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THE SECRET FOR CONTENTMENT

Philippians 4:10-13

By

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Philippians Lesson 27

The Secret for Contentment
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An airline pilot was flying over the Tennessee mountains and pointed out a lake to his copilot. "See that little lake?" he said. "When I was a kid I used to sit in a rowboat down there, fishing. Every time a plane would fly overhead, I'd look up and wish I was flying it. Now I look down and wish I was in a rowboat, fishing."

Contentment can be an elusive pursuit. We go after what we think will make us happy only to find that it didn't work; in fact, we were happier before we started the quest. It's like the story of two teardrops floating down the river of life. One teardrop said to the other, "Who are you?" "I'm a teardrop from a girl who loved a man and lost him. Who are you?" "I'm a teardrop from the girl who got him."

The lack of contentment that marks our nation is reflected in many ways. 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. Of course, the advertising industry tries to convince us that we can't possibly be happy unless we have their product, and we often take the bait, only to find that we own one more thing to break down or one more time consuming piece of equipment to add more pressure to an already overloaded schedule.

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. Some of the moves are demanded by the need for decent jobs. But some of it is fueled by a gnawing discontent that we think will be satisfied when we find the right living situation. But we never quite get there.

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.

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.

In Philippians 4:10-13, a man who sits in prison because of corrupt officials awaiting possible execution over false charges tells us how to find contentment. The answer lies buried in the midst of a thank-you note. The Philippian church had sent a financial gift to Paul the prisoner. He wants to express his heartfelt thanks, but at the same time he doesn't want to give the impression that the Lord was not sufficient for his every need. Even though he had been in a very difficult situation (4:14, "affliction"), he doesn't want his donors to think that he had been discontented before the gift arrived; but he does want them to know that their generosity was truly appreciated. So he combines his thanks with this valuable lesson on the secret for contentment. We'll look first at what contentment is as Paul describes it; and then at how we acquire it.

WHAT IS CONTENTMENT?

The word *content* (4:11) comes from a Greek word that means self-sufficient or independent. The Stoics elevated this word, the ability to be free from all want or needs, as the chief of all virtues. But the Stoic philosophy was marked by detachment from one's emotions and indifference to the vicissitudes of life. This clearly is not the sense in which Paul meant the word, since in 4:10 he shows that he rejoiced in the Lord greatly when he received the gift, not because of the money, but because it showed the Philippians' heartfelt love and concern for him. Paul was not detached from people nor from his feelings. He loved people dearly and was not afraid to show it. And, 4:13 clearly shows that Paul did not mean the word in the pagan sense of *self*-sufficiency, since he affirms that his sufficiency is in Christ.

Neither does contentment mean complacency. As Christians we can work to better our circumstances as we have opportunity.

The Bible extols hard work and the rewards that come from it, as long as we are free from greed. Paul tells slaves not to give undue concern to gaining their freedom, but if they are able to do so, they should (1 Cor. 7:21). If you're single and feel lonely, there is nothing wrong with seeking a godly mate, as long as you're not so consumed with the quest that you lack the sound judgment that comes from waiting patiently on the Lord. If you're in an unpleasant job, there is nothing wrong with going back to school to train for a better job or from making a change to another job, as long as you do so in submission to the will of God.

So what does contentment mean? *It is an inner sense of rest or peace that comes from being right with God and knowing that He is in control of all that happens to us.* It means having our focus on the kingdom of God and serving Him, not on the love of money and things. If God grants us material comforts, we can thankfully enjoy them, knowing that it all comes from His loving hand. But, also, we seek to use it for His purpose by being generous. If He takes our riches, our joy remains steady, because we are fixed on Him (see 1 Tim. 6:6-10, 17-19). Contentment also means not being battered around by difficult circumstances or people, and not being wrongly seduced by prosperity, because our life is centered on a living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. So no matter what happens to us or what others do to us, we have the steady assurance that the Lord is for us and He will not forsake us.

HOW DO WE ACQUIRE CONTENTMENT?

The world goes about the quest for contentment in all the wrong ways, so we must studiously avoid its ways. Paul's words show ...

The secret for contentment in every situation is to focus on the Lord--as Sovereign, as Savior, and as the Sufficient One.

He is the Sovereign One to whom I must submit; He is the Savior whom I must serve; He is the Sufficient One whom I must trust. If I know Him in these ways as Paul did, I will know contentment.

