

The Letter to the Philippians

Lesson 22: The Secret of Contentment

Philippians 4:10-19

“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. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. 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. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Kids dream about what they'll do, and who they'll be when they're older. For me, I was going to play basketball in the NBA. Fortunately for me, by the time I was nineteen, I suddenly realized that was *not* going to happen, so I shifted my focus to working in a warehouse in Tecumseh. But kids dream. Kids want to be a doctor, or a fireman, or a police officer. Little girls start planning their wedding day in their heads at seven years old. They know what their husbands eye color and hairstyle will be. They know how the tables are going to be decorated. They know how many kids their going to have.

Then kids get older, and very few of us resemble what we dreamt we would be. We all know someone, or know someone who knows someone, who made it big in the world. I knew a kid two grades below me in grade school who played in the NHL. We all know that kid who became a doctor, or a lawyer, or owns a successful business, who bought the fancy house, vacationed often and well, and always look stylish. Their life from our perspective looked together and complete. Sure, we imagine that hiccups happen in their lives, but it always seems like money fixes everything, and they have lots of it.

The lifestyles of the rich and famous are what the world dreams us. (And watched on television in the mid 90's.) The world watches and reads about famous people, and dreams about what it would be like to live their life. We dream, but the dream is just that. Most of us realize that we'll never be rich. We'll get up early for work every day. Our bones will crack, our muscles will ache as we go downstairs. We get into a vehicle that could use repairs that we still owe the bank thousands for, and we go to work. But the job isn't the one from our dream, unless your dream was to break your back in a hot factory for just enough money to pay your bills and buy an occasional burger. And we work...a lot, so that we can pay for the house or apartment that we wish was newer and bigger. We spend our evenings around a television, where we are entertained by the lucky ones, the ones who make more money than they could ever spend in their life, for acting, or singing, or dancing, or playing a game. We think it must be nice to have a mansion and a sports car, and never have to work hard a day in our life.

So people play the lottery. Instant gratification! We buy that ticket and we dream...and dream...and dream. But we don't win the lottery, and neither does anyone else that we know. So we take extra measures to get as rich as we possibly can, so that we get as close to that life of contentment and satisfaction, and we work harder. And we do make some more money, but we regret how much time we

missed as the kids grew up. We put in 60 hours each week chasing the dream. The bank account filled up. We replaced that old vehicle with a shiny new one. We figure that'll bring us joy! We bought the bigger house because it had a garage and bigger yard! Two years later, we traded in the new car for the next model because it had three new features. Then our friend from work showed us the pictures of his new man cave! Well...I don't have a man cave, or even room to make one. So we move so that we get one. And then we move again, because Joe has a house on the water with a boat, and he looks happy, that will bring me contentment and satisfaction. You realize that you and your wife are now both working six days a week to pay for everything, and you've "drifted apart", "you don't know each other anymore". So you trade her in like she's the lease on your toy sports car, and you look for someone younger and exciting that'll bring you life and excitement!

And at the end of your life. With your feet up, watching the waves crash off the shore. You're retired, and sitting next to your third wife. Your kids grew up and started lives of their own, and you hardly noticed because you had a dream to catch. Do you know what you'll want at that moment in your life? The next thing that promises you the joy and satisfaction of life.

That certainly was an extreme example. And I want to stress that there is nothing sinful about having wealth and possessions, but I am stressing that all of us have a desire built into our sinful nature that wants more and more of everything. It's not that people who desire to better themselves are greedy and discontented people. But the desire for more in life can become such a dominating desire that it becomes a sinful desire.

