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Contentment in Need

Biblical Ministry

Revelation 2 and 3 contain a series of seven letters written to seven churches. While each of these churches existed at the time of the writing of Revelation, nevertheless by application they easily can be taken as the kinds of churches which have existed throughout church history:

- The Cold Church, Revelation. 2:1-7
- The Persecuted Church, Revelation 2:8-11
- The Worldly Church, Revelation 2:12-17
- The Church Which Tolerates Sin, Revelation 2:18-29
- The Dead Church, Revelation 3:1-6
- The Faithful Church, Revelation 3:7-13
- The False Church, Revelation 3:14-22

And yet we limit the application of these passages if we identify ourselves too closely with any one of these churches, and so fail to heed the warnings and encouragement given to all of them.

In light of this, listen to the salutation of the letter written to the church in Smyrna:

Revelation 2:8-9, “And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.”

It is interesting that that which set this church apart was that it not only was persecuted, but, physically speaking, it was poor. Christ said, “For the poor you always have with you” (Mark 14:7).

We can conclude that poverty — or need — could very well be part of our ministry in this world. Let's face it. Many of us — if not all of us — at some point in our lives are going to experience need. And when that time comes, it behooves us to be prepared for so holy a calling.

This is why our passage is so important. Paul found himself on the receiving end of the Philippians' ministry. And thus he used his situation as an opportunity to encourage and teach the Philippians about the ministry of need.

The One Receiving: Their Joy

As we approach our text, let's begin by reviewing what we saw previously.

Philippians 4:10, “**But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly**, that now at the last your care of me hath flourished again; wherein ye were also careful, but ye lacked opportunity.”

This phrase, but I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, reflects a statement of exaltation, nevertheless it presupposes that Paul's passion in life was Christ alone! The most important attribute of the minister of need is his relationship with Christ. It is not the meeting of any physical or emotional need that he or others may have.

This is a very important distinction. The tendency of someone in need is to “speak from want”¹ or to seek a gift.² But here we see that what should burden us (regardless of what we may be facing on a day to day basis) is Christ and His love, will, glory, and approval. Paul rejoiced because he had Christ. Thus when need arose, his lack did not control him.

The One Receiving: Their Ministry

Philippians 4:10, “But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at the last your care of me hath flourished again; wherein ye were also careful, **but ye lacked opportunity.**”

This verse reflects Paul's understanding of how his need related to the kingdom of God. Because the purpose of every spiritual gift is the edification of the body³ it is also God's will for the one lacking. As his needs are made known to the body the people of God are forced to make a decision. Will they ignore one of their own? Or will they share the love of Christ with them? The latter choice is the only option for a genuine body of Christ, we see that “need” in the body is a catalyst for the body's growth in grace.

We see this in 1 Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 12:18, “But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.”

While Paul is talking about spiritual gifts, based on verses 22-23 we know that the “ministry of need” is not very far off. Accordingly, when it comes to need in the body, we must recognize that it is a ministry granted by God for a specific end.

1 Corinthians 12:24-25, “For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another.”

In a healthy church each member in the body has “the same care for one another,” and so uses their gifts and abilities to serve each other unto the church's growth in grace.⁴ Accordingly, the one in need must recognize that God has given them a ministry in their weakness that the body might be moved from its

¹ Compare Philippians 4:10

² Compare Philippians 4:17

³ Compare 1 Corinthians 12; 1 Peter 4:10

⁴ Compare also Ephesians 4:16

lethargy unto love. And so, far from hiding or embellishing our weakness, we must allow the Lord to use our need so that the body of Christ might “revive its concern” on behalf of the body.

Now as a person whose joy in life is Christ and His Kingdom work⁵ and who understands that God has ordained their need as a tool to encourage the body of Christ on to love and good deeds what ought to be the Disposition of the one in need?

A Disposition of Contentment

Philippians 4:11, “Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.”

The obvious conclusion from this verse is that the disposition that must govern one in need — and not just the needy, but all in Christ — is contentment. But this is where this passage gets dicey.

When the time came for Paul to express his gratitude for the Philippians’ sacrificial gift, he found himself in a quandary. He could have just said, “Thanks” and kept going — but that would have missed a great opportunity for ministry. This passage falls on the heels of a reference to the Philippians’ anxiety over their needs.⁶ So accordingly, Paul opted to use the Philippians’ gift to teach them and us about the importance of the ministry of need.

But herein lies the difficulty. How does one balance appreciation with education such that it doesn't appear that as in this case — Paul’s — that you are just seeking money? How does one encourage someone in the ministry when you are the primary recipient of the ministry? How does one preach about the importance of respecting the office of elder without sounding like you are after honor? How does one teach about the responsibility of a church to support those who “work hard at preaching and teaching”⁷ without sounding like you are after money?