1. Contentment comes from focusing on the Lord as the Sovereign One to whom I must submit.

Paul mentions that the Philippians had revived their concern for him. The word was used of flowers blossoming again or of trees leafing out in the springtime. He is quick to add that they always had been concerned, but they lacked opportunity. We do not know what had prohibited their sending a gift sooner, whether it was a lack of funds, not having a reliable messenger to take the gift, not knowing about Paul's circumstances, or some other reason. But whatever the reason, Paul knew that God was in control, God knew his need, and God would supply or not supply as He saw fit. Paul was subject to the Sovereign God in this most practical area of his financial support.

I will develop this more next week, but I believe that Paul had a policy of not making his financial needs known to anyone except the Lord. Here he was in prison, unable to pursue his tent-making trade, and he was in a tight spot ("affliction" in 4:14 literally means "pressure"). He wrote a number of letters during this time to various churches and individuals (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon), and he asks for prayer in those letters. But never once does he mention his financial needs. Rather, he asks for prayer for boldness and faithfulness in his witness. He trusted in and submitted to the sovereignty of God to provide for his needs.

Sometimes God supplied abundantly, and so Paul had learned how to live in prosperity. Most of us would like to learn that lesson! But sometimes God withheld support, and so Paul had to learn to get along with humble means. At those times, he did not grumble or panic, but submitted to the sovereign hand of God, trusting that God knew what was best for him and that He always cared for His children (1 Pet. 5:6-7).

But notice, Paul *learned* to be content in all conditions. It didn't come naturally to him, and it wasn't an instantaneous transformation. It is a process, something that we learn from walking with God each day. Key to this process is understanding that everything, major and minor, is under God's sovereignty. He uses all our circumstances to train us in godliness if we submit to Him and trust Him. Our attitude in trials and our deliberate submission to His sovereignty in the trial is crucial.

George Muller proved the sovereign faithfulness of God in the matter of finances. He lived in 19th century Bristol, England,

where he founded an orphanage. He and his wife had taken literally Jesus' command to give away all their possessions (Luke 14:33), so they had no personal resources. Also, he was firmly committed to the principle of not making his financial needs known to anyone, except to God in prayer. He was extremely careful not even to give hints about his own needs or the needs of the orphanage. The children never knew about any financial difficulties, nor did they ever lack good food, clothes, or warmth.

But there were times when Muller's faith was tried, when the Lord took them down to the wire before supplying the need. On February 8, 1842, they had enough food in all the orphan houses for that day's meals, but no money to buy the usual stock of bread or milk for the following morning, and two houses needed coal. Muller noted in his journal that if God did not send help before nine the next morning, His name would be dishonored.

The next morning Muller walked to the orphanage early to see how God would meet their need, only to discover that the need had already been met. A Christian businessman had walked about a half mile past the orphanages toward his place of work when the thought occurred to him that Muller's children might be in need. He decided not to retrace his steps then, but to drop off something that evening. But he couldn't go any further and felt constrained to go back. He gave a gift that met their need for the next two days (*George Muller: Delighted in God!* by Roger Steer [Harold Shaw Publishers], pp. 115-116). Muller knew many instances like that where God tried his faith.

If you are walking with God and you find yourself in a desperate situation, you can know that you are not there by chance. The sovereign God has put you there for your training in faith, that you might share His holiness. It may be a small crisis or a major, life-threatening crisis. Submit to and trust the Sovereign God and you will know the contentment that comes from Him.

2. Contentment comes from focusing on the Lord as the Savior whom I must serve.

The reason Paul knew that God would meet his basic needs was that Jesus had promised, "Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt.

6:33). All these things refers to what you shall eat, what you shall drink, what you shall wear (6:25). Jesus was teaching that if we will put our focus on serving Him and growing in righteousness, God will take care of our basic material needs. In the context He is talking about how to be free from anxiety, or how to be content in our soul. Paul taught the same thing (see 1 Tim. 6:6-11). If our focus is on our Savior and on doing what He has called us to do for His kingdom, which includes growing in personal holiness, then we can be content with what He provides.

Please take note that He promises to supply our *needs*, not our *greed*. Most of us living in America have far, far more than our needs. We live in relative luxury, even if we live in a house that is too small or only have one car. Sometimes we need to remember that people in other countries squeeze ten family members into a one-room, dirt-floored shanty.

I read a story about a Jewish man in Hungary who 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].) Perspective helps, doesn't it!

But the point is, if you live for yourself and your own pleasure, you will not know God's contentment. But if you follow Paul in living to serve the Savior, you will be content, whether you have little or much. Part of seeking first God's kingdom means serving Him with your money and possessions, which are not really yours, but His, entrusted to you as manager. We mistakenly think that we will be content when we accumulate enough money in the bank and enough possessions to make us secure. The truth is, you will know contentment when you give generously to the Lord's work, whether to world missions, to the local church, or to meeting the needs of the poor through Christian ministries. "Where your treas-

ure is, your heart will be" (Matt. 6:21). If your treasure is in this world, your heart will be in this world, which isn't the most secure environment! If your treasure is in the kingdom of God, your heart will be there, and it is a secure, certain realm.