What is true contentment? Or more specifically, what is biblical contentment? The Word of God has some things to say concerning contentment. John the Baptist said to the soldiers in Luke 3:14, "**Be content with your wages.**" Paul wrote to Timothy in 1 Tim. 6:8, "**But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.**" The writer of Hebrews said in Heb. 13:5, "**Keep your life free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, for He has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'**" Paul even said, "**For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.**" (2 Cor. 12:10)

And we certainly can try and put ourselves in Paul's shoes to appreciate his contentment despite his present condition. Considering that he is writing from his confinement in prison, under the constant and close watch of the Roman soldiers, awaiting his potential death, his closing remarks to these Philippian believers details his contented living in God's provision. He details five principles of contentment in these nine verses that will help us to live for a coming kingdom, in the midst of a culture that is building mini-kingdoms all around us. The five are: Confidence in God's providence, satisfied with little, independent from circumstances, strengthened by divine power, and preoccupied with the well-being of others.

Confidence in God's providence: "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." (4:10)

At this point in history, it had been ten years since Paul had planted the church in Philippi. There was now ten years of history between them. They had long supported Paul financially, emotionally, and spiritually. They partnered with him in ministry with their hands, and with their hearts. And at this time in his life, when Paul is expressing the joy that fills his heart, he's thankful for them. He knows that they are aware of him, and that they are concerned for him. Paul mentions a time of lull, when despite the fact that they were always concerned for him, that they lost the opportunity to support and comfort him. Why they lost opportunity we're not told. We do know from 2 Cor. 8:1-2 that the churches of Macedonia were

facing extreme poverty, so perhaps they were no longer able to reach Paul for a time. Perhaps they simply weren't able to locate him, or perhaps they simply never got the news of his concerns.

We just don't know for certain what caused the lull in their support, but we do know that circumstances had changed, and they were able to send Epaphroditus up to Paul with a gift to encourage and support him. (4:18) And Paul thanked the Lord greatly for this gift. MacArthur writes, "*Paul's gracious attitude reflects his patient confidence in God's sovereign providence. He was certain that God in due time would arrange his circumstances to meet his needs. There was no panic on his part, no attempt to manipulate people, no taking matters into his own hands. Paul was content because he knew that the times, seasons, and opportunities of life are controlled by the sovereign God "who works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11), thereby causing "all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). Those who seek to control their own lives will inevitable be frustrated. A confident trust in God's providence is foundational to contentment.*"¹⁰⁶

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

As I introduced at the outset of this lesson, through the example of the discontented man, I come to the conclusion that we live in a world that knows little to nothing about contentment. Poor people always want riches, and rich people always want more riches. The concept of a person who "has enough" sounds almost like a defeated position, or a lazy position. The world would encourage such a person to dream bigger, work harder, and aspire for greater things. But a Christian needs none of those things for true contentment. Paul says to Timothy, "**Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds in evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.**" (1 Tim. 6:6-10)

Paul trusted in God's provisions, and he knew that God would meet his needs. Paul was one who heeded the instruction of the Lord and laid "**up [his] treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.**" Paul knew that where his "**treasure was, his heart would be also.**" (Matt. 6:20-21) Therefore Paul needed little, and he rested in the truth that God would care for his needs. "**Look at the birds of the air: they neither now nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ...But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ...For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.**" (Matt. 6:26, 30, 32-33)

Independent from Circumstances: "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." (4:12)

¹⁰⁶ MacArthur, John, *New Testament Commentary: Philippians* Moody, 2001 (p.298)

Creflo Dollar (@Creflo_Dollar), Pastor of World Changers Church in Atlanta, Georgia, tweeted, “*Jesus bled and died for us so that we can lay claim to the promise of financial prosperity. #ProsperityInChrist #WealthyLiving #AbundantLife*”

Joel Osteen, a false prophet in Houston, Texas, said, “*It’s God’s will for you to live in prosperity instead of poverty. It’s God’s will for you to pay your bills and not be in debt.*”

There is a religion alive and thriving in the world today, which uses the name of Jesus Christ as its deity, and teaches people that health, wealth and prosperity are the fruit of every follower. That these things can be expected, and even demanded from God, as though we should own them. The end result is a people who fill those churches, experience little to none of the those things, and give much money, hoping to one day have God’s blessings returned.

