

Contentment's Secret

Philippians 4:10-19

*I have learned the **secret** of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need*

Introduction: If we could sum up the philosophy of our world in one word, the place where happiness, satisfaction come and what drives people each day, it would be the word **MORE**. We are enamored with this concept. We want what is *faster*, both in operating system and communication. We want what is *quicker* in terms of travel. We want what is *larger and roomier*, both in houses and cars. We believe *more money* will bring happiness and satisfaction. We believe that if we can buy more things (especially those things we don't need....how many shoes do we really need?!?) it will improve our life and well being, the magic bullet to our happiness. If we could own a house, or a bigger house, or a nicer car, or if we could have a different body type, or figure, or abs, or if our nose was a better shape, or if our husband was more attentive or if I had a better job or a different mate or a significant other....**then I would be content and satisfied!**

Part of the consequence of the fall of mankind into sin and the brokenness of this world is a **constant churning of discontent**, a restlessness of never having enough, of always wanting more. This has *nothing to do with external amounts or circumstances*, since we live in a day of the greatest tech advances, medical breakthroughs, comfort options and variety of anytime in history, and our cultures discontent is greater than ever. Let's do a little test together. Air travel is not only amazing but rather recent. For centuries travel over great distances was impossible for families, and when it availed itself, it was arduous, dangerous, and time-consuming. You and your family would have stuffed yourselves into a ship for months, enduring the worst kind of conditions, including shipwreck, capsizing, and sickness with the hope of getting across the ocean to a place that you'd never been to and whose conditions were no more hospitable. Today we can fly anywhere in the world within a day or maybe two, with food, bathrooms, and moist toilettes. Yet, how many of us have complained about the size of seats, bathrooms, and service. Or if you are like me, complained about two hour delays because of storms on the East coast forced me to get home a few hours later than I planned. Listening to others around me was both convicting and unsurprising: "this is the worst", "this airline is terrible", "this is a total nightmare". Contentment escapes us when life does not line up with our expectations.

We started with book of Philippians looking at the difference between *happiness* and *joy*, with the conclusion that the pursuit of happiness cannot be a reasonable goal in life since it is entirely based on circumstances, where joy is *circumstance proof* since it is based on the *immovable reality and foundation of Christ Jesus our Lord*, who never changes. Both happiness and contentment acknowledge that circumstances can stink (which is an honest assessment of life) while maintaining an attitude and understanding that transcends. **Discontentment** is the enemy of our **joy, satisfaction in Christ**, and inevitably our **relationships**.

"Every marriage that ends in divorce begins that tragic journey in a heart of discontent. Though we cannot say that every misery in this world begins with human discontent, we can safely say that all the suffering of the world is exponentially intensified by the failure to find genuine contentment in the midst of any and every circumstance."¹

¹ Andrew M. Davis, "The Power of Christian Contentment", p. 15

Contentment is a command that God gives us for our good. It is the **mark of a mature Christian, yet open to even the newest of Christians**. Contentment is NOT a Stoic acceptance of hardship in this world, as though we are denying that we are in pain or that anything can be done about it. It is not complacency or false peace based on ignorance. It is not an escape from battle. Contentment is NOT a passive and passionless acceptance of life the way it is. We are never content with our sin, with our divided desires, with our progress in faith as if we are finished products. I have found that far too many people are content with a certain level of misery that is comfortable, unwilling to change, repent, and humble themselves but would rather live in conflict, loneliness, and an artificial sense of "being right". Paul learned the secret of contentment, yet was proactive in his pursuit of Christ and Christ-likeness. He had a holy discontent, one that unleashed the sufficiency of God's Word and the Holy Spirit's power working in Him. It was in the external realities that he found contentment, what **Jeremiah Burroughs** called the "sweet inward, quiet gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition."²

So in this final, farewell section we learn from Paul the secret of contentment, which should really be the worst kept secrets in the world. *How do we learn this secret, finding our hope and satisfaction in Christ, getting off the hamster wheel of the drive for **MORE**.*

Contentment Finds Confidence in God's Provision (10)

I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity

How God Provides: Providence & Miracles

Paul's life was not easy. In fact, he faced one round of suffering after another. We remember back at the founding of the church at Philippi where Paul was wrongfully beaten with rods, put in jail, and leaving without fighting for the justice he deserved. He went to Thessalonica where he was run out of town, to be followed by numerous other shipwrecks, beatings, stonings, and imprisonments (2 Cor. 11:16-33). We know that through all of this, some churches began to waver on their support of Paul, believing that all of this must mean Paul was in the wrong and thus distanced themselves from him. In fact, the church at Philippi had helped him initially (see 4:16), but it had been **10 years** since they had an opportunity to send Epaphroditus to Rome to bring a gift and provision to Paul in prison. It was at this revival that Paul **rejoiced**, since he viewed it as a gift, not just a necessity. *How did Paul view God's provision?* Through the lens of **God's providence**.

