.”

- A. That doesn't mean I can do anything I want to do.

- B. It doesn't mean I can make my problems go away
- C. It doesn't mean I can become a world-class athlete
- D. But it does mean that I can do any and everything God commands me to do.
- E. And consider this, God never commands you to do something you can do on your own. Everything he commands is something that you can ONLY do "in the Lord."

3. Remember what Jesus said: "I am the vine and you are the branches. He who abides in me will bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do...NOTHING.

- Oh sure, you can whine and complain
- You can be bitter about your circumstances
- You can manipulate people to get what you want
- But you'll never bear the fruit of the Spirit - the fruit of contentment - in your own strength and by your own will.

4. Practically speaking, then, how does one cultivate contentment in the midst of your trials and blessings?

A. Rejoice in the Lord (Phil. 3:1; 4:4)

In John Flavel's book *Keeping The Heart*, we read"

The soul is so constituted that it craves fulfillment from things outside itself and will embrace earthly joys for satisfaction when it cannot reach spiritual ones.... The believer is in spiritual danger if he allows himself to go for any length of time without tasting the love of Christ and savoring the felt comforts of a Saviors presence. When Christ ceases to fill the heart with satisfaction, our souls will go in silent search of other lovers.... By the enjoyment of the love of Christ in the heart of a believer we mean an experience of the "Love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given to us" (Rom. 5:5)..... Because the Lord has made Himself accessible to us in the means of grace, it is our duty and privilege to seek this experience from Him in these means till we are made the joyful partakers of it (from Maurice Roberts, *The Thought of God*, pp. 57-58). John Flavel, *Keeping the Heart*, (...), x

B. Bring your concerns to the Lord (Phil. 4:6-7)

C. Discipline your thoughts to honor the Lord (4:8-9)

D. Rest in the providence of the Lord (Rom. 8:28 We know that God causes all things to work together for good...")

5. Thomas Boston once wrote:

Happy is the people whose God is the Lord: for all things shall work together for their good. They may sit secure in exercizing faith upon God, come what will. They have good reason for prayer; for God is a prayer-hearing God, and will be enquired of by his people as to all their concerns in the world. And they have ground for the greatest encouragement and comfort in the middle of all the events of providence, seeing they are managed by their covenant [keeping] God and gracious friend, who will never neglect or overlook his dear people, and whatever concerns them. For he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you, (Heb. 13:5)."

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