

“The Secret to Being Content”

Philippians 4:4-13

Turn with in your Bible to the fourth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Philippians. In 1990, a Brazilian farmer needed some water for his fields, and so he made the trek down to a nearby stream. As he was stooping down to the water’s edge, something caught his eye and he quickly scooped it up. At first glance, it looked like a stone. But upon closer inspection, it was certainly much more. That Brazilian man discovered what is now known as the largest red diamond in history, a whopping 13.9 carats in its rough form. You know that all diamonds are rare, but red diamonds are the rarest of the rare. This one would eventually be cut into a triangular shape, weighing nearly 6 carats, now referred to as the Moussaieff Red Diamond, named after the collector who purchased it 20 years ago. The sale price was kept a secret, but modern estimates place its value as high as \$20 million. It was a rare discovery indeed.

But perhaps even more rare is a person who has come to possess contentment in life. The reason we find it to be so rare is because we live in a society that is characterized by a spirit of discontentment. In fact, there may be no better word that summarizes the hopes and obsessions of today’s generation than the word more. More money, or more stuff, more trips. Men and women today live for their next raise, or the next house, the latest gadget or device. You see the evidence of discontentment every day in the way people respond to circumstances. They display it while driving because traffic is moving too slow. The weather is too hot, too cold, or too rainy, too dry. Discontentment shows up at work where we aren’t making enough money or receiving enough credit for all the hard work we put in. Or we can’t stand the people we work with. People feel

disappointed in their marriage, or with their physical appearance. On and on it goes.

However, the real challenge is not so much that we live in a society that is discontented, but if we're honest, we all face discontentedness in our own heart and mind. The fact that something constantly clamors for my attention—the things which others do, honors which others enjoy, possessions which others have. Discontentment is when your eyes are always scanning the horizon for what's next, for something else. A poem I came across pretty much sums it up:

*It was spring,
But it was summer I wanted,
The warm days,
And the great outdoors.*

*It was summer,
But it was fall I wanted,
The colorful leaves,
And the cool, dry air.*

*It was fall,
But it was winter I wanted,
The beautiful snow,
And the joy of the holiday season.*

*It was winter,
But it was spring I wanted,
The warmth,
And the blossoming of nature.*

*I was a child,
But it was adulthood I wanted.
The freedom,
And the respect.*

*I was 20,
But it was 30 I wanted,
To be mature,
And sophisticated.*

*I was middle-aged,
But it was 20 I wanted,
The youth,
And the free spirit.*

*I was retired,
But it was middle-age I wanted,
The presence of mind,
Without limitations.*

*My life was over,
But I never got what I wanted.*

Proverbs 27:20—“Hell and destruction are never full, and the eyes of man are never satisfied.”

Nearly four centuries ago a Puritan pastor named Jeremiah Burroughs preached a series of sermons on contentment in 1642, which were collected and published under the title, “The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment.” Far more rare than the rarest of diamonds is the rare condition known as contentment. And so with

that in mind, we're in Philippians 4. This passage is important, for it is here we find the most extensive treatment in the Bible concerning the subject of contentment. It is evident from this text that there's a direct correlation between gratitude, the peace of God, and our overall contentment in life. (Read)

The greatest statement anywhere on the value of Christian contentment comes from Paul's own pen in this letter that he wrote to the Philippian church. Though he is writing to the church from his Roman imprisonment, these Christians had personally witnessed the apostle live out supernatural contentment when he and Silas had first come to the city of Philippi to preach the gospel. The story of how the church was planted is found in Acts 16. There, the Bible says that a demon-possessed girl did some fortune telling and made huge sums of money for her owners. But the demon drove her to follow Paul and Silas around, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation" (Acts 16:17). Paul commands the demon to come out of her, and she is delivered. However, her owners who were profiting from her become angry and have Paul and Silas dragged off to face the city magistrate. They're beaten and publicly humiliated, and then thrown in the Philippian jail. The Bible tells us that their feet are fastened in the stocks, which means they're in the worst possible part of the prison. Surrounded by darkness, surrounded by unimaginable filth, as their bodies are sore and bloodied from the beating, there they are in such an awful place. Yet despite all of that, the Scripture says in:

Acts 16:25—“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.”

From the text, I want to show you from Paul's words as well as his own personal example several specific ways that we can experience true contentment. And I

want you to notice how it is all connected to a walk with God. First of all, you can be content with:

1—The peace of God that SETTLES you (4:4-9)

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. 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. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”

Just as peace and contentment go hand in hand, so also do worry and restlessness. And I realize that what fuels my restless heart is a lack of contentment with where I am, or with who I am, or what I have, and so on. The antidote to such thinking is presented to us in these verses. Now, we looked at these verses at length last time, so I won't spend much time here. But it is important for the sake of context.