There are two ways that God interacts and provides for us in this world. The first is **the miraculous**, where He interrupts or halts the natural order of the world and does something contrary to it. We saw this with Jesus as He would calm storms with a word, heal disease with a touch, and raise the dead. Miracles are supernatural, cannot be explained by science, and are not repeatable outside of God's determined action. Do miracles happen today? Sure, in the sense that every time a person comes to saving faith a heart of stone is replaced with a heart of flesh, where spiritual blindness is replaced with sight, and death is replaced by life. We have stories in this church of God healing heart attack and cancer where doctors had no explanation other than something or Someone greater than them acting. However, miracles, even Biblically were NOT the normative way that God acted. Miracles affirmed and confirmed the fact that Jesus was Messiah and that the apostles were sent by Christ Himself. Most often God acts through **providence**.

² Jeremiah Burroughs, "The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment." 19.

Providence is God's unseen hand that accomplishes His purposes to the praise of His glory. Providence is God working through normal means to orchestrate or work all things to His glory and our good. It is what happens when circumstances line up just right to have us avoid the car accident, to time the transaction perfectly, to meet our spouse at the right place. The world uses words like **chance, luck,, and coincidence** to explain this working since they have no other means of understanding. We are called to work hard (1 Thess. 4:11-12) and care for one another, yet always with the view that God is in control of all things. Often what we *call miraculous* is not a miracle but rather God working things out in His timing. John Piper said, "**when God does one thing, He's doing a million things.**" I'd add to that phrase that He *has done a million things already to do that one thing. Why is this so important?* Instead of waiting for the miraculous (which occurs far far less), we pray that God will *providentially care*, through our work, the help of others, and other qualified people (doctors, lawyers, etc). Paul was **thankful** since God provided for him in prison through the means of God's church and people.

Thankfulness, not Guilt

There is a way to read this section and get the sense that Paul was a bit perturbed. *10 years, really?? Couldn't muster up a little collection before that, huh?* Though Paul was no stranger to sarcasm to make a point (read 1 Cor. 4:9-11), this was not what he was doing here. He realized that they did not have the right opportunity (or season) to help, without having to have them justify themselves. Since he knew God was the one who cared for him, and that God had always done so, he could rejoice in the fact that they found a way to care for him presently. Some of us may think we have the gift of guiltning others, but when we see life through the lens of God's providential care, we take everything from God's hand as a gift, whether physical provision or the care of family.

Contentment is Not Dependant on Circumstances (11-12)

*Not that I 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*

Separating Need from Want

The second key secret of contentment is to remember that since contentment is both supernatural and an internal frame of mind, we see the world through Biblical promises rather than cultural pressures. The foundation for contentment is straightforward:

1 Timothy 6:6-8 - *"But godliness with **contentment** is great gain, for we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have **food and clothing**, with these we will be **content**."*

Godliness is worth the investment not only because it honors the Lord, but actually has dividends into eternity. Jesus told His disciples to "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things (what we eat, drink, wear), will be added. (Matt. 6:33). In other words, if we have food and clothing, we have enough to be content in this world. AND, even if these are taken away, we know that to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Hebrews 13:5 - *"Keep your life **free from the love of money**, and **be content** with what you have for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'"*

The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10) and the pursuit of it has lead some away from the faith and caused much pain. We can be content with what we have since we know that the most important thing can never be taken away: *Christ will never leave us or forsake us!* We are almost

all familiar with Psalm 23 where David said, "*The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want*", meaning that when we know Christ we have all we need, and everything else becomes a bonus, a gift of God's grace. Contentment is clear that no amount of money will ever breed true satisfaction, and no amount of more material will bring happiness.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 - *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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I **am content with weakness**, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."*

We embrace the failing of our bodies, wills, and weakness since it makes us more aware of God's grace and forces us to depend on Him more. Contentment is not housed in more strength or better situations, but in the lavished grace of Christ on us.

So if we have food and clothing we should be content, knowing that no amount of material gain will actually create greater contentment. The problem is, we have a hard time separating out our **needs and wants**. We are not in position to complain that God does not meet our **needs, but rather our wants**. However, our world seeks to convince us that our wants are really needs, so that everything becomes a need, something we deserve, that which will make us happy. This is not only in advertising (you need the newest _____ or another _____), and in cultural mindset (if you have not discovered your sexual identity or activity, you are not complete, satisfied, etc). We now base God's goodness NOT on the undeserved gifts He gives, but on the goodness He is withholding, the same temptation the serpent used on Eve in Genesis 3.

*When all of life is about **feeding our needs**, it can only **fuel our discontent***

Think about all of our desires that we move up the list from *wants* to *needs*. What would be different about our perspective in our job if we were clear about these? How about our marriage? When we embrace what we truly deserve, we begin to see **God's grace** all around. No longer is sexual satisfaction a need but a **gift**. Being treated fairly and kindly, having someone notice my work, or being rewarded by a job well done become gifts rather than needs. This unlocks a new way of thinking about circumstances and others, and each become conduits of grace rather than roadblocks of happiness.

