

The Secret Of Contentment

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Philippians 4:10-13

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Philippians 4.

Pastor Paul is away this Sunday, so we decided to press pause for a week on our Apostle's Creed series. This affords us an opportunity to tackle something of a live issue in our church and culture.

I think it's fair to say that we have been through a year of mild adversity and, while it has come with some discomfort, it has also forced us to learn some important lessons. In the same way that there are some plants in your garden that only flower in the cool, rainy days of spring, there are some lessons that can only be learned when the going gets tough.

COVID has really rattled the cage of the cozy, North American church. Our polished, mega gatherings have been temporarily shut down. We've been forced to scale back the worship team and to scale down the meeting sizes. We're working twice as hard for half as much return. What used to be easy and flashy is now clunky and hard.

And of course, the restrictions bleed into our personal lives as well. We have been kept away from our grandparents. Many of our businesses have been pushed to the breaking point. To use language from our text this morning, many of us have "been brought low." And this adversity has caused some underlying issues to expose themselves.

In general, the response of the North American church has been concerning. We gave full vent to our anger on social media. We publicly spewed out our disgust with the officials that God placed over us. We protested. We demanded our rights. We flexed our muscles and showed our teeth.

Now that THAT has been exposed, we ought to spend some time unpacking that response. Where did that come from? I've introduced this sermon with an illustration from COVID, but I want to encourage you to think bigger than COVID today. As hard as it is to believe, this uncomfortable

season that we are living in will soon pass. But, while our circumstances are soon to change, the heart issues that were exposed will remain unless we address them. Today, I want to focus our attention on the general discontentment that we are witnessing all around us and, if we're being honest, within us.

To that end, we're going to turn our attention to the Book of Philippians. Paul wrote this letter while he was living under house arrest in Rome. He had been imprisoned for preaching the gospel and yet, notably, this letter includes no polemic for political reform. There is no rallying cry for an insurrection – no sermon about the tyranny of an unjust government. There is no “woe is me” language.

Paul is in prison. But Paul is content. Clearly, he understands something that we as North American Christians have lost somewhere along the way. I don't know about you, but I want to reclaim it. To that end, look with me now to Philippians 4. We're going to read from verses 10-13. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

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. ¹¹ Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² 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. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:10-13 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Here we find:

Reflections On Contentment From Prison

It's hard to receive correction from someone when they are oblivious to your circumstances. We've seen that play out over this past year. The person whose private business is crumbling doesn't want to hear a lecture from the secure politician. The church in Peel that has been in the grey zone since December doesn't want to hear from the pastor in Muskoka.

But no matter how difficult your circumstances might be, you can bet that the Apostle Paul understands. Paul was disowned, harassed, beaten, stoned, persecuted and shipwrecked and, at the time when he wrote this letter, he was in prison in Rome. From those circumstances, the Holy Spirit compelled Paul to speak to the church about contentment. So let's lean in and listen close. The first lesson Paul would have us learn is that:

1. Contentment knows how to be brought low

Humanly speaking, Paul had been brought low in every respect, but in this context he is referring to a season of poverty. In verse 10, Paul wrote:

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. (Philippians 4:10 ESV)

When Paul refers to the Philippians' "revived concern" he is alluding to a financial gift that he had just received from the church. Theirs was the first church that Paul had planted in Europe and, they had been some of his most faithful supporters since day one. However, along the way, something kept them from being able to maintain their commitment to Paul. Just like missionaries today, Paul faced seasons when the support income dried up. But even though he had experienced a season of poverty, he wanted the church to know that he was perfectly content. In the very next breath, he could say:

Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. (Philippians 4:11 ESV)

His finances were low, but he doesn't want the church to come away thinking that poor Paul was moping in his poverty. Even when the bank is empty, Paul is a happy man. John Calvin explains:

"Whatever my condition may be, I am satisfied with it." Why? because saints know that they thus please God. Hence they do not measure sufficiency by abundance, but by the will of God, which they judge of by what takes place, **for they are persuaded that their affairs are regulated by his providence and good pleasure.**¹

¹ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries (Complete)*, trans. John King, Accordance electronic ed. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), paragraph 90066.

