

The Joy of Contentment Crushes the Misery of Discontentment

Galatians 5:22; Philippians 4:11

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One of the greatest helps to our joy in the Lord is the grace of contentment, and one of the greatest hindrances to our joy in the Lord is the sin and misery of discontentment. It happens at times that when we do not receive in this life what we believe will bring us joy that we chose to wallow in the self-inflicted misery of discontentment as the children of the living God. When we do not receive the support, pat on the back, and encouragement of others (family, friends, teachers, or supervisors), when we do not reach the goal for which we have worked so hard, when our health, our resources, our expectations for marriage are taken away or delayed, we so often chose to bewail our losses rather than to rejoice in all our gains as Christians.

Dear Christian, the Lord Jesus Christ would have you know that you are not consigned and given over to the misery of discontentment over the loss of loved ones, over the loss of dreams, over the loss of affection from others, over the loss of applause and favor in the sight of men, or over the loss of time to be able to accomplish all that needs to get done in the course of a day or week. For the Apostle Paul (speaking by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who cannot lie) has declared: "For I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content" (Philippians 4:11). Will you chose by God's grace to learn contentment in whatever state you are, or will you sinfully chose to be swallowed up in discontentment as you face a loss, a trial, a heartache, or a tribulation in your present circumstances? The joy of contentment or the misery of discontentment is a door before you. Which door will you open and walk through?

As we continue our study of the Fruit of the Spirit, we look again at the fruit of joy: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, JOY" (Galatians 5:22). The main points for the sermon this Lord's Day are the following: (1) Contentment in All Circumstances Can Be Learned (Philippians 4:11-12); and (2) Contentment in All Circumstances Is Realized through Faith Not Sight (Philippians 4:13,19).

I. Contentment in All Circumstances Can Be Learned (Philippians 4:11-12).

A. This Lord's Day let us add further to our understanding of the fruit of joy. As we noted in the previous sermon, the joy listed by Paul in Galatians 5:22 is a supernatural fruit of the Holy Spirit implanted at regeneration in all Christians (who trust alone in Christ alone for their justification). The joy of the Lord is therefore a grace and fruit that must also be watered and fed (by the means of communion with Christ, especially in daily use of the Word and prayer). We also noted that this joy of the Lord follows the fruit of love, for joy flows and increases in our life from an ever increasing knowledge and experience of the sacrificial love of Christ for such unworthy sinners (like you and me), loved from eternity and chose in Christ Jesus before the world began.

B. Since we considered the inspired command of the Apostle Paul in the previous sermon (as found in Philippians 4:4), and gave some account of the trials he had experienced and was even experiencing as he penned this Letter to the Philippians, let me simply note for our remembrance that Paul wrote this letter from prison in Rome, not for any crime committed by him, but rather for his faithfulness to preach and to follow Jesus Christ, regardless of the cost to himself. Moreover, even while Paul was suffering for Christ in prison, fellow Christians (even ministers) were adding to Paul's affliction by way of their contentious accusations against Paul.

1. And yet despite the fact that Paul in his ministry had been stoned and left for dead,

whipped with the painful Roman lash upon his bare back, bound with chains in a cold damp prison, maligned and lied about, and deserted by friends in this time of isolation, this letter is filled with constant expressions of joy, contentment, and thanksgiving (15 times a form of the Greek word for joy, *chara*, is used).

2. Paul rejoiced not that he suffered for the sake of suffering, but he rejoiced that he could see by faith the love of Christ, the power of Christ, the righteousness of Christ, and the wisdom of Christ in all that he suffered (“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” Philippians 1:21).

C. As Paul now draws this inspired letter to a close, he does not want the emphasis to be upon his needs, upon his afflictions, upon his suffering, but rather he desires all attention to be focused upon the sufficiency of Christ our Savior in all trials and affliction. Here he was languishing in prison and his desire is not to complain about his trials, but rather to encourage the Philippian brethren to learn contentment that their joy might be full and complete. Now, I’m sure Paul could have given a hundred reasons why he should not be in prison, but there he was by God’s appointment. And rather than complaining about the unfairness or untimeliness or the unloving adversities he faced, he was content to be there knowing that the Lord could do him no wrong. His life (in prosperity and in adversity) was Christ, and therefore even death was a gain to him.

D. Paul wanted the Philippian Christians to know this undeniable truth: Contentment in all circumstances can be learned by the child of God (Philippians 4:11-12).

1. The Greek Stoics used this very Greek word for contentment (*autarkes*) to describe their own self-sufficiency. They did not need anyone or anything outside of self to be content—they believed themselves to be self-sufficient. This is also the doctrine of Eastern religions and post-modern man: look inside of yourself to find peace, joy, and contentment. But dear ones, all looking to ourselves to be self-sufficient is pure vanity and futility. For such a philosophy denies that man is finite and totally depraved in every faculty of his being. The fact that mankind is both finite and corrupt due to sin makes all men, women, and children absolutely dependent upon God for their very being, life, and eternal blessedness.

