

Pray

Reading

These are the words of God:

10 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. 11 Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. 12 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. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:10–13)

Intro

What would it take to make you content? What is the one thing you feel you lack, and you think to yourself, “If I just had that one thing, then I’d be content”.

For a long time, for me, it was marriage. As some of you know, I was single into my forties, and the temptation was to think that everything I struggled with in life would basically be fixed when I got married, and life would finally begin.

Now I don’t want you to mishear me, Lee is a wonderful woman, but can any marriage really fulfil our deepest longings for lasting contentment? Can anything do that?

We might not say it out loud, but functionally, deep down, I think many of us feel that if we were married, or married to someone different, or lived somewhere else, or had a different job, or a higher salary, or better relationships in my family, THEN we’d be content.

But would we? One poll asked Americans how much money they believed it would take for them to achieve the American dream. Americans who earned \$25,000 a year believed it would take \$54,000 a year. Those who made \$100,000 on average believed it would take \$192,000.

So apparently, we believe that contentment requires roughly twice as much as we currently have – whatever we currently have.

Whether you're on food stamps, or you're Elon Musk, apparently there's still a longing for more, and when you get that, it's still not enough.

We get the dream job, the dream marriage, maybe you even find the dream church - imagine that! - but contentment is still out of reach.

Stephen Altrogge writes about this in his book *The Greener Grass Conspiracy* calls this the “‘if only’ game”. He writes:

If only I could get married, if only I could get this job promotion, if only my wife weren't sick so often, if only my son would start respecting me, if only my budget wasn't so tight... THEN I'd have peace, joy, contentment, and some sleep at night.

Once you've identified your 'if only' dream, invest all your hopes in that dream and spend hours thinking and praying about it. Put all your hopes for

life and happiness into that dream. Imagine how happy you'll finally be when that dream is fulfilled.

Most people are good at playing the 'if only' game. The only problem is, you can never win. I've been playing it for years and haven't won once. But that doesn't stop me. Like a wheezy old man hooked on scratch lottery cards. My life has been a succession of if onlys. [And, he says]. I've been a discontented person for much of my life...

There's a reason why the defining Puritan book on this subject is called "The RARE Jewel Of Christian Contentment"! Contentment is rare! Not many find it.

You know that famous opening line from Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy: "Happy families are all ALIKE; each UNhappy family is unhappy in its own way." His point is that there are many, many more ways of finding DIScontentment, than there are ways of finding the opposite.

But here's Paul, at the end of verse 11, saying he has found true and lasting contentment, despite the most terrible circumstances:

11 ...I have learned in whatEVER situation I am to be content.

(Philippians 4:11)

I know I usually do three headings, but today I have only one, and it's simply this:

Contentment does not depend on WHAT we have, WHERE we go, WHAT we DO, or WHO WE ARE.

Paul starts here in verse 10 by saying:

I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now AT LENGTH you have revived your concern for me. (Philippians 4:10)

When he says “at length”, he isn’t saying “Finally, you’ve sent me support! About time!”

The phrase “at length” simply means that because of the circumstances over the past ten years, not least Paul’s constant travelling, they have not had the OPPORTUNITY to send support. He says, verse 10:

You WERE indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity.
(Philippians 4:10)

And he’s at pains to point out, verse 11, that his rejoicing in their concern for him is NOT because he is in need.

Verse 11:

11 Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.

(Philippians 4:11)

Paul's contentment is independent of his financial or material status.

And that's surprising, because for many of us, discontent comes because we are conscious that we have LESS than others.

One Christian writer called Fabs Harford is very honest about this. She wrote this on her blog:

I'm a little tired of the constant comparing of myself to other writers, to other teachers, to other women. I'm exhausted by the way I seem to be threatened by other people's success and the way I envy their gifts.

Where did we learn the lie that the value of what we're given is determined by comparing to what OTHERS get? God gives us this delicious beautiful piece of cake, and we're thrilled, excited, until we notice that the girl next to us got a cherry on her

piece. And suddenly gratitude is cannibalized by envy; God has withheld from us. So we start sabotaging and stealing from one another to level the playing field.

We will only be satisfied when we have a better piece of cake. Or at least an equal slice. Our contentment is dependent on our confidence that no one around us has more than us. So we grasp and push and shove, desperate to get a little bit closer to the position we want, which is only valuable to us BECAUSE it is ahead of someone else.

So discontent can come because we have LESS than others. But surprisingly, discontent also comes when we have MORE than others. Look at verse 12:

12 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.

