

Learn to be Content

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There is a familiar verse in the Bible which reads, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." Now, here's a little test. Without saying anything this morning, without raising your hand, I want you to think to yourself. Do you know where in the Bible this verse comes from? Do you know who said it and most importantly do you know what its immediate context is? Think about it. "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."

Did these words issue forth from the mouth of Noah when he faced the daunting task of building, and then living in, a boat large enough to house representatives from all the created order? Or was it Abraham when he stood over Isaac, ready to sacrifice his own son? Or how about Joseph when he was sold into bondage and then imprisoned on a false accusation? Was it Moses when he stood before the Red Sea with an army closing in behind him or was it Joshua leading Israel into battle against Jericho? Was it the youthful David when he faced the Philistine giant or Esther as she came unbidden to confront her husband and king? Was it Elijah as he positioned himself against all the prophets of Baal or Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego as they stepped into the fiery furnace? Perhaps it was Daniel as he descended into the lion's den or John the Baptist as he stood before Herod to confront him for his immorality. Was it Stephen as he testified before the high priest or was it Peter or Paul enduring beating and imprisonment? The list could go on and on through thousands of years of biblical history.

"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." While these simple words have broad application, and may well have been thought or uttered in any of the monumental instances I've mentioned, these words are recorded for us in a far different context. They are not intended to encourage us primarily in the face of flood or famine or fire or giant or sword or stone. They are instead intended to equip us for battle against a much greater and far more deadly foe, namely the enemy of discontent.

I've entitled this morning's message, Learn to Be Content, and I hope that it will be a reminder for us that contentment is not optional in the Christian life. It is commanded. Philippians 4:4 tells us to "Rejoice in the Lord always", and I don't know of any way to rejoice in the Lord with a heart full of discontent. Contentment is not optional, and neither is it something that just happens to us. It is a learned discipline, like reading or writing or praying. I think we can all agree with the proposition that the human heart, whether it has much or little, is bent on discontent. The grass is always greener on the other side.

Turn with me if you will to Philippians 4:11 and we'll plug the verse we've already contemplated back into the context from which it is so often pulled. We read in verse 11.

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; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

In verse 11 you see the basis for my title, "for I have learned to be content". If Paul had to learn contentment, then so must we. It is no easy endeavor and it does not happen overnight. The first thing we should notice is that Paul's contentment is totally independent from the circumstances that surround him. "I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am." The world knows nothing of such contentment, nor can it, and yet this is the only contentment which can stand firm amidst the turbulent and often devastating changes of life. So where does such contentment come from? Paul has learned the secret and he shares it with us. The secret to being content with much or with little, the secret to being content in famine or in feast is to learn and forever meditate on

the implications of one profound principle. "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." I can even be content! For those of you in this room who knew that this verse was referring to contentment, the ability to rejoice in any circumstance that comes your way, congratulations, you did better than I. It wasn't until I recently started memorizing portions of Philippians that I really started to dwell on the fact that this simple declaration offers much more than just encouragement in the face of some unusual trial. It offers the secret of contentment. That's huge. Philippians 4:13 is not a special-circumstances verse, it's an everyday verse. The battle to be content, to learn contentment, is fought everyday.

After considering a variety of texts on this topic of contentment, I am going to present you with five points, the implementation of which, I think are essential for living a life of contentment.

I - Be United to Christ in Salvation

This should be obvious, but since union with Christ is our absolute foundation in the struggle to be content, we would be remiss to start anywhere else. True contentment is simply not available to the unbeliever. Period. Why is this true? Because no matter what the unbeliever bases his contentment on, it will one day be taken away. And not only will it be taken away, it will be replaced with eternal torment so that even the most stoic philosopher and the most unshakable optimist will be utterly incapable of finding even a moment's contentment amidst eternal damnation. What is the alternative to seeking contentment in that which can be taken away? Paul tells us in Philippians 3, starting in verse 7. Let's look at it together.

But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

I want you to notice, more than anything else, the tone of this statement. Does Paul sound like a man dejected or a man excited? Is he lamenting the loss of "all things" with a "woe is me" type despair, or is he rejoicing at what he has gained? To me, it's obvious that the tone is joy. There is nothing in all of existence more valuable to Paul than His Lord Jesus Christ. Why? Because Jesus has given him a righteousness not his own, one Paul could never attain in his own efforts, and therefore Paul is acceptable to God, on the basis of faith, and will one day attain "to the resurrection from the dead." When you couple that reality with the promise of Romans 8:38,39 (that nothing shall be able to separate us from the love of God), how could Paul be anything but content? The only thing that mattered to him could never be stripped away, and all that actually was being stripped away was "rubbish" in light of the "surpassing value of knowing Christ".