Paul understood the sovereignty of God. Therefore, if the money wasn't there, it meant that God desired for him to make do with less for a season. If the citizens of a city chased him out of a city while they pelted him with rocks, it meant that God desired for him to preach in a new city. If the officials sent him to prison, then there were guards who needed to hear the gospel. Paul understood that he was not entitled to a life of luxury because he understood the call to discipleship. Jesus commanded us to take up our crosses and to follow him, therefore, Paul could say:

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. (Philippians 1:21-22 ESV)

You can only talk that way if you truly believe the gospel. If you believe that Jesus died on a cross so that your sins could be forgiven and that he has made a way for you to enjoy the presence of God forever in the new heavens and the new earth, then hardships and suffering and cost become very small things. Which is why, when people refuse to let go of their sin, it is undeniably evident that they don't believe the gospel. If you think that ANYTHING that this world has to offer – any treasure, or relationship, or comfort – is better than that which God has offered to you in Christ, then you don't yet understand the gospel. Matthew Henry concludes:

Note, A good man will soon have enough of this world; not only of living in it, but of receiving from it. A covetous worldling, if he has ever so much, would still have more; **but a heavenly Christian, though he has little, has enough.**²

If God strips away all of your earthly comforts, will you still rejoice in Him? THAT is Christian contentment. Paul's second lesson for us is related:

2. Contentment knows how to abound

I suspect that many of us actually struggle more in seasons of prosperity than we do in adversity. Paul teaches us here that Christian contentment is possible in both:

for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. (Philippians 4:11b-12a ESV)

² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible (Unabridged)*, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), paragraph 41040.

Here's a question: Do you know how to abound? How does your spiritual life fare when all is well, and everyone is healthy, and your business is thriving, and there is food in the cupboard?

Allow me to make a quick pastoral observation: Some of you have never attended services more faithfully than you have in the last 12 months. The number of long-time attendees that have taken the plunge and pursued membership has been staggering.

Is it possible that, when we had the freedom to go anywhere and to do anything we lost sight of what matters most? Was it really worth it to put the kids in the sports program that kept us from worshiping with God's people each Sunday? Did we really need to skip church for the cottage every other weekend? Is it possible that our comfort and leisure and clutter was silently choking out the faith in our homes? Jesus warned:

How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! (Mark 10:23 ESV)

It is interesting to me that we are spending so much of our energy fighting to restore life to "normal". Might I suggest that we devote ourselves to a different battle in this season? Let's battle with our discontentment. Let's learn how to be content in adversity so that we can carry that contentment with us if and when the Lord restores our comfort.

We're so eager to change our circumstances – as if the circumstances are the problem. But that's simply not the case! Adam and Eve had PERFECT circumstances and yet they succumbed to their discontentment.

Listen: You could have all the riches of the world, but it wouldn't ultimately satisfy you. The degree that you're pursuing – the child that you're pleading for – the relationship that you're clinging to – NONE of it will give you the contentment that you are longing for. Everything that this world has to offer will leave you dissatisfied and longing for more. King Solomon had it all, and yet he lamented:

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity. (Ecclesiastes 1:2 ESV)

“I had it all,” he says, “but it wasn’t enough. It was vanity. It was a mirage – a puff of smoke. It was a wasted life.” Contrast that with what Paul says in chapter 3 of this letter. After describing the life of respect, prestige and comfort that he had formerly lived, Paul went on to say:

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ (Philippians 3:7-8 ESV)

“I had it all,” Paul says, “but I was happy to let it all go for the sake of Christ!” THAT is what Christian contentment looks like! We hold our blessings with an open hand. We put everything on the table for the Lord. We don’t run away from prosperity or comfort, but we hold it loosely because we know that Jesus may ask it from us at any moment.

And finally, Paul teaches us that:

3. Contentment is a two-handed work

Let me share a quick illustration to help you visualize this. I’ve been trying to exercise a little more in the midst of this pandemic, and Matt Koller has been showing me the ropes. He likes to push me sometimes – to give me more weight than I think I can handle – in order to grow me. Sometimes, when I’m lying on the bench and the bar is crushing me with all its weight, his hands will come onto the bar. As I feebly push with all my might, he compensates for my weakness and lifts it back up onto the rack. However, if I give up and stop pushing, he lets that bar sit on my chest. He refuses to simply do it for me. I have to push. Even though I am contributing very little to the equation, it has to be a two-handed work. Paul tells us here that growth in contentment is like that.