The Apostle Paul must have been doing it all wrong. In fact, if our life’s circumstances are the ruler by which we judge God’s dealing with us in blessing or judgement, than Paul must have been a heretic; and maybe Job’s friends were right in their words to him!

Paul had a rough life! Since the time of his conversion on the road to Damascus, until the end of his life, he experienced turmoil and hardships on account of his allegiance to Jesus Christ and the preaching of His gospel. Let’s read the summation of his hardships in 2 Corinthians 11:23-33. Paul recognized that it wasn’t God’s goal for us to be healthy, wealthy, and prosperous. Paul’s goal was to live his life for the glory of God, taking the gospel to the lost, and trusting in Christ to meet his needs. Paul knew that to live was Christ, and if while living for Christ, his life was taken, he’d die and it would be gain!

But Paul’s life wasn’t one of constant violence and punishment, there were times of prosperity. I’m certain that Paul’s definition of prosperity resembles nothing of what we define prosperity as. In Paul’s world, having a full stomach, and enough to have his basic needs met were prosperity, compared to the seasons when his stomach was empty, and his days were full of suffering, with many needs that required attention.

Yet regardless of his circumstances, regardless of what season was upon him, Paul was content. Contentment isn’t a character trait that you’re born with, it’s something that you learn. In some parts of the world, people learn contentment by necessity, as they must deal with a life of poverty. But in our culture, contentment is something that must be learned intentionally. We need to learn how much is enough. We need to give God the praise for our abundance, and give from it sacrificially.

Paul’s contentment came from knowing Christ, and resting in His loving care, regardless of the present circumstances of his life. This is the secret that Paul learned. Paul learned that Christ is the One who fills the void in our hearts. And so whether he had much or little at the moment, he remained content. Our hearts are black holes of contentment, but they are sealed up in Christ. Christ all our hope and stay. So Paul lived for Him, and so should we. The obedience of Christ led Him to a brutal and agonizing death, as did the apostles, and countless martyrs ever since. Our obedience will certainly bring affliction, ridicule, scorn, and even death for some, and yet we can echo the contentment of Paul who wrote, “**For this light momentary affliction is preparing us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.**” (2 Cor. 4:17)

Strengthened by Divine Power: “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” (4:13)

This might be the most misapplied verse in the entire Bible. People treat Philippians 4:13 as though it were an isolated statement. As though it were an open-ended motivational statement with a myriad of applications. People have quoted this verse to win the championship, to complete a monumental task at work, to become a proficient painter or musician, and a zillion other things that our hearts can be set upon. Their interpretation is straightforward they say, “I can do ALL things! That means I can do anything in Christ!” To be quite literal, and logical, I cannot do everything through Christ who strengthens me. I cannot jump fifteen feet in the air regardless of how much I believe 4:13. *Well, the verse clearly doesn't promise that we can do super-human things!* Ok, well I'll never become an Olympic athlete even if I believe 4:13 with all my heart. Nor will I achieve spiritual perfection this side of Heaven.

To be quite literal and logical, we cannot do ALL things through Christ in 4:13. This verse isn't commanding us to do whatever we want and know that Jesus is carrying us to the top. So if we're to know what Paul intended when he wrote this, we're going to have to read this verse within the chapter it is written. The proper biblical hermeneutic of contextual reading and application.

Paul just finished speaking about his contentment in little or much through Christ. It just seems a little odd that the application of verse 13 in our age has become nothing of what Paul meant in his own circumstances. The first key to rightly understand the verse is to apply the right definition to the words **I can do**. *Ischuo* (I can do) means “to be strong”, “to have power”, or “to have resources”. The word *ischuo* is used again in James 5:16, “**Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.**” We see here *ischuo* used in an effectual way. Healing doesn't come naturally, but it happens after confession of sin and prayer for one another. Acts 19:20 translates *ischuo* this way, “**So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.**” God's word was *ischuo*, literally ‘victorious’ or ‘stronger than its’ opposition’.