(Philippians 4:12)

That strikes me as counter-intuitive. We EXPECT Paul to say “I have learned to be content even when I have less than others.”

But he also says “I have learned to be content even when I have MORE than others.”

Last Saturday I had the joy of conducting a wedding here. You remember those marriage vows. Each person promises that they will remain committed to the other:

for better OR for worse
for richer OR for poorer
in sickness AND in health

We don't always think of it this way, but actually, BOTH extremes can be damaging to our contentment. Let's face it, if having plenty of health and wealth really helped us be content, presumably Hollywood marriages would last longer than they do.

Get MORE than others, and we still find we want more. You find yourself anxious about losing it, or maintaining it.

But there's another reason why having more than others is not enough.

Last week I read an article in The Atlantic by a marriage therapist, and it was called “Why Happy People Cheat”. Listen to what one of her clients told her:

“Most descriptions of troubled marriages don’t seem to fit my situation. Colin and I have a wonderful relationship. Great kids, no financial stresses, careers we love, great friends. He is a phenom at work, [very] handsome, attentive lover, fit, and generous to everyone, including my parents. My life is good.”

And yet this woman is having an affair. She says:

“[This is] not someone I would ever date—ever, ever, ever. He drives a truck and has tattoos. It’s so clichéd, it pains me to say it out loud. It could ruin everything I’ve built.”

So why is she having an AFFAIR? She doesn’t fully understand it herself.

But the therapist explains something. She says, affairs don’t only happen because something is missing in the marriage. Sometimes affairs happen because something is missing in the person having the affair. They’re not

looking for a new partner, they're actually looking for a new self - and maybe they don't even realize it.

The therapist says to this woman, "This is not about the marriage, this is about you."

Having great friends and a great spouse and no financial stress will not solve your discontent. Because, she says, the discontent isn't rooted in those things, it's rooted in you.

One sociologist wrote that in modern life:

there is always a suspicion... that one is living a lie or a mistake; that something crucially important has been overlooked, missed, neglected, left untried and unexplored; that a vital obligation to one's own authentic self has not been met, or that some chances of unknown happiness (completely different from any happiness experienced before) have not been taken up in time and are bound to be lost forever.

When the singer Adele got a divorce, she told Vogue magazine: "[The marriage] just wasn't right for me any more. I didn't want to end up like a lot of other people I

knew. I wasn't miserable miserable, but I would have been miserable had I not put mySELF first. But, yeah, nothing bad happened or anything like that.”

When asked whether her album 30 was the “divorce album”, the singer said, "I think I'm divorcing myself on this one."

So in other words, the root of her discontent was not in her spouse, and she knew it.

The marriage was fine. Her discontent was rooted in her sense that there was a better version of herself that she had to step into, or regret it forever.

I think this is a deeply held belief for many of us. We believe that self-reinvention can cure us of our discontent.

Have you noticed how kids are always “trying on” different roles? Doctor. Nurse. Queen. Mechanic. Chef. Dog. Cat. Jedi. My two year old likes pretending to be a baby! Sweetheart, you don't have to PRETEND to be that. You basically ARE that. Kids LOVE trying on different roles, and we enjoy giving them the freedom to do it.

But then you grow up, and the music stops, and you find yourself sitting in a chair you didn't choose for yourself.

But you're not a kid any more. You're not allowed to get up and try on a different role. Your commitments make you feel tied down. And so the discontent comes. And it starts to eat away at you.

As one writer put it, we have a "nostalgia for unlived lives." You wonder, what other stories could I have been a part of?

The therapist in that article describes adultery like this: "Adultery is the revenge of the deserted possibilities." What sort of person could I have been? What sort of person could I STILL be, if I just grab the chance, no matter what it does to my family?

In the movie *A Walk on the Moon* the main character has an affair with a blouse salesman. Her teenage daughter asks her, "[Do] you love [him] more than all of US?" "No," the mother replies, but "sometimes it's easier to be different with a different person."

Why do we want to be different? Because we're not content with the person we ARE. To use Adele's line, we want to divorce ourselves.

Ah, we say, I knew it! The secret of contentment is learning to be content with your SELF! THEN I'll be content in every situation.

We think, the secret is SELF-acceptance. SELF-love. Just accept yourself as you are with no judgements. But does that work?

A friend of mine sent me an article about sologamy. Sologamy is when you marry yourself. You give yourself a ring, you walk the aisle alone, you say your vows in front of a mirror, and then you toast yourself. Assuming of course that you accept your own proposal of marriage.

Why do people do this? Because we believe the solution to our discontent is "our SELF accepting our SELF".

