

The Freedom of Contentment

Philippians 4:10-15

This morning we are going to learn about contentment from a most unlikely source, the apostle Paul. He had endured the types of things that typically make a person bitter, angry, vengeful, and **discontented**:

- This man had been beaten, stoned, and left for dead, not because he hung out with the wrong crowd in the wrong places, but because he couldn't stop talking about Jesus.
- There were times when this man was thirsty and hungry; he wrote in 2 Corinthians 11 that he was "often without food."
- There were times when he was exposed to the elements: once he spend a day and a night floating out in the Mediterranean Sea; sometimes he lacked shelter and had to endure the cold.
- Paul often had to deal with complex, painful situations in the churches he had planted. He called these issues "the daily pressure on me for all the churches."
- When he wrote Philippians he was in prison awaiting trial, not because he'd done something wrong, but because he had been falsely accused.

This catalog of Paul sufferings suggests that if he has learned the secret of contentment, we should pay close attention to his experience. Nobody would dismiss Paul by saying, "Paul, it's easy for you to talk about contentment because you're living the dream. If I had your life I would have contentment also. . ." No, Paul has great credibility because of his experience; he can speak authoritatively about learning contentment even in the most difficult of circumstances.

I daresay that all of us can identify areas of our lives in which we struggle with discontentment; when that area comes to mind, instead of peace and trust we feel unsettled and anxious and fearful. That area of your life might involve relationships, finances, career, health, or uncertainty about the future. Keep that area of your life in mind as we look at Philippians 4:10-13.

I appreciate J. I. Packer's description of contentment. He says that contentment "is essentially a matter of accepting from God's hand what He sends because we know that He is good. . ." (cited in *Margins*, p. 187). Contentment is not complacency ("Whatever happens happens. . ."); and contentment is not passivity ("I guess I'm just supposed to idly wait this out. . ."). Paul wasn't complacent or passive in prison, for example. He solicited prayers so that he might be released from prison (see Phil. 1:19); as a Roman citizen he took advantage of the legal system to gain his release. He sought different circumstances, and he had ambitions for his future (see Phil. 1:21-25). But **while he was in prison**, he was **content**. He accepted his imprisonment from God's hand because he believed that God is good. And he believed that God was sovereign over his circumstances. Contentment flows from faith and results in peace.

Paul's Example of Contentment. (*Philippians 4:10-13*) Paul speaks about his own contentment in the context of thanking the Philippians for a gift that they had sent him.

In a couple of weeks we'll look more specifically at the Philippians' example of giving. But this morning let's simply notice the context as Paul explains it in verse 10.

10 But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned *before*, but you lacked opportunity.

Paul mentions that the Philippians "revived their concern" for him. Down in verse 18 Paul mentions that this revived concern came in the form of a gift that was delivered by Epaphroditus. This gift and Epaphroditus' presence communicated so effectively just how much the Philippians still cared about Paul and about the progress of the gospel that Paul overflowed with joy.

But Paul wasn't implying that they had been negligent. In the last half of verse 10 he qualifies himself by saying, "indeed, you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity." Perhaps the Philippians hadn't been aware of Paul's needs or perhaps Paul had instructed them not to send gifts for a time; whatever the case, when the Philippians had the opportunity to give, they did so graciously.

But we see beginning in verse 11 that Paul didn't want to give the wrong impression. He didn't want the Philippians to think that his joy was dependent upon their gifts. Certainly their gifts were an occasion for joy, but there was something else operating deep within Paul's soul - he experienced a contentment that transcended his immediate circumstances.

11 Not that I speak from want; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am.

Paul's earlier comments shouldn't imply that before the gift arrived he was sitting around being miserable because he had unmet needs. To the contrary, Paul makes this extraordinary claim: for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. Contentment wasn't something that Paul possessed his entire life; and it wasn't something imparted to him at his conversion. As he experienced a wide range of circumstances - from abundance to poverty - over an extended period of time, he **learned** how to be content.

