

Going to School to Learn Contentment

Our Life in Christ

Philippians 4:10-13

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I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have reviewed your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. 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. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. Philippians 4:10-13 (ESV)

Introduction:

We come to the next-to-the-last sermon in the epistle of Paul to the church in Philippi. It has been a great journey, and it will conclude next Sunday. This book must be a staple of a believer's diet as we live in this world as citizens of heaven. As we have seen, the epistle ends with many practical admonitions that give us food for thought and actions. This week is no exception. The focus of this short text is "contentment." What a great sounding word that is, yet it is a concept that is often so hard to realize.

The question of the morning is, "Are you content?" The follow-up question is "Would you like to be content?" I was reading a blog by Joshua Becker (a self-identified minimalist) who quoted Will Rogers: "Too many spend money they have not earned to buy things they do not need to impress people they do not like." In that same blog, Becker gives some general statistics (I did not verify them, but they sound reasonable). He said that the average U.S. home has doubled in size in the last 50 years. Ten percent of Americans rent storage space; 25 percent of the people with two-car garages cannot park their cars in the garage; 75 percent live paycheck to paycheck; and the average credit card debt is \$15,000. His concluding quote is well stated: "Our discontent is evidenced by our excess." Obviously, he is only dealing with material issues. I am sure we could find other statistics in the realm of counseling, medicine, entertainment, etc. that would verify that we live in a country and culture that struggles to be content and that looks for it in all the wrong places. For me, contentment is often measurable by the quality of sleep I obtain, particularly early in the

morning. Let's look at this brief text and pray that God opens our eyes to what He has to say about contentment.

In Philippians 4:10-13, we can see three truths to help us achieve contentment.

I. Contentment is learned (answers the "how" question), vv. 4:10-11

In verse 10 Paul goes back to one of the reasons he wrote the letter in the first place. He is thankful for their concern for him. In 4:18, Paul is explicit that he is rejoicing and thankful for their generous gift (probably money) to him. It may be that Paul wondered if they had deserted him and were not concerned for him because it must have been some time since he had heard from them. He now knows that they just needed the right opportunity to show their support for him. He was thankful and glad.

In vintage Paul fashion, he takes this opportunity to teach by example. He sets the record straight in verse 11. He was not speaking in respect of want or need. He would have survived without their giving for sure. To us that sounds ungrateful, but Paul was just expressing his gratitude and wanted to teach them as well. The teaching was that he had learned in whatever situation he was in to be content. What a powerful statement. There are at least two profound points from this short statement.

1. First, he learned to be content. Paul was content. Do you wish you could say that in any circumstance? This exact word is not used often in the New Testament. The idea is in Hebrews 13:5 where the readers are encouraged to be free from the love of money and content with what they have. Paul speaks to this issue in 1 Tim. 6:6, saying that "godliness with contentment is great gain." Again Paul speaks in 2 Cor. 12:10, saying that he is content in weakness, insults, etc., because when he is weak, then he is strong. Contentment is powerful and beautiful.

The word used in this verse is a word found in secular Greek and is used by the Stoic philosophers as a satisfied state of life because one is totally independent and in need of no one and nothing. Classic stoicism sees the state of total self-dependency to be the highest state, and therefore one is content. The Biblical nuance is more like the sentiment expressed by the Puritan of the early 1600s, Jeremiah Burroughs. In his book, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, he writes, contentment is "that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit which submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition." That just sounds blissful, and it also sounds like it should be the norm for a Christian who truly lives in Christ.

2. The second profound point in this text struck me as I prepared for this sermon. I know I had seen it before, but it really hit me this time. It is found in the word “learned.” I wish Paul had offered a magic pill for contentment. I wish there were four steps to contentment. No—it must be learned. It is a process. We should take advantage of opportunities to learn contentment. It will not come easy, but it can come to one who is in Christ as that person works at the lessons designed by God to teach us contentment.

Learn about contentment from Bible characters. There are many examples of those who learned contentment in the Bible. Think of Joseph, son of Jacob. He was sold by his brothers, wrongfully imprisoned, and mistreated. He learned that God works all things together for good and was content in his God. Remember Daniel. He was righteous but was taken into captivity by the Babylonians and even thrown into a lion’s den. He affirmed that God rules over all and that all are beneath his sovereign rule. He was content even when the pagans seemed to win and he was mistreated.

In the New Testament, Judas is on the other side. He was one of the Lord’s disciples but was not content. He did not learn his lessons well and betrayed his Lord—the result was his suicide. In church history you can compare the martyrs to those like Judas who commit suicide. Fox, a product of the English Reformation, tells the tradition of the death of Paul in his *Book of Martyrs*. Fox writes, “Paul, the apostle, who before was called Saul, after his great travail and unspeakable labors in promoting the Gospel of Christ, suffered also in this first persecution under Nero. Nero sent two of his esquires to bring him word of his (Paul’s) death. . . .The soldiers came and led him out of the city to the place of execution, where he, after his prayers made, gave his neck to the sword.”

What a difference in contentment between a martyr and a one who commits suicide.