The ingredients of effective praying

Does the call here to prayer mean that when we pray, all of the things we tend to fret over will automatically be solved and that all our troubles will vanish? Not necessarily. It is not so much that my circumstances change as much as it is that I am changed. Through prayer and thanksgiving, we are given divine perspective. The key to effective praying is not getting what we want, but

wanting what we get. If we ask God something, we must be willing to receive whatever it is that He gives. And this is something that a heart that is content in Christ understands.

Notice that Paul couples prayer with thanksgiving.

Norman Harrison — *“In prayer, anxiety is resolved by trust in God. That which causes the anxiety is brought to the One who is totally competent and in whose hands the matter may be left. In thanksgiving, anxiety is resolved by the deliberate acceptance of the worrying circumstance as something which an all-wise, all-loving, and all-sovereign God has appointed. Prayer takes up the anxiety-provoking question ‘How?’—How shall I cope?—and answers by pointing away to Him, to His resources and promises. Thanksgiving addresses itself to the worrying question ‘Why?’—Why has this happened to me?—and answers by pointing to the great Doer of all who never acts purpose-lessly and whose purposes never fail.”*

He goes on to say that the world worries, and it has ample reason for doing so. It faces tremendous problems, with no real solution for them. But the Christian is very differently situated. Though he is in the world, he is not of the world. He has an anchor for the soul that the world doesn't know or possess or understand. The Christian man or woman has faith in a God who providentially guides circumstances. And prayer maintains a heavenly perspective, so that the believer is spared so much of the mental anguish brought on by worry.

The importance of excellent thinking

When our anxious thoughts are displaced by prayer and thanksgiving, they must be replaced with something else. Verse 8 tells us what kind of thoughts must fill our minds. Notice Paul tells believers, “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable,

whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable.” Six characteristics of those things which should fill our minds. He says, “If there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” Nothing will rob you of contentment and joy like negative, impure, untrue thoughts.

Proverbs 23:7—“As a man thinks in his heart, so is he.”

In other words, our lives are set upon the trajectory that we think and dwell upon. Whatever you think about will always show up in your life in some tangible way. The word that Paul uses in verse 8 for ‘think’ is the Greek word ‘logizomai’ which means to ponder, to consider, to give proper weight and value to, and to meditate upon. Instead of ingratitude or worry, he says we should give weight to whatever is:

- True, as opposed to that which is false
- Honorable, as opposed to that which is dishonorable
- Just, as opposed to that which is unjust
- Pure, as opposed to that which is impure
- Lovely, as opposed to that which is unlovely
- Commendable, as opposed to that which is not

Garbage in, garbage out. Jesus said that the heart is what defiles a man, and things such as adultery and murder all begin in the heart. And so what you and I think about is a big deal. Someone who understood this to some degree was Victor Frankl, a Jewish man who spent three years in a Nazi concentration camp. Each day brought with it the grim realization that it might be his last. And many

of his fellow prisoners died from worrying about their death. But Frankl chose not to do that. Instead, he would look through the broken slats in the wall of his cold cell and find pleasure in the beauty of a sunset. He developed a sense of humor so that he could laugh even in the midst of pain. He would later write a book entitled “Man’s Search For Meaning” in which he made this statement:

“The experiences of camp life show that man does have a choice of action. There were enough examples, often of a heroic nature, which proved that apathy could be overcome and irritability suppressed. Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress. Every thing can be taken from man but one thing: the last of human freedoms: to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s way. And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision...In the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone. Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually.”

How much more should this be true of the man or woman who knows Jesus Christ? You may not have a choice as it comes to your circumstances, but you and I always have a choice in how we respond. We must not let those negative thoughts run wild in our imagination, because when I do, I give Satan an inroad into my life. No, 2 Corinthians 10:5 tells me to bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. True thinking must be found in its place.

1 Thessalonians 5:17-18—“Pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

Isaiah 26:3—“You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.”

That’s the same thing that Paul says here. When we pray with thanksgiving and fill our minds with those excellent and praiseworthy things he mentions, the result will be that the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

The word used there is ‘garrison’ so that the idea is that the peace of God acts as a guard or sentinel there at the door of your mind to provide security. When we pray and think and do as God has instructed us to, His peace becomes the guard that is standing watch at the door and keeps anxiety from wreaking its havoc.

This is what will give you the advantage as you deal with the pressures of the day.