As I mentioned earlier, Paul wasn't passive or complacent about his circumstances. Rather, he engaged in prayer and words and actions in hopes that God might change his circumstances. But all the while, he lived in contentment, assured that God had ordered his circumstances.

In a similar way, you may be in circumstances that you feel need to be changed. You shouldn't be complacent if there are relationships that need to be strengthened or mended. You shouldn't be complacent about your spiritual growth and the growth of those around you. You may need to ask God to change things; you may need to take action to see some things changed. Such steps of active seeking and obedience aren't incompatible with contentment. But contentment **does** mean accepting God's timing and God's ways in relation to seeing those circumstances changed.

Because he trusted that God was in control of his circumstances, Paul was genuinely content in every circumstance. "Right now, I trust that God is sovereign in the circumstances in which I find myself." In verse 12 Paul gives specific examples of what he means by being "content" in whatever circumstances he found himself:

12 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.

This is the second time he's mentioned that contentment is something he "learned." But I'm also struck that he writes, "I have learned **the secret** . . ." of being filled and going hungry. Calling contentment a "secret" implies that contentment isn't widely known; if everybody knows something it's not a secret. Only those who walk closely with Christ discover contentment.

Notice that Paul had learned contentment on both ends of the spectrum. **First**, he knew how to be content when he had "humble means" (when he had been brought low); specifically this mean when he had to "go hungry." I can't think of anything more threatening than not having food. He doesn't seem to be talking about starvation - going without food for weeks. Rather, it seems as if Paul is saying that there were times when he went without food, perhaps for days. He "suffered need."

We can only speculate about how Paul "learned" to be content when deprived of essentials of life. One intriguing suggestion is that Paul learned to be content while hungry through fasting. Both as a Pharisee and as a Christian Paul engaged in fasts - going without food for a period of time. Perhaps through fasting Paul learned how to be quite content without eating. This is different from starving, of course. Many people have learned to go without food for for spiritual purposes unless there are complicating medical conditions.

Second, on the other end of the spectrum, Paul learned how to be content with prosperity and abundance - when he had more than he needed. In most areas of our lives most of us would fit in this category. Even though we have abundance, we still need to learn contentment.

Sometimes the source of our discontentment is comparison/envy. We look at other people's lives and think, "If I had everything they have, I'd be content. If I had their money, if I had their house, if I had their family, if I had the discretionary time they have . . . then I'd be content." What we forget is that the people we envy are often looking at somebody else thinking the same thing. In our abundance we need to learn contentment. We need to learn to say, "I am at peace with what I currently have."

This means that contentment is not a function of circumstances. Contentment is the ability to say, "I accept from God's hand whatever He sends my way."

Paul's discussion of his contentment would not be complete without the often-quoted verse 13:

13 I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

Paul hasn't changed topics when he speaks about doing "all things." He is saying that he can be **content** in **all circumstances** through Christ who strengthens him. Paul's contentment was a function of his confidence in Christ, not a function of his circumstances. He was content in all circumstances because he continually experienced the strength of Jesus Christ. Paul knew that Jesus wasn't sitting back casually observing whether or not Paul could handle his circumstances. Rather, Paul knew that Jesus was actively and continually supplying what he needed to be able to be content. Again, contentment is a positive Christian virtue; contentment is an active, aggressive trust in God.

Example. The other day I was reading through Daniel 3 in my normal Bible reading plan. It struck me that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had an extraordinary type of contentment; they accepted any and every circumstance from the hand of God and believed that His strength would sustain them. You may remember the plot of that chapter. . .

Nebuchadnezzar had a great statue of himself built. When the trumpet was blown everybody was commanded to bow down and worship before it; if you didn't you would be thrown into a fiery furnace (basically a huge incinerator). These three Jewish boys living in Babylon wouldn't bow down to a statue of gold. They were brought before Nebuchadnezzar who gave them an ultimatum: bow down and worship my gods and the golden image or you will be thrown into the fire. Their answer is classic (Daniel 3:16–18):

16 Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. 17 "If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. 18 "But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

That's boldness. That's faith. That's contentment: since God was sovereign over that very circumstance, they believed that God would give them the strength to obey.