2. Nor is the one who goes to the opposite extreme and indulges himself with every pleasure outside of himself able to find true contentment. For there is always something that one doesn’t have that one believes will make him/her content once he/she possesses it. Either one is never content because one cannot get what one wants in life, or if one does get what one wants, the novelty wears off and he/she wants something else. Or if the novelty does not wear off, one lives in fear of losing that which one believes will make him/her truly content, so that one is not content although one has what he/she desires.

3. Dear ones, true contentment is not a sufficiency in ourselves, but a sufficiency in Christ. True contentment is to rest in the all-sufficiency of Christ regardless of your need. It is not to be without emotion (like a stone that feels nothing), or to be indifferent about what is happening to you, but it is repose in the comfort and hope that the God who loves you with an everlasting and infinite love that never changes can do you no wrong and is working all adversities for the good of you who love Him and are called according to His eternal purpose (Romans 8:28).

4. Beloved, all of this world should be viewed as a temporary lodging, rather than a permanent lodging (like the booths at the Feast of Tabernacles, which pointed God’s people from the perishable nature of the things of this world to the imperishable nature of the treasures we have in Christ and are reserved for us in heaven). Where is your treasure (Matthew 6:21)? Is your treasure here? It will perish. Is your treasure in heaven and in Christ? It will never perish.

5. Dear ones, what would make you content in this life? What would you place in the blank: “If I only had _____, I would be content in this world.” What would finally put an end to all your discontentment, complaining, self-pity, and covetousness? A good paying job? A beautiful home? Dependable transportation? No more bills? No more taxes? Reformation within the nation? A loving husband? A submissive wife? Obedient children? Parents that give you more freedom? Health, wealth, fame, and security?

Now there is nothing inherently wrong with these things. But if you have to have them in order to be content, then you will never know contentment in this life.

6. Beloved, if you do not rejoice in what the Lord has already abundantly given to you, what makes you think you would rejoice if were to give you more? Dear ones, you will either choose to be discontent by looking to persons or things in this life as the source of your joy, or you will choose to be content by looking to Christ alone as the source of your joy. We can never blame our lack of joy on our not having certain things in this life, for it is the gift and privilege of the Christian to be content in every circumstance in which we find ourselves (Hebrews 13:5).

7. Paul says he had “learned” in whatsoever state he was in to be content. In other words, it was a process he learned in the School of Christ every day. Although the grace of contentment (like all graces received from God) was implanted within Paul at regeneration, he yet had to work out that grace in his life which God had worked within him (Philippians 2:12-13). He had to learn (by the grace of God and by the power of the Holy Spirit) to exercise that grace of contentment in every circumstance, so that over a period of time he learned to be content. The reason why Paul could learn contentment in all circumstances (and it is unlikely that we could compare our afflictions with his) is that Jesus Christ was his life (Philippians 1:21). Jesus was not simply one part of Paul’s life. Jesus was Paul’s life. Christ gave meaning and purpose to everything in Paul’s life (when he was wanting and lacking, when he was abased and humbled, when he was ill and sick, when he was stoned, whipped, and imprisoned, and when he was deserted by his closest friends, Philippians 4:12).

a. Beloved, Jesus Christ is all-sufficient to make you truly content in this life, regardless of the trials, afflictions, suffering, and tribulations you are facing (the “whatsoever state” does not exclude anything in your life or mine). The Lord (through Paul) calls us to contentment instead of dreaming how life might have been, if only we had done this or not done that, or only if this would have worked out instead of not working out. We cannot re-write our lives, and spend the rest of our lives dreaming and fantasizing how life would presently be if only _____.

b. The reason we as Christians have not learned contentment is because we have not learned consciously to make Christ our life in all our disappointments, discouragements, pains, trials, and afflictions. For as we do, even when walking through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil, for Christ (our life) is with us. Death will only usher us into the very presence of Him who loved us and gave His life for us. Dear ones, there is hope for all who trust in Jesus Christ, for contentment can be learned by the child of God in this life.

II. Contentment in All Circumstances Is Realized through Faith Not Sight (Philippians 4:13,19).

A. Immediately the cry of the child of God who realizes his own sinful tendencies and his own finite inadequacies is, “I don’t have the strength to learn this contentment in my own life. If you only knew how very weak I am when it comes to giving in to discouragement, to self-pity, to worry, to complaining, to envy, to discontentment. When life doesn’t go the way that I want it to go, when my plans are disappointed, when trials overwhelm me, I seem to forget Christ and cave in.” Well then you are ready to hear how and only how you may be strengthened and able to learn contentment and delight in the Lord in whatever adversities you may face in this life.

B. Dear ones, consider the promise Paul embraced by faith (not by sight) in order that he might learn and practice contentment in the face of every trial and tribulation in life: Nothing was impossible when Christ was his strength. Without Christ, we can do nothing (John 15:5). But with Christ, we can do all things that the Lord calls us to do for His glory (Philippians 4:13). Just as Christ was Paul’s life and reason for living, so Christ was Paul’s strength and power for living.