Twice in these four verses he tells us that he LEARNED contentment. It’s not as if this attitude was simply part of Paul’s wiring. No, I’m sure Paul was just as capable of grumbling and complaining as the rest of us. As one commentator notes:

It is significant that Paul had to “learn” this virtue. **Contentment is not natural to most of mankind.**³

Paul had to work at this! And yet, he didn’t work at it in his own strength. He writes:

In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³ **I can do all things through him who strengthens me.** (Philippians 4:12b-13 ESV)

Do you see that two-handed language coming through? **I** can do all things. Through **him** who strengthens me. Contentment is difficult for me. It is not natural. Life gets hard and it feels like that heavy bar is crushing my chest, but I can push it back up because God LIFTS AS I PUSH!

The funny thing is, if you grew up in the church then you’ve memorized Philippians 4:13. This is the verse we all wrote onto our Nikes. I used to chant this verse when I was training to run long distance. And I’m thankful that we all memorized it! But now, let’s go a step further and make sure that we understand what it means.

When Paul says that he can do “all things,” he’s referring to something that is far more difficult than training for a marathon or dunking a basketball. He’s referring to contentment. Paul is saying, “I can be content when I’m on top of the mountain and I can be content when I’m in the valley. Through Christ who strengthens me, I can do all things.”

Instead of writing this verse on our sneakers, we should be writing it on a sticky note over the sink. When I’m doing the dishes after a long, exhausting day, and everything inside of me wants to complain, I need to remind myself of this truth. Write it on that expensive quote you just received from your mechanic. Write it on the wall of the nursery where you rock your newborn on those sleepless nights. By God’s grace, you CAN be content. In plenty and in hunger. In rest and in exhaustion. In bliss and in lockdown.

³ Homer A. Kent, Jr., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Ephesians – Philemon)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 11, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 154.

But that contentment won't just happen. God will give you the strength, but He has called you to LEARN contentment. It is a two-handed work. So, with the time that we have left, I want to ask a very practical question:

How Can I Grow In Contentment?

Before we unpack this list, I want to provide two disclaimers. First of all, this is not an exhaustive list. It is, however, a solid start and it will provide us with more than enough to sink our teeth into. And everything on this list is taken from this letter. Second, I want to reiterate that everything on this list requires the help of the Holy Spirit working in us. This list, apart from grace, is useless. We simply cannot do any of these things in our own strength. However, as we apply ourselves to grow in these areas, God promises to work in and through us. Indeed, we can do all things through Him who strengthens us.

That said, I want to pull out four practical commands that Paul has included in this letter. First, if you want to grow in contentment:

1. Find people worth following

Paul says in chapter 3 verse 17:

Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. (Philippians 3:17 ESV)

Be careful little ears who you listen to. Be careful little feet who you follow.

If you want to grow in Christian contentment, don't follow grumpy, argumentative leaders. Some people live to fight. Some people are never happy until they have control. Such people are not worth emulating. In the Philippian context, these lousy leaders were men who were fixated on the world. Paul warns:

Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:19-20 ESV)

Be wary of leaders who are fixating on building their earthly kingdom. Friends, our citizenship is in heaven! When we remember that, we respond to and engage with the world in a very different way.

Do you find yourself inclined to greed? Don't follow a greedy leader. Do you find yourself wanting to wrestle away authority from all of the leaders who are over you? Find leaders who model humility and submissive spirits. And I'm not just referring to official church leadership – I'm talking about friendship and mentorship as well. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul reminded the church that bad company corrupts good character. If you want to grow in contentment, you need to find people who are worth following.

Second, if you want to grow in contentment:

2. Rejoice always

Philippians 4:4 says:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. (Philippians 4:4 ESV)

We are, by nature, ungrateful. That's why we have to work so hard to train our kids to say thank you at the dinner table. Entitlement is our default.

For example, how many of us have entertained ungrateful thoughts even just this morning? "I hate that I have to wear this mask. Ugh, 15% capacity? I have to wake up even earlier for church now. These aren't the songs we sang in my old church."

Nobody had to encourage you to think those thoughts. All of THAT arose naturally from your sinful, selfish entitlement. Listen: Right now, at this very moment, your lungs are filling up with breath. Your heart is pumping blood through your body. Your mind is absorbing and storing information. A million miracles are happening in this exact moment because of the grace of God.

And we're worshipping at 15% when a year ago we were only allowed 10. And even then, we could worship without fear of persecution. How many other Christians have been able to say that in the history of the world?