3. Contentment comes from focusing on the Lord as the Sufficient One whom I must trust.

Paul says that he had "learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need" (4:12). That secret is stated in verse 13, "I can do all things in Him who continually infuses me with strength" (literal rendering). The all-sufficient, indwelling Christ was Paul's source of strength and contentment. Since Christ cannot be taken from the believer, we can lean on Him in every situation, no matter how trying.

Notice that there is a need to learn not only how to get along in times of need, but also how to live with abundance. In times of need, we're tempted to get our eyes off the Lord and grow worried. That's when we need a *trusting* heart. In times of abundance we're tempted to forget our need for the Lord and trust in our supplies rather than in Him. That's when we need a *thankful* heart that daily acknowledges gratitude for His provision. Thanking God for our daily bread, even when we've got enough in the bank for many days' bread, keeps us humbly trusting in Him in times of abundance.

By "all things," Paul means that he can do everything that God has called him to do in his service for His kingdom. He can obey God, he can live in holiness in thought, word, and deed. He can ask for the provisions needed to carry out the work and expect God to answer. If God has called you to get up in public and speak, He will give you the power to do it. If He has called you to serve behind the scenes, He will equip you with the endurance you need (1 Pet. 4:11). If He has called you to give large amounts to further His work, He will provide you with those funds. As Paul says (2 Cor. 9:8), "God is able to make all grace abound to you, that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed."

Notice the balance between God's part and our part. Some Christians put too much emphasis on "I can do all things," on the

human responsibility. You end up burning out, because I cannot do all things in my own strength. Others put too much emphasis on “through Him who strengthens me.” These folks sit around passively not doing anything, because they don’t want to be accused of acting in the flesh. The correct biblical balance is that I do it, but I do it by constant dependence on the power of Christ who indwells me. As Paul expressed it (1 Cor. 15:10), “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.” In Philippians 4:13, the verb is present tense, meaning, God’s continual, day-by-day infusing me with strength as I serve Him.

The Greek preposition is “in,” not “through.” It points to that vital, personal union with Christ that we have seen repeatedly throughout Philippians. Paul is saying that because of his living relationship of union with the living, all-sufficient Christ, he can do whatever the Lord calls him to do for His kingdom.

This verse is one of many which affirm the sufficiency of Christ for the believer’s every need. But this doctrine is under attack by the “Christian” psychology movement, which claims that Christ is sufficient for your “spiritual” needs (whatever that means!), but not for your emotional needs. But look at the list of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), look at the qualities of the godly person as described throughout the New Testament, and you’ll find an emotionally stable person. You are not equipped for every good deed (2 Tim. 3:16-17) if you’re an emotional wreck. The living Christ and His Word are powerful to strengthen you to serve Him, which includes emotional well-being. But the church today is selling out the joy of trusting in the all-sufficient Christ for a mess of worldly pottage that does not satisfy. Whatever your needs, learn to trust daily in the sufficient Savior and you will know His contentment in your soul.

Conclusion

Legend has it that a wealthy merchant during Paul’s day had heard about the apostle and had become so fascinated that he determined to visit him. So when passing through Rome, he got in touch with Timothy and arranged an interview with Paul the prisoner. Stepping inside his cell, the merchant was surprised to find

the apostle looking rather old and physically frail, but he felt at once the strength, the serenity, and the magnetism of this man who relied on Christ as his all in all. They talked for some time, and finally the merchant left. Outside the cell, he asked Timothy, "What's the secret of this man's power? I've never seen anything like it before." "Did you not guess?" replied Timothy. "Paul is in love." The merchant looked puzzled. "In love?" he asked. "Yes," said Timothy, "Paul is in love with Jesus Christ." The merchant looked even more bewildered. "Is that all?" he asked. Timothy smiled and replied, "That is *everything*." (Adapted from Leonard Griffith, *This is Living* [Abingdon], p. 149.)

That's the secret of contentment--to be captivated by Christ--as the Sovereign to whom I submit; as the Savior whom I serve; as the Sufficient One whom I trust in every situation.

Discussion Questions

1. Where's the balance between being content and yet trying to better your situation or solve certain problems?
2. Someone says, "If God is sovereign over the tragedy that happened to me, then He is not good." What would you reply?
3. What does it mean practically to seek first God's kingdom and righteousness? Must we all become full-time missionaries?
4. Someone says, "We trust God and yet use modern medicine; why can't we trust God and use modern psychology?" Your answer?

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