1. Dear ones, do you believe that Christ, who victoriously and powerfully conquered death, could also give strength to weak Christians to conquer discouragement, self-pity, worry, complaint, envy, and discontentment? If the Lord overcame all the forces of darkness during His ministry on earth, if he secured our justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification, is there anything so great that He is not greater still? How big is your God? Christ is your sufficiency—nothing is impossible.

2. Beloved, you can only learn contentment in life when you learn that you can't be content in your own strength, in your own gifts, or in your own resources. You can only learn contentment and an abounding joy and delight in the Lord in all circumstances when Christ is your life and your strength.

C. The verb is in the indicative mood of fact and reality, "I can do." It is not in the mood of mere possibility or probability, "I may or might do." Is this the promise to which your struggling faith clings? If so, you will have the strength of Christ to learn contentment in all circumstances. And even more than that, Paul says, "I can do NOT SOME THINGS, but ALL things through Christ who strengthens me" (i.e. all things which the Lord gives me to do in my calling as a Christian).

1. If in our calling as a Christian, the Lord would have us suffer the loss of a loved one, He will give us the strength to use it for His glory. If in our calling, the Lord will give us an audience to whom we might proclaim His truth, He will give us the strength to honor Him in it. If in our calling, the Lord will give us a thorn in the flesh to subdue our pride, He will give us the strength to make his power perfect in our weakness (as He did with Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10). If in our calling He blesses us with health or wealth, He will give us the strength to use it to extend His kingdom (even if we only possess two mites or one talent). Oh, how unthankful we are with what the Lord has already given to us in this life and especially in giving to us everything in Christ as the heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ (1 Corinthians 3:21-23). We need to hear the cries and the groans of those who are truly ill in hospitals, suffering from such bodily pain that they writhe and shake from it. We need to hear the cries and the groans of those who are suffering and being tortured for the Cause of Christ in Islamic and totalitarian nations. Where, dear ones, in the joy of thanksgiving for all that God has given to us and to our children?

2. The Puritan divine, Thomas Brooks has written,

In God is fulness, all fulness, infinite fulness; and if this with a little of the world will not satisfy thee, I know not what will. If God for thy portion will not content thee, all the world will never content thee" (*Works*, 2:52).

3. Dear ones, there is hope for all who trust in Jesus Christ, for you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you (including overcoming that besetting sin in your life). God is not a liar. It is absolutely true. Believe it. Practice it. Lean not on your own understanding, nor walk by sight. Walk by faith in the promise of Christ.

D. And as if the promise of Christ's resurrection power and strength to learn contentment in all circumstances was not enough, the Apostle Paul gives us one more glorious promise to learn contentment in the midst of all the trials, heartaches, and tribulations you face in life: All your needs will be supplied (Philippians 4:19).

1. God manifested in flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ, continually supplied the needs of those who fled to him in faith: feeding the five thousand with a few fish and loaves of bread, healing the sick, raising the dead, forgiving the guilty and receiving all the prodigal sons, and showing mercy to His weak and struggling disciples.

2. In Philippians 4:14-18, the Apostle Paul rejoices in the compassionate giving of the Philippians in the hour of his need on more than one occasion. And then he proceeds to the infallible promise

found in Philippians 4:19 (literally, “And my God will fill your every need”). Not every want, not every desire, but every need (and not necessarily what we ourselves consider to be a need, but what He Himself deems to be a need. And if you do not receive that for which you have prayed, then it was not as needful as you thought (Matthew 7:11—if God doesn’t give it, then it wasn’t good or needful for you to receive it).

3. Promises like the ones found here in Philippians 4:13,19 are only as good as the resources and faithfulness of the one who makes them. Beloved, there is no lack of resources or faithfulness to fill your needy hands as you lift them to the Lord Jesus. For all the riches of heaven are at His disposal to distribute to His children who cry out to Him for mercy, and it is impossible for God to lie about anything that He has promised.

4. In times of hardship, God lays bare that in which we trust and hope. All pretense and superficiality flee in the face of severe trials, and there is revealed in our lives one of two responses: (1) faith in our Father who loves us with an everlasting love and promises to supply all our needs according to His riches in glory by means of Christ Jesus (like Joshua and Caleb who saw the same giants in the land of Canaan as did the other 10 spies, and yet they trusted that God who had promised to give to them the land would provide all that they needed, Numbers 14); or (2) unbelief in the LORD who has promised to supply all our needs (like Israel of old who though they witnessed God’s miraculous salvation in sending 10 astounding plagues upon Egypt, in dividing the Red Sea and destroying the army of Pharaoh in it, and in sending food from heaven, yet they proceeded to reveal their unbelief in such a loving, faithful, and mighty God by complaining, “Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?”, Psalm 78:19).

5. But if the Lord should delay or withhold from you that which you believe is a need, will you be content in knowing that Jesus Christ is your life and will you trust Him in knowing that He is infinitely wise and delays/withholds that for which you have sought for your greater good from a heart of everlasting love for you? Will you learn contentment knowing, Christ can do you no wrong? You can learn contentment, for you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you.

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