The illustration of exemplified living

Perhaps no one modeled and exemplified this any better than Paul. He tells the church in verse 9, “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.” And so notice how Paul’s words here begin with the peace of God and end with the God of peace. Rather than worry, fear, and anxiety maintaining an iron grip on my heart, the God of peace produces inside of me the peace of God which rules my thinking. So that the man or woman who is truly content in Christ, grateful to God for His good and faithful hand of blessing, always has reason to give thanks. And he or she lives with a sense of profound peace that surpasses all understanding! This is Paul’s experience in the Roman prison. He is a contented man, not because of something circumstantial. It had nothing to do with his outward circumstances, but had everything to do with his inward condition. Paul knew something of about the peace of God which settles you. A second point to consider about contentment is that it involves:

2—The place where God has STATIONED you (4:10-12)

“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.”

By the end of his letter to them, Paul is wanting to thank the Philippian church for the monetary gift they sent for his support. He is grateful to them for the gift, but he also uses it as a teaching opportunity. He tells them in verse 4 to rejoice in the Lord always, and in verse 10 he says that this has been his own practice. He says that his joy at their gift is not because he'd been in need, though he had. Instead, he says that he has learned to be content no matter the circumstances. He was content in Christ before the money came, he will be content in Christ using the money for his needs, and he will be content in Christ after the money is spent. He says, “I've learned in whatever situation I am to be content, whether abounding in plenty or being brought low.” Their money will not improve the state of his soul in Christ one iota. And yet for all of that, notice how he says ‘thank you’ to them in verse 14 and the verses that follow, leading up to the marvelous promise in verse 19 that the same God who provided so richly for his needs is the very same God who will provide for their needs as well. It is an amazing statement of promise.

But the thing that I want you to pay attention to is the fact that Paul says twice, “Contentment is something that I have learned.” He says it here in verse 11, “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.” He says it in verse 12, “I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.” That

means it wasn't something that came natural to him. He wasn't all the sudden filled with contentment the moment he met Christ on the road to Damascus. His life was changed. He was given the Holy Spirit. Yet it was through the school of daily life, and in the furnace of suffering that the apostle Paul would learn this priceless lesson. And if it is something that he had to learn, that means it is something that you and I have to learn as well. Perhaps we can start by a simple definition.

Jeremiah Burroughs — *“Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.”*

In other words, contentment is the result of submitting to God’s will and delighting in God’s wisdom. The word that is translated as ‘content’ there in verse 11 is a Greek word for contained. Thayer’s Greek Lexicon says it is was used to describe a mindset of being sufficient for oneself, strong enough, or independent of external circumstances. It was used to describe a city that didn’t rely on external imports. And yet that is not exactly what Paul has in mind here as he refers to a Christian’s contentment. Sufficient, yes. But independent, no. His sufficiency came through Christ. It is the same word that is used in 2 Corinthians 12:9 where he asked the Lord to remove a particular thorn, but the answer he was given from the Lord was this, “My grace is sufficient for you.” It is the same word as content. A form of this very same word is used in:

Hebrews 13:5— **“Keep your life free from love of money and be content with what you have, for He has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’”**

The restless discontent of an unbelieving world should not surprise us. The Bible reveals the spiritual condition of the lost in passages such Ephesians 2:12 which

says they are “without hope and without God in the world.” Matthew 9:36 says they are “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Or consider:

Isaiah 57:20-21 — “The wicked are like the tossing of the sea; for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt. There is no peace for the wicked, says my God.”

Paul says, “I have learned how to be content no matter the situation I’m in.”

Whether in need, or in abundance, or in plenty or in want. No matter what I have or don’t have, I always have enough. I came across something this week in my reading that got my attention. There was an article in Atlantic Magazine some time back that revealed how much has changed over the last century. Things which were at one time seen as luxuries have now become necessities we can’t function without. The article makes the following observations:

- In the year 1900, 90% of US households did not have electricity or a telephone.
- In 1915, 90% of families in the US did not have a car
- In 1930, 90% didn’t own a refrigerator or washing machine
- In 1945, 90% didn’t have air conditioning in their home
- In 1960, 90% didn’t own a color TV
- In 1975, 90% didn’t own a microwave
- In 1990, 90% of people didn’t have a cell phone or have access to the internet

How in the world did people manage to survive? Listen to this statement—

“Today, at least 90% of the country has electricity, car, fridge, washer/dryer, air conditioning, color TV, microwave, and cell phone. But they are not enough.”

And when you think about our situation in modern America, what excuse do we have? For the last 250 years, due to developments in science, industry, and medicine have all systematically reduced the physical miseries that were common to every preceding generation of humanity. Think about technological progress, or how it has made things in our lives much more convenient. Yet we all can still find something to complain about!

Gregg Easterbrook wrote a book entitled “The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse.” He says that in first world countries, even with modern convenience that has improved the material and physical comfort of men and women in those societies, the rates of depression and anxiety continues to rise. In the midst of abundance, they sense their life lacks meaning and can’t seem to find any remedy to the plague of discontentment. Consider the lives of so many of today’s celebrities.