These are very difficult things. Yet Paul does it masterfully here. When it came to the Philippians’ financial gift, Paul said, “not that I speak from want” (Philippians 4:18). In other words what drove Paul was not the desire for more money because his needs were already met. Yet you say, Paul is clearly not rolling in the dough, he is in prison. However, because of the disposition that characterized his life, he honestly could say that he didn't speak from a desire for more.

2 Corinthians 4:16-17, “For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction⁸, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”

Talk about an understatement: “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment?” The trial surrounding the writing of 2 Corinthians was anything but “momentary and light.” In fact, the word that Paul uses here for affliction itself speaks of an unbearable pressure. And yet, Paul genuinely could say they were “momentary and light” for in verse 18 we read, “While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen.” Paul spoke as he did here — minimizing his suffering — because he saw the glory of the Lord and eternity. The Lord is what moved him.

⁵ Compare Philippians 4:10

⁶ Compare Philippians 4:6-7

⁷ ?Compare 1 Timothy 5:17

⁸ θλιψις thlipsis

Likewise in our text, Paul's statement that he “did not speak from want” was not because he had money to spare, but because; look at the text, “for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content”⁹ (Philippians 4:11).

What an incredible statement! Paul could not be moved by the wind and the waves of need, worldly pressure, opposition, persecution, man’s opinions, or the pressures of life because he had learned to be content in all things!

What does this mean?

The word *content* is used only here in the New Testament and references a disposition which is “free,” “independent,” or “sufficient.” For example, it was used in classical Greek of a town that did not need imports.¹⁰ And that's the idea here. When it comes to the world’s kudos, values, treasures, honors, goals and wealth the child of God is in need of no imports. Thus a “contented” Christian is someone who is not in need of anything that this passing age has to give.

And yet, how does this happen? How does a Christian “learn to be content in [all] circumstances?”

Clearly the text implies that it is learned. While Paul answers this ultimately in verse 13, nevertheless from 1 Timothy 6 we glean some insight.

Learned Contentment

Paul wrote 1 Timothy to instruct Timothy and the congregation at Ephesus. In his final exhortation, Paul focuses upon the wealthy.

1 Timothy 6:17, “Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain¹¹ riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy.”

.There is a word-play going on here. On the one hand you have God — who is a rock: steady, stable, dependable. On the other you have, “the uncertain riches.” The word *uncertain* means *to appear not*. The nature of wealth is that it doesn't appear when needed.¹²

Now the thing I want you to see from this passage is that Paul here is not theoretically dishing out good advice; he is speaking from personal experience! When it came to his life, Paul's wealth clearly let him down. We saw it in Philippians 3:4-6- as a Pharisee of Pharisees, Paul had it all. Yet it “appeared not” when the chips were down, and life got difficult. This is when Paul anticipated approaching the King of kings.

And from this we learn in part how Paul could be content in all things. He was independent from all the world had to offer. Paul had come to the point in his life where he saw that the best that this passing world could offer was only passing at best!

⁹ αυταρκης autarkes

¹⁰ Compare Dr. John MacArthur’s commentary on Philippians, page 299.

¹¹ αδηλοτης adelotes

¹² Compare Proverbs 23:4-5

And family of God, this conviction will move us to contentment when it comes to the things of this life!

Observe the fool. He rises early, retires late, and eats the bread of painful labor.¹³ He spends his days endeavoring to make a name for himself. He forsakes the kingdom of God because it doesn't fit into his plan for success. He lives for pleasure, fulfillment, success, and power. And yet in the twinkling of an eye, the Lord requires His soul. His life is whisked away. He is summoned before the King of kings. He is called upon to give an account for his wasted life.

“We loose nothing if we gain Christ.”

As the only thing in this life that will transcend the grave is Christ and people, let us therefore release our feeble grip on the things of this passing age. And so learn to be content in all circumstances. And yet, what does this look like- to be content in all circumstances?

Contentment Shown Forth

Philippians 4:12, “I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.”

Paul is speaking here with tongue in cheek by using the terminology of the mystic. And thus he scales the heights and depths of material need — essentially saying that because he was content, he could be satisfied with whatever this world brought him.

Contentment in Wealth

It is almost certain that the plenty or wealth that Paul spoke about in this text referred to the early part of his ministry.¹⁴ Paul was reared in Tarsus and received from his father not only the tent-making trade but an education that excelled in Phariseism and Roman citizenship — which is believed to have been purchased by his family.