That's the type of contentment Paul had. His circumstances were inconsequential; he didn't seem to have a preference whether he had abundance or lack. In any and every circumstance he learned to be content; in any and every circumstance he experienced the strength of Christ. In 2 Corinthians 12 he said that he was content with "weakness" (probably a physical weakness), insults, distresses, and persecutions because, "When I am weak, he is strong" (i.e., I experience the strength of Christ). Paul had the mindset of contentment: "God's glory matters more than my comfort."

Here's my question for you: "**Today**, in your current circumstances, do you want the type of contentment Paul had?" Don't answer too quickly. I suspect that many of us would say, "Eventually I'd like to have that type of contentment, but only after my circumstances change. . ."

The problem, of course, is that your circumstances may not change: you may not get the job and the income you'd like; that relationship may not get mended; your health problems may not get resolved. And even if your circumstances do change, they probably won't deliver the satisfaction we'd like. If we're not contented in our current circumstances, we are naïve to think we'll be contented with different circumstances. Do you really want to experience contentment here and now with your present circumstances?

Since today is the only day that's guaranteed (yesterday is gone; tomorrow may or may not come), we need to learn contentment today. In order to urge us all to learn contentment in our current circumstances, today, I want to spend a few minutes considering a couple of the **benefits** of contentment. Instead of thinking about contentment in terms of all the things we should be willing to do without, we should think in terms of all the benefits that contentment provides. To me the word that best sums up these benefits is **freedom**.

Freedom from ruin. (1 Timothy 6:6-11) Note what Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 6:

6 But godliness *actually* is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment. 7 For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. 8 And if we have food and covering, with these we shall be content.

Contentment doesn't necessarily solve our financial problems. You may be in a situation in which you genuinely need more income to meet basic living expenses. But contentment will definitely keep you from foolish financial decisions that will cause untold stress and hardship. Furthermore, contentment will protect you from spiritual ruin.

9 But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang.

Paul writes that some people abandon the faith altogether because of their love of money. We could give examples of famous people who love money so much that they do illegal and immoral things. But closer to home, most of us can probably think of people who've become so preoccupied with money and possessions that God is an afterthought instead of the focus of their life.

Contentment gives us the spiritual perspective that we need for genuine freedom. In Hebrews 13:5 we read this:

5 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,"

True freedom is being able to say, "I am content with what I have because I have God - who says to me, 'I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.'" In a very tangible way, God wants us to find our contentment in Him and His personal presence in our lives.

The alternative is to say to God, "I really appreciate You, but You're not enough. I want more." Contentment provides freedom from this type of spiritual ruin.

Freedom to invest in others. I'm thinking here of Paul's comments to the Philippians that even though he appreciated their gift, he didn't ***need it*** in order to be satisfied. Paul's contentment released the Philippians from the burden of thinking that if they didn't send him money he'd be miserable. Paul's contentment gave him the freedom to seek the Philippians' best, instead of pursuing them for what they could do for him.

We need to realize that when we are discontented, we put a tremendous burden on the people around us. Discontented people become self-centered and preoccupied with their own needs - so much so that they don't have the capacity to meet the needs of others. I know that when I am discontented with something - whether related to the church or something at home - I become quite selfish. I no longer look at people and ask, "How might God want to use me to meet his/her needs?" Rather, I go around subtly demanding that people do things that make me happy. We're basically saying, "I won't love God or my neighbor unless I get what I want. . ."

A contented person, on the other hand, is free to minister deeply to other people. Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. . . and like Paul, we say, "God, even if my circumstances don't change at all, I will worship and serve You. . . and I will love my neighbor as myself. You are worthy."