True Christian contentment is the God-given ability to be satisfied with the loving, gracious provision of God in any situation. It is both an independent as well as a dependent quality. The things that the world says are necessary for a person to be satisfied does not matter to the Christian. And the things that the world says are unimportant are of vital importance if the Christian man or woman is to be content. If I’ve got Jesus, how could I want more? It was C.S. Lewis who said something to the effect, “He who has Christ and the whole world has no more than he who has Christ and nothing else.” Got Jesus...you’ve got it all!

Andy Davis — *“It is the duty of all Christians to strive after contentment every single day for the rest of their lives on earth. We owe this to Christ. A convicting question stands over all our moments of complaining discontent: Has Christ, crucified and resurrected on your behalf, done enough to make you content today...or must He do a little more?”*

That's a very penetrating question, isn't it? Jesus, thanks for bleeding and dying in my place, thanks for giving me life and breath and salvation, but I need You do a little bit more before I can truly be satisfied. That puts it in perspective. So there's the peace of God that settles you, and the place where God has stationed you. A third thing to understand about contentment is that it comes through:

3—The power of God that STRENGTHENS you (4:13)

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

Paul tells us in verse 12 that he had learned the secret of being content, no matter the circumstance. And now in verse 13, he openly declares that secret for us—"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." The secret of being content is found only in the power of Christ which is in operation in your life. Paul is saying that he was always being energized in all things by the strengthening power of the Lord Jesus. And it doesn't have anything to do with an outward set of circumstances, but has everything to do with an inward source of strength. Contentment is not found in a place, but in a person.

John 15:5—"I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."

Let me tell you, it was this same power at work in Paul that led the Philippian jailer to take notice of his faith. As he and Silas were praising and worshiping in the midst of their shackles, they were more content than the jailer himself so that he asked the question, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" He saw something in them that was lacking in his own heart and life. You will never convince me otherwise.

Paul says, “I have this secret so that circumstances can never again touch me and bring me to the place of total despair.” Though it didn’t come easy, he could say, “I’ve learned the lesson.” So many people go through life and think that if they could only relocate, they would be content. If they could go to another church, they would be content. If they could get on with another company, they would be content. If they could live in that neighborhood, drive that car, go to that school, they would be content. And they go through life always wanting, never satisfied. The reason is that they haven’t yet learned the secret. Contentment is in Jesus Christ and through His power at work in you.

And so bearing all of this in mind, and considering how contentment involves—

- The peace of God that settles you
- The place where God has stationed you
- The power of God that strengthens you

Time will not permit me to say a whole lot more about this, but we will finish up Philippians next time by talking about the people of God who support you and the promise of God that sustains you. But we’ll save that for later.

A certain man went to visit his friend up near a mountain range in the Canadian wilderness. It is a beautiful area teeming with wildlife but very rough terrain and sparsely populated. After a fishing trip, they were cleaning salmon together along the river. The visitor looked over at his friend, whose white t-shirt was a blanket of grey. He said, “Jim, your back is covered with mosquitoes.” “I know,” he said as he kept working on the fish. “Doesn’t that bother you?” He said, “Not really.” “Well, that’s crazy. How can that not bother you?” To which he said,

“When I came out here, I decided I had to learn how to ignore the mosquitoes. And so I did.”

Learning to ignore the mosquitoes isn't something that is easy, and neither is it easy to say, “I've learned in whatever situation I am to be content.” Can you say with the apostle Paul that you've learned the secret of contentment? To the world, it is an illusive mystery. But for the Christ follower, it is an open secret. And I'm glad Paul has shared it with us. Grateful to God for His peace that is produced in you, for the place where He has called you, and for His power at work in you. True contentment takes these things into careful consideration, and experiences a profound, out-of-this-world kind of peace that money cannot buy. The good news is that Jesus Christ offers it to you freely by His grace.

Chuck Swindoll — *“Some people are thermometers. They merely register what is around them. If the situation is tight and pressurized, they register tension and irritability. If it's stormy, they register worry and fear. If it's calm, quiet, and comfortable, they register relaxation and peacefulness. Others, however, are thermostats. They regulate the atmosphere. They are the mature change agents who never let the situation dictate to them.”*

Learning the secret of being content demands that we no longer allow ourselves to merely register the temperature around us. Instead, we regulate it as we look away from the external circumstances of life and and look in faith to the eternal God. Like what a poet says tongue in cheek:

*Whether the weather is cold, whether the weather is hot;
Whether the weather is good, whether the weather is not;
No matter the weather, we'll weather the weather...
whether we like it or not!*