Truly, as one of the brightest and best of his generation, Paul excelled as a Pharisee — having before him the prospect of an easy and rich life serving Judaism. And thus, as Paul entered into the ministry of the Kingdom, he no doubt would have known plenty.

Yet, because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus¹⁵ Paul considered the best that this world had to offer as “rubbish.”¹⁶

And so what does it look like to be “content in all things?”

It means having the world’s goods, enjoying the best of this world, and knowing plenty, prosperity, and abundance and yet not valuing them or relying upon them such that you are distracted in your love and service for the Lord.

¹³ Compare Psalm 127:2

¹⁴ For a more detailed analysis read Hendricksen’s Commentary on Philippians

¹⁵ Compare Philippians 3:8

¹⁶ Compare Philippians 3:7

Contentment in Weakness

Now it is easy to speak thus when you are rich — which is why what Paul says here is so important. Paul knew not only plenty and wealth, but also hunger, sickness, trial, and difficulty. Behold the scars that Paul bore in his service of Christ.

1 Corinthians 4:11-13, “Even unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling place; And labour, working with our own hands: being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it: Being defamed, we intreat: we are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things unto this day.”

Paul wrote this as an admission. The “super-apostles” at Corinth were claiming that they were of God because they were blessed with such plenty- their wealth was a sign of God's approval! To counter their argument, Paul shares of the hardships that he underwent for Christ.

2 Corinthians 4:8-9, “We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed.”

2 Corinthians 6:4-5, “But in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings.”

2 Corinthians 6:10, “As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.”

Paul could speak as he did here assenting to the criticism that they were the scum of the earth, because while they had nothing of worth in this world nevertheless they “possessed all things” in Christ! Paul’s need did not drive him, rather it was his relationship with Christ.

This is the testimony of Scripture¹⁷ that in and through all things Paul remained satisfied/content. He neither longed for the days of his youth when he was healthy and rich nor lamented the miserable conditions that service in the kingdom of God brought him.

This is what the disposition of contentment is all about.

Yet, how did this work? How is it that Paul remained content in humility and prosperity?

Contentment Explained

Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through¹⁸ Christ which strengtheneth me.”

There is an important qualification given here: through Christ. This means according to the will of God or in the kingdom of God.¹⁹

¹⁷ Compare 2 Corinthians 11:23-29

¹⁸ εν εν

¹⁹ This is a statement that has been quite abused in the church. Does this imply that there is nothing that a Christian will not be able to do if they simply would enjoy their “in Christ” relationship? In answering this we must avoid the extremes...

a. It is clear that Paul has more in mind here than simply being content with want or plenty.

Once again, as with Philippians 1:27, we are addressing one of the more misleading translations in our English bibles. Our current translation²⁰ may lead one to the implication that if the child of God would simply be empowered by Christ, no circumstance would be beyond his ability. This is not what Paul writes in this text. Listen, Paul is not hinting at a Christian “triumphalism” in which if one simply believes and claims the authority of Christ and pronounces Christ’s name and dominion over difficulties then nothing would be impossible.

In fact, the text does not read, “I can do all things THROUGH Christ who strengthens me.” Rather it literally says, “I can do all things IN HIM who strengthens me.”²¹ This understanding points us to the “in Christ” relationship!

You say, “Here we go again!”

Many of the promises and assurances that Paul mentions in this epistle are rooted in the “in Christ” relationship! In fact, Paul makes reference to this relationship no less than twelve times in this epistle (and 114 times throughout his writings). And so for the twelfth time, what is the “in Christ” relationship? And how does it lead to contentment?

As we have seen the “In Christ” speaks of a relationship into which we enter with Christ upon our conversion. When a person is saved, they literally become united to Christ, and thus connected to His glorified body.

Now because this is neither physical nor corporeal and yet is real, we refer to this as a mystical union between the child of God and the Lord. Dr. Robert Reymond commenting on this union wrote this:

“The Scriptures make it clear that, though it is spiritual and mystical, this non-material union with Christ is as real as though there were in fact a literal umbilical cord uniting them, reaching all the way from Christ in heaven to the believer on earth.”

That is what the “in Christ” relationship is all about. And it is in this relationship that Paul grounds the Christian’s contentment. What this means is that contentment in the life of the believer arises as Christ enters more richly into us and strengthens us! It is not claiming a promise, enjoying the second blessing, transitioning into a deeper mode of relating to Christ, rebuking a demon, or entering into the higher life.