So, Paul was not saying that he (and we) can accomplish any desire of our heart through Christ. What he was saying was that despite his circumstances, even if he had little, even if he was hungry, and beaten, and imprisoned, and facing imminent death, he had within him a strength from the Lord. He had the prevailing strength of Christ that was bigger than all the opposition against him. So that whatever came upon him, he was content and trusting in the sovereign plan of God. He knew that he would be strong enough to endure whatever came at him, and he knew that it was God's sustaining power that enabled him to live for Christ and the furtherance of His gospel, all his days. We need to recognize that the contentment that Paul had came from the Holy Spirit of God, a fruit of a righteous life. Contentment wasn't one of Paul's natural abilities. It didn't come naturally for him, nor will it for any of us. The power that filled Paul is the same power that fills every believer, but the result of that power at work is contented godly living through every circumstance.

Preoccupied with the Well-Being of Others: Philippians 4:14-19

Let's be honest, we naturally think of ourselves. Sin has corrupted our hearts so much so that it bends and twists our desires around so that we take care of ourselves first. We're not all on the same plane of corruption. Some of us tend to think of ourselves a lot more than others, but in essence, to varying degrees, humanity is selfish. Contentment will never come to the self-centered soul, because life will never meet the demands of a sinful heart. Contentment comes out of a heart that is satisfied in God's provision, and is focused on the well-being of others.

Paul has touched on this topic earlier in this letter in 2:3-5a, “**Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves,**

which is yours in Christ Jesus.” Christians are to be a people who serve the Lord, and not themselves. We are those who are being shaped into the image of our Saviour, and His life was lived in humble obedience to the Father, so that He might die in the place of those people whom the Father had given Him. Our lives are to be spent, even exhausted, in like manner.

This is the obedience that we see from the lives of the Philippians. They invested in Paul. They knew his heart, and we're united with him in ministry. They partnered with him emotionally, spiritually, physically, and financially. Paul takes them back to the beginning in verse 15 and reminds them how far back their ministry goes. The Philippians were the only church who supported him in his ministry when he left Macedonia. Even while he was in Thessalonica, they sent him gifts occasionally. Did the Philippians have a super-abundance of wealth and resources? Hardly! But they also weren't seeking for comfort and contentment in them anyways. The Philippians sent gifts to Paul, giving him resources that many outsiders and financial advisors might have encouraged them to hold on to meet their own needs. When Paul received those gifts, he wasn't looking for a safe-deposit box to store his new-found riches. But what he received, he made the most use of. He encouraged them that he had **“received full payment, and more. I am well supplied.”** He encouraged them that their gift pleased God, that is was a **“fragrant offering”** and that their sacrifice (which it undoubtedly was) was **“acceptable and pleasing to God.”** Surely the resources that the Philippians gave up left them in a position of greater need themselves. So Paul encouraged them to know that **“my God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”**

How are we living today? Whose lives are we invested in today? What sacrifices of our time, emotional and physical strength, prayer, and finances are we intentionally making to build others up in the faith, to further the gospel of Christ?

We will never be content without first placing our confidence in the sovereign God over all. God is the conductor of this orchestra of life, let us learn to play the notes He has ordained. Let us secondly learn to be satisfied with the simple necessities of life. Not that it is sinful to have riches, but it is sinful to require and seek contentment in them. The third reason plays into the first, let us be content apart from our circumstances. Regardless of whether our life is going well or not in our estimation, our adoption as children of God, the salvation that we have, remains secure in Christ. Let us remain content in the riches that remain ours in Christ regardless of our current lot in life. Fourth, let us learn contentment through the power of God. In our own strength, we will fail, but in Christ we have the power to accomplish all things that are pleasing to God, and in Him we will be content. And finally, we will find contentment when our lives are focused on the well-being of others. May God strengthen us to live as contented servants of Him!