Application:

1. Study your life and learn to be content. Here is a suggestion; Get a contentment journal. List the times that you are content and when you are not. Pray that God will teach you through those life experiences how to be content.
2. Another suggestion would be to find a mature Christian who has learned contentment in tough times (although probably not perfectly, he has learned much). Ask questions and see what you can learn from him.

3. Above all, be in prayer (remember Phil. 4:6) for the Lord, by His Spirit, to teach you contentment. It is not a pill or a five-step plan. It is not magic, but it comes to those who seriously learn from the Lord and who listen to the lessons. Most of us want the easy way. Contentment comes to those willing to submit to the Lord and learn the lessons that come to us daily.

II. Circumstances should not affect contentment—(answers the “when” question), v. 4:12

Paul moves to some contrasting verbiage to show that contentment is not based on circumstances. Indeed, Paul was content in the easy and in the hard. Paul lists three contrasting situations, with a total of six types of circumstances, in all of which, Paul learned to be content. There is certainly overlap in the terms but below are the contrasts and a suggestion of categories which may summarize them.

Easy circumstance	Hard circumstance	Suggested category
“Abound”	“Brought low”	Reputation
“Facing plenty”	“Hunger”	Necessities of life
“Abundance”	“Need”	Possessions

Paul had learned that circumstances do not make for content people. He even suggests that the easy circumstances do not make for content people. How often have we had easy circumstances and it only makes us want more. We have enough food, so we eat too much. Humans, left to themselves, will not be content no matter what the circumstance is.

The last verb in verse 12 is very interesting. Paul says he learned the secret to being content regardless of the circumstance. He had to learn it, and we want to know the secret. Paul, give us the contentment pill. Let us know the secret. Do not keep it to yourself. Is it only for apostles? Verse 13 will answer the question to the secret.

Application:

1. Do not think that contentment will necessarily come when circumstances change. If you are struggling with health, finances, relationships, employment, etc., you can be content in any circumstance. Paul was and we can be as well.

2. Often the best lessons in contentment come in difficult times. Look at the “successful” people in our culture: the entertainers, athletes, rich and famous people, etc. It does not take long to see that circumstances will not bring contentment. It must come from some source deeper than ourselves. We tend to live like my grandkids who loved their pacifier. It brought so much contentment. It promised so much but did not deliver. We grow up and develop our mature pacifiers to bring contentment, and we find them lacking. Let’s go to the final point and see Paul’s “secret” to contentment in any circumstance.

III. Christ is the secret to contentment—IN CHRIST—(answers the “who” question), v. 4:13

Philippians 4:13 is one of the most loved and misused verses in the Bible. We love to use it when we are in difficult situations hoping that God’s mighty arm will allow us to conquer the problems. We use it before tests we did not study for, or for tasks that seem too large, or for work projects that are impossible. We use it as a kind of genie in the bottle to ask for miracles from God. The context here is clear. We can have the strength to be content in any circumstance through the one who strengthens us for the challenge. It is not a promise of deliverance from difficult circumstances but a promise for divine strength in those challenging times.

The word translated “through” in verse 13 is an interesting preposition. The commentator O’Brien suggests the translation “I can do all things in vital union with Christ.” As long as we are with Him and in Him, we can find the secret to contentment in any circumstance. It is like a good marriage. When we are right with each other, we can be content in all circumstances of life, because we have each other. How much more true is that for those who are in Christ? We can be content as we are in union and fellowship with the one who is all powerful and who strengthens us. We are not like the Stoics who were proud of their independence and lack of giving into circumstances. Our only hope in all circumstances is not in ourselves or in anyone else, but in Christ alone!!

Conclusion: What do we do with this?

1. Learn the sovereign Lordship of Christ. He is King and He is not caught by surprise. He does know the future and is causing all things to work together for good to those who love Him.

2. Get ready for school. Get pen and paper, look at what God brings into your life, and determine to be content and to learn that contentment. You are not saved as a mature believer. Learn that God is faithful and he will not allow you to be tested beyond what you are able.

3. Do not let circumstances dictate your contentment. Fight with all your might against that. In your journal, list circumstances (real ones) and chronicle their development. Pray that God will strengthen you to learn contentment in all circumstances. Repent when you do not trust Him, and celebrate when you see that He is sufficient.

4. Believe that Christ is enough. He is all you need. His strength is sufficient and more so. Let Him be glorified. Seek to live our union with Him. Reread or memorize Philippians to learn what it means to be in Christ.

- Phil. 1:21 “in union with Jesus” makes death gain.
- Phil. 2: 11 in union with Christ adores his Lordship—Lord of lords.
- Phil. 3:8 in union with Christ means that I can count everything as loss to gain him.
- Phil. 4:6 in union with Christ allows me to pray to him and see anxieties flee.

5. There are some times to be discontent. We should not be content when we are in sin. We should not be content when we desire something more than God. At times our discontentment may be God’s way to draw us away from false imitations and closer to the only source of contentment—Jesus.

College Park Church, we need to be people who are content in every circumstance and then show the God who strengthens us as we are in union with HIM! What a great way to live!

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