Now in Scripture this occurs as the child of God actively participates in that which is passive by nature — communing with the Lord! Moises Silva put it this way:

“Once again in this epistle we are... reminded of the great paradox: our dependence on God’s power does not preclude our effort, and our working does not contradict the reality of grace.”²²

Like the call to be Spirit-filled — which is a passive imperative implying that it is something that God

b. Yet is also clear that Paul is not speaking of the claims of the many higher life teachers today.

Indeed, “all things” must be interpreted according to Paul’s intent which clearly is in reference here to kingdom living. Thus, whatever is placed upon me by way of obligation and/or privilege will only be realized in Christ.

²⁰ The King James, New King James, NIV, NASB, and ESV all use the word *through*. The definition of the word here is not “by way of” but is best understood as “in, by or with.”

²¹ This is the rendering of Young’s Literal Translation and the Revised Standard.

²² The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary, page 235

does in us — as we commune with Him in His word contentment in the life of the child of God is cultivated as we endeavor to have Christ work grace in our lives. It comes as we enjoy the “in Christ” relationship! We see it in stated in John 15.

John 15:5 – 7, “I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.”

Now don't misunderstand here! Christ is not talking about a “Higher life” or the “let go and let God” mentality. He is saying that as we cultivate our relationship with Him and feed upon His word His Spirit becomes that which controls us by His word.²³ We will know more and more the fruit of the kingdom — a fruit which includes contentment.

And so it is in our relationship with Christ that Paul roots and grounds the Christian's contentment. The “learning” that occurred in Paul's life that led him to contentment occurred not by praying harder, appeasing God, or attaining the higher life but it came as he saw the futility of worldly alliance. It came about as he gave up longing for the things of this life and learned to fellowship with his Lord in spite of the difficulties of life. Sinclair Ferguson put it this way: “For Paul contentment is not found in creating our own security, but by abandoning our security to Jesus Christ!”²⁴

Such is the call that rests on our lives this day!

Whether you have been charged with the Ministry of Need or not, we must release our feeble claim on anything and everything in this life and endeavor to cultivate a deep and abiding relationship with Christ. It is then that we will know contentment!

And yet as we have seen, this takes “learning” implies time, struggle, and failure as we labor to asses the value of the Kingdom.

This brings us to the other half of God's purpose in ordaining need. Not only does God use it to cultivate the love of the body of Christ. But in His tender providence, God uses it that we might know, first, the futility of this passing age, the uncertainty of riches, and the shallowness of worldly glory. Secondly it helps us see the beauty of Christ, the value of His kingdom, and love for the Lord. And so willingly and zealously serve Him without regret or longing for anything from this world!

The question at any given moment in our life is this: Is Christ sufficient? Is Christ enough? Or must we have Christ and something else?

The “secret” to contentment is knowing the sufficiency of Christ so that you are independent from the world and its offerings.

In light of this and in closing, I want you to turn with me to Hosea 2. Here Hosea is speaking to the people of God who had fallen into sin “For their mother (Israel) has played the harlot... she [has] said, 'I will go after my lovers...’” (Hosea 2:5).

²³ Compare Ephesians 5:18, Colossians 3:16-17

²⁴ Sinclair Ferguson, *Let's Study Philipians*, page 109

Here the people of God are guilty of loving the world! And what was God's loving response?

Hosea 2:6-7, “Therefore, behold, I will hedge up thy way with thorns, and make a wall, that she shall not find her paths. And she shall follow after her lovers, but she shall not overtake them; and she shall seek them, but shall not find them: then shall she say, I will go and return to my first husband (God). . .”

Do you see the point?

In order to secure a devoted people unto Himself, God places a “hedge of thorns” and a “wall” in the way of His people. What was this “hedge of thorns”? What was this “wall”?

Based on the context we see that it was suffering, difficulty, need.²⁵ Samuel Rutherford, commenting on this verse, wrote this:

“The hedge of thorns and the wall which God builds in your way, to hinder you from [your love of the world], is the thorny hedge of daily grief, loss of children, weakness of body, iniquity of the time, uncertainty of estate, lack of worldly comfort, and fear of God's anger for old unrepentant sins. What do you loose, if God twists and makes the hedge even thicker? God be blessed, the Lord will not let you find your paths.”²⁶

And that's exactly right!

It is while we are at our weakest — beaten and bruised by this world — that we are in the best position, for it is then that Christ is seen to be as He really is: Most precious to us!

And so, praise God for any and all need- for it teaches us that “[we] can do all things through Christ who strengthens [us]” (Philippians 4:13).

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²⁵ Compare Hosea 2:9-13

²⁶ Letters of Samuel Rutherford, Page 41

About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on May 16, 2004. Greg is the preacher at Broomfield Presbyterian Church.