The encouraging portion of this text is that, for those of us who are in Christ, our eternal condition, which is the basis of our contentment, is just as secure as Paul's. Nothing can separate us from He who is supremely valuable, and nothing that is separated from us has any comparative value at all. The discouraging portion of this text, for me at least, is that despite my condition in Christ, I struggle to be content, and I'm quite sure that I'm not alone in this room. I think Philippians 3 was written on a very good day for Paul, when God's promises were paramount and the appeal of the flesh was small. I've had days like that, but I've also had a lot of Romans 7 days. "Who will set me free from this body of sin?" (7:24) "For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish." (7:19)

Let us remember the message of Philippians 4. Contentment is learned. It is a discipline. But for those of us who

are united to Christ in salvation, the only sufficient foundation for lasting contentment is in place. Let's rejoice in that fact and build on it.

II - Consider What You Were Saved From

Last week I came across some verses that are so good, on so many levels, that I wonder how I've missed them all these years. Perhaps I haven't been spending enough time in Lamentations. The verses I want to highlight are Lamentations 3:39, 40, but I'm going to include 37 and 38 as well since they're such great "sovereignty of God" verses, verses that should shut the mouths of those who worship a small and containable god.

Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and ill go forth? Why should any living mortal, or any man, offer complaint in view of his sins? Let us examine and probe our ways, and let us return to the Lord.

Lamentations 3:37-40

Why should any living mortal, or any man, offer complaint in view of his sins? Here's the lesson I take from this verse. The next time you're tempted to complain about some pain or some inconvenience or some mistreatment, remember what your sins deserve and shut your mouth. The bottom line is this. From the moment of our conception right through to today, none of us in this room, and no one living in all the world has experienced anything other than constant grace. I do not say that in ignorance of the very real suffering that exists in the world, but to emphasize the message of Lamentations 3. The whole of humanity deserves to be in hell right now. So long as we're not there, we are living in absolute grace. No amount of suffering in this life, including the loss of parent, spouse or child can compare with the suffering which would be ours if we were to receive the wages of our sin. All of the unbelievers in this world who think that death will be a means of relieving them from their present sufferings are in for a horrific discovery, unless God grant them to believe.

Philippians 2:14 is another verse that should hit us right between the eyes. "Do all things without grumbling or disputing." Grumbling is the outpouring of a discontent heart, and grumbling is a sin. Grumbling out loud is a sin and grumbling in your heart is a sin. You cannot be content and grumble. There are few things that will set your life more apart from the world around you than a lack of grumbling. Grumbling in the world is like a badge of honor. It's everywhere. The Christian should be markedly different. If we continue from Philippians 2:14 and read verse 15, we'll find this:

Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world.

Contentment proves you are a "[child] of God", not to God himself (God knows whose are His), but to you and to the watching world around you. Grumbling proves that your affections are misplaced, and not only does it destroy our witness, it will also cut us off from those we need to reach. Is there anything more draining that spending time with a constant complainer? If our lives are marked by grumbling, we can be assured that both believers and nonbelievers alike will keep their distance, and that's not good.

III - Flee from the Love of Money

Money is a very good thing. Bibles are printed, bound and bought with money. Missionaries are sent with money. Church buildings go up with money and massive needs the world over are met with money. Money is a very good and important thing, but money is very dangerous. Hebrews 13:5 reads:

Let your character be free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.

If you want to be content (which we're commanded to be), free yourself from the love of money. How do we do this? The writer of Hebrews tells us, and he agrees with Paul. We free ourselves from the love of money by remembering the saving promises of God. "I will never leave you, nor forsake you." Money doesn't matter. With or without it, our foundation is secure, and the reward of salvation trumps the reward of money.

As I thought about my audience this morning, I wondered where we, in this room, stand in our affection for money. We are a small church. Our parking lot is noticeably lacking some of the big-ticket automobiles that are staples at the mega-churches I've attended. Our seventy year-old facility is certainly nothing to write home about. Does that mean that our congregation is free from the love of money? Perhaps, but not necessarily.