And these challenges are actually teaching us valuable lessons! Every setback has come to us from the hand of our sovereign, heavenly Father who works all things for our good. So, THANK GOD for trials! Thank God for exposing our idolatrous hearts that are tempted to idolize our personal preferences. Thank God for a small gathering and the chance to meet some brothers and sisters who would have been lost in the crowd. Thank God for ALL of it!

Most of all, thank God for sending His Son to die on the cross for our ungrateful souls. If He never gave us anything else, we would still forever be in His debt. What an amazing God we serve! Christian: Rejoice always! When a grumbling thought stirs up in your mind, turn it into thanksgiving. As you do that, He will change you.

Third, if you want to grow in contentment:

3. Release control

Look at verses 6-7:

do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7 ESV)

One of my favorite quotes comes from an apologetics scholar that most of you have likely never heard of. His name is Scott Oliphint, and in his book *Covenantal Apologetics* he wrote:

Anxiety is a heart confessing that Christ is not Lord.⁴

⁴ Scott K. Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics – Principles & Practice in Defense of Our Faith*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 204.

I think that is exactly right and worth memorizing. Sit in that for a moment: When you are anxious, you are either saying that you don't believe that God is in control or that you don't believe that He is good. Sometimes, you're saying both.

When you are overwhelmed by your powerlessness – when you feel like a creature – you need to bring your concerns to the Creator. Because here's the thing: You ARE powerless. But the God who is powerFUL loves you and cares about you and He is in complete control and He has invited you to bring your burdens to Him. So, release that control and lay them down.

Let me speak really bluntly and practically to you today: You don't need to be the expert on every vaccine that is rolling out. You don't need to determine the best provincial strategy for how to navigate through COVID. You don't even need to determine how our church will navigate through this season. That's not your load to bear. Too many of us are putting far too much on our own shoulders, and it's going to drive us mad in the long run. Listen: The God who is in control and who loves you has put leaders in place to bear those burdens for you. Are you concerned with how things are being handled? Are you feeling anxious? Bring those concerns to the One who is Lord over all. And, while you're on your knees, obey 1 Timothy 2 and pray for your leaders.

If you want to grow in contentment, you need to release control. Finally, if you want to grow in contentment:

4. Retrain your brain

Look at what Paul says in verse 8:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Philippians 4:8 ESV)

Contentment begins in the mind.

I'm not a doctor, but I had a great talk with Dr. Gary the other day and he shared with me some of the science behind this verse. As we repeat thoughts in our mind, we essentially carve out a trail that will make it more likely that we will repeat the same thought pattern in the future. So, for

example, each time you experience an inconvenience, and you respond with anger, you make it more likely that you will respond with anger in the future. Be careful which thoughts you entertain today, because tomorrow those thoughts will come to you more naturally and they will be harder to stop.

Here, Paul says: “You need to carve some new trails! You need to retrain your mind!”

When you identify an ungodly, grumbling thought, you need to repent of it and then you need to pivot away. For example, on Wednesday, when the stay-at-home order was announced, perhaps your thoughts began to venture down some familiar paths. Maybe you entertained the “woe is me” voice, or maybe you indulged an internal rant about the government. Paul says here, “Stop indulging those thoughts. Replace them.”

“Thank you, God, that I don’t have to make those hard decisions. Thank you, God, that You are ultimately the One who is in control. Thank you for all of the lessons that you have been teaching me this year. Please help all of those who are going to be struggling in this next season.”

Can I be REALLY practical? Some of you need to take a sabbatical from social media. For the sake of your soul and your sanity, you need to get away from that noise. You need to spend less time looking at twitter and more time outside listening to the birds. Memorize Scripture. Enjoy your family. Turn off the television. Carve new paths in your brain. Some of the mental health we’ve been battling this year has been self-inflicted. If you want to learn contentment, you need to retrain your mind.

I will tell you that the most contentment I have felt in the last 12 months was on the afternoon of Good Friday. As we meditated on the holy love of God displayed in the cross – as we turned our eyes upon Jesus – the things of earth grew strangely dim. Didn’t they?

That’s what Paul is saying here. THAT is the secret to contentment.

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. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:12-13 ESV)

Christian, you don't need to grumble. You don't need to be miserable. God has given you everything that you need to live a life of contentment that will glorify Him. You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth. You possess a joy unspeakable and full of glory. This world doesn't need any more opinions. It doesn't need any more complaints. This world needs Jesus! So, for the glory of God and the good of this city, resolve today to leave that discontentment behind you. May the light of the Lord Jesus Christ shine through us in these dark days.

Let's pray together.