Perspective in Little and Much

The word Paul uses for **content** is literally to be **self-sufficient or contained**. Now in the context of this paragraph as well as the rest of Scripture we are never called to trust or bank on ourselves for anything. The idea here is not a focus on self, but rather the discovery that in Christ we have all we need (see John 15:5 - apart from me you can do nothing). It was what Agur desired as he wrote the Proverb: "*Remove far from me falsehood and lying; **give me neither poverty nor riches; fee me with the food that is needful for me**, lest I be full and deny you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of the Lord.*" (Proverbs 30:8-9). The goal was dependency on the Lord first and primarily, and seeing everything else from that lens.

Paul had experienced a full spectrum of comfort and material well-being, from being cold and alone in prison to having more than enough to eat. He had slept sitting up in shackles and on a comfortable bed, had been cold through to the bone as well as the warmth of a hospitable home. He felt the sting of neglect from churches as well as the provision that came from them (2 Cor. 11:9). The key to

contentment that he gained with being sufficient in Christ: **contentment is bulletproof when it comes to having much or nothing.**

We are all called to work hard, but we recognize we are all dependent on so much for life. Most everyone in this room has experienced having more than we need and living from paycheck to paycheck. Erin and I share in pre-marital counseling how we had to budget in the beginning of our marriage because we did not have much of anything, and all of our furniture was handed down to us or dual purpose (the old Igloo cooler coffee table once a sheet was put over top). When Erin began teaching at a public school and we did not have to pay rent, we had to budget to make sure we did not just spend away our extra. Some in this room are experiencing the loss of a job and waiting on the Lord for the next one, and some of your businesses are struggling to make ends meet. Paul had experienced both polls and contentment was found on either end. *What does this mean for us?*

Contentment is NOT external, but trusting the sufficiency of Christ for all things. We get caught deceiving ourselves thinking that if we only had more, we'd be content, but Paul said that was just as dangerous a place to be in terms of contentment. *Contentment, then, **must be learned wherever we are presently** since no external change will bring it.* If I am not content in Christ as a single person, I will not be content as a married one. If I am not content in Christ with the money I have now I will not be content with more. If I am not content in my marriage now I will not be content outside of it. But what was the secret?

Contentment is a Learned Perspective (11-12)

Both difficult and possible

This is a tremendous truth. Paul said that he had to **learn contentment over time**. This should give all of us hope. **Malcolm Gladwell** popularized the notion of learning and practice in his book "*Outliers*", where he said it took 10000 hours, or almost 10 years, of deliberate practice to become an expert in something. Paul had already commanded that the key to stability is to **practice the truth that we put our minds on** (4:8-9), meaning that contentment is a coalescence of practicing those things we already studied in Philippians: *pressing on, forgetting what lies behind, seeking Christlikeness, standing firm, agreeing with each other, rejoicing in the Lord, being gracious, and ceasing our anxiousness through prayer with thanksgiving.* The life of a Christian is that of a **learner**, the literal word for disciple, and just like any discipline, we will never grow unless we put what we know into consistent, relentless, and continual practice.

Putting this into practice is **difficult**. If you have ever learned an instrument, memorized lines for a dramatic production, or tried to hit a 9 iron well, you know how inconsistent we can feel. But we also begin to see progress as we practice more and more. The hope we have is that **learning contentment** is possible for every believer, so you do NOT HAVE TO CONTINUE LIVING ON THE HAMSTER WHEEL.

A Secret Out in the Open

Most times we think secret things are supposed to remain hidden. However, the reason Paul was ending this letter this way was that the church at Philippi and we would know the key to unlock the secret of contentment. The answer is the same answer to everything else: **Christ**. He is the answer to the longing of our heart, He is our greatest satisfaction, and our greatest gift. He will not leave us, He strengthens us, and supplies our every need. When we reach an end of our searching, our self-sufficiency, and our acceptable level of misery we are left with only on thing: **repentance**. We repent and surrender our life as we've tried to carve it to yield it to God in Christ, turning from our sin, asking

for forgiveness, and following Jesus obediently with the entirety of our life. When we turn from our discontented churning, we find the peace that Jesus made on the cross, offering us something far greater than any material gain we could have. In Him, we can live distinctly from the world, ceasing our **complaining and worry**, and resting in Christ alone.

Contentment is Satisfied in Christ (13)

I can do all things through Him who strengthens me

A Great Misunderstanding

A Glorious Strengthening

Contentment Views Others More Important (14-19)

*Yet is was king of you to share my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, **no church entered into partnership with me** in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. Not that I **seek the gift**, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus*

Focusing on the Better Gifts

True Goal of Giving Gifts