I would guess, in fact, that it is often those who have the least money who may love it the most. Money, to them, remains the apple of their eye because it has yet to default on its many promises. Money promises happiness, and so long as people are without much money, they may never know that it's lying. The rich have spent enough to know that wealth doesn't deliver the lasting happiness it promises. It is no coincidence that the one man in all of human history who was able to indulge his every desire, was the one man in all of history whose words seem the most jaded and despairing. "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," so declares King Solomon in the book of Ecclesiastes (1:2).

Along the same lines, it is revealing, returning to the passage that we opened with in Philippians 4, that Paul tells us that he knows how to be content both in poverty and prosperity. Why would anyone need to learn contentment in prosperity, right? Isn't it the impoverished who must struggle with contentment? How many wealthy men and women the world over wished it were that simple. The implication of Paul's statement is that contentment is no less difficult for the rich man than it is for the poor man, (and there is massive discontent among the rich). In fact, monetary prosperity in the life of a believer brings with it a whole new realm of difficult kingdom-building responsibilities. There is a world of unevangelized and uneducated and unhoused and unfed people whose souls are crying out. God gives us an abundance for every good work, not for every good comfort. And God calls him a fool who uses his excess money to increase his own comforts rather than investing in the rock solid futures of eternity (Luke 12:15-21).

The next time that you are enticed to forsake the gain of godliness in pursuit of the gain of greed, remember the message of I Timothy 6:6,7:

But godliness actually is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either.

The first question that struck me, based on the way Paul pairs godliness and contentment is this. Is it possible to be godly and discontent? Clearly the answer is "no", but Paul highlights the need to be content because it is a truth easily forgotten by thick headed creatures like us. Furthermore, I think Paul is combatting the notion that external godliness is a means of temporal gain. As such, I take his phrasing to mean that the "great gain" is contentment, and that is infinitely valuable! I mean who in the world, if they could choose between being rich and being happy would choose to be rich? People pursue wealth because they think it will make them happy, but in the end, it isn't the money they want, it's the happiness, the contentment. And the same would be true with anything, power, fame, influence, knowledge. These things are pursued as a means to contentment but if it came right down to either having them or having contentment, only a great fool would choose against contentment. May we not be great fools. Let us learn from the misery of the rich that those who love money will never be content.

IV - Meditate on that Which is Good

Philippians 4:6-8 speaks to this point.

Be anxious for nothing (anxiousness is the antithesis of contentment), but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God (contentment), which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.

If your mind is filled with that which is excellent and good, it will be that much harder for treacherous desires to gain a foothold in your life and prompt feelings of discontent. Conversely, I find the message of Philippians 3:18,19 to be shockingly appropriate. This text reads:

For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.

The enemies of the cross, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite are marked by one thing. They set their mind on the things of the world. How many church going people will spend eternity in hell because they've never set their mind on anything beyond movies or music or baseball or business or politics or family or travel or leisure? A mind set on the things of the world is a mind bound for destruction, and a mind bound for destruction is a mind that will never be content. Meditate on that which is good, and do not set your mind on the things of the world.

V - Remember Where Your Citizenship Lies

When all is said and done, Christian contentment is far more patience than denial. Denial exalts yourself. Patience exalts Christ. It is not learning to be content with little. It is learning to wait for much! If we continue where we left off in Philippians 3, we read:

For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself. (20,21)

Our cursed and decaying bodies will be transformed into conformity with the glory of Christ one day. Remember that. Remember that next time your knee flares up or your back aches or cancer starts to eat away at your body. The resurrection is coming. Glory is coming. The wait is worth it. Don't complain. Eagerly expect.

I will close by urging you and urging me to combat discontent with the same fervor that we would combat lust or hatred or unbelief. It is HUGELY important. We are commanded to rejoice, we are commanded to not complain or grumble, and we are commanded to be content. We take our first step on that road by becoming united to Christ in salvation, and then we must *Consider What We've Been Saved From, Flee from the Love of Money, Meditate on that Which is Good, and Remember Where Our Citizenship Lies*. Since eternity is where almost the whole of our lives will play out, how foolish it is to try and find contentment in anything that won't last for eternity. Even if we managed to secure such contentment in this life, what good is it? Contentment which does not last is no contentment at all, and if our contentment is not anchored in Christ, we will have all eternity to curse our foolishness, in perfect discontent.

Let's pray.