But I can't accept mySELF for the same reason I can't give mySELF the Nobel Prize for Literature. If *I'm* the one giving out the awards, it makes the award meaningless.

People say "SELF acceptance is really hard" - it's not just hard, it's impossible. Acceptance and love HAS to come from someone other than ourselves for it to have any weight, any significance, any meaning.

So if SELF-acceptance isn't the secret of contentment, what is?

It seems like wherever I GO, whatever I HAVE, whoever I'm WITH, whatever version of myself I CREATE, there I am. And I'm still discontent.

There was a wonderful skit on Saturday Night Live a few years back. The comedian Adam Sandler played this character Joe Romano, a travel agent who does award-winning tours of Italy. And he says, "Every so often people leave us a review that they were disappointed or didn't have as much fun as they thought. So here at Romano Tours, we always remind our customers: if you're sad now, you might still feel sad there. Our tours will take you to the most beautiful places on earth. But remember, you're still going to be YOU on vacation. If you are sad where you are, and then you get on a plane to Italy, the you in Italy will be the same sad you from before. Just in a new place. We can take you on a hike. We cannot turn you into someone who likes hiking. Our friendly tour guides are happy to take your picture. But remember, the pictures you're in are going to have YOU in them. And if you don't like how you look back home, it's not going to get any better in a gondola."

We bring the seeds of our discontent WITH us into every new relationship, every new experience, into our long-awaited retirement, or our job promotion or our sparkling achievement or our vows of self-acceptance.

The Apostle Paul gets that. He knows that for a person to experience LASTING contentment, it's going to have to be independent of how MUCH you have, independent of how LITTLE you have, and *independent of your own SELF*.

11 ...I have learned in whatEVER situation I AM to be content. 12 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. 13 [How?] I can do all things through HIM who strengthens me.

(Philippians 4:11–13)

That last line is THE most misquoted verse in the Bible: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

You see it tattooed on the biceps of athletes. And the implication is: As long as I have God, I can run faster, jump higher, throw further.

But hopefully you can see, that's not what verse 13 is saying. You don't get to be an NBA player just because you believe in Jesus. "I can do ALL things" in verse 13 means "I can face all SITUATIONS with contentment".

(So if you DO have the "I can do all things" tattoo on YOUR bicep, please would you add an extra sentence underneath, just to clarify that for people.)

So where have we got to with this? Contentment does not depend on WHAT we have, WHERE we go, WHAT we DO, or WHO WE ARE. It is independent of all those things.

So what DOES it depend on?

The clue is there in verse 13:

I can do all things through HIM who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:13)

Lasting contentment is dependent on Him who strengthens you. Who is the "Him" there in verse 13? It is the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lord Jesus Christ strengthens you so that you can be content in every situation. How does He do that?

By His Spirit. Only His Spirit can give you the deep, internalized assurance that both your plenty AND your hunger, your abundance AND your need, come to you from the same wise and loving hands.

Look back at v12, because there's a very unexpected word there. Paul says:

12 I know how to be BROUGHT LOW...
(Philippians 4:12)

Brought low. Not just "I know how to be low" but how to be brought low. Someone is doing the "bringing" here.

Why IS my current situation like this? Is it random? Is it just bad luck - wrong place, wrong time?

Or have my circumstances been purposefully and carefully arranged? Is there a heartless universe behind this, or is there a compassionate and wise Father?

Am I simply "low", or have I been "brought low" by someone who cares for me better than I care for myself?

Jeremiah Burroughs, the Puritan who wrote *The Rare Jewel Of Christian Contentment*, defined contentment like this:

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.

So the secret of contentment is peacefully submitting ourselves to, and delighting ourselves in, the deep truth that our Father ordains our EVERY situation in the light of his everlasting care for us.

Philippians Chapter 1 verse 29:

...it has been GRANTED to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake...
(Philippians 1:29)

Both the belief AND the suffering come from the same hand. It is not the result of a cold impersonal algorithm in a blind cosmos. Both come from your Father.

Philippians 1 verse 12:

12 I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel...

(Philippians 1:12)

Even your chains have your Father's fingerprints on them, and are advancing the gospel in ways you may not be able to see. Maybe they're advancing the gospel in your own heart, as we speak.

This morning three of our missionaries are with us, who know the reality of this. David and Barbara Crossman, and Emily Cogliano.

Philippians chapter 1 verse 6:

6 ...I am sure of this, that he who BEGAN a good work in you WILL bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

(Philippians 1:6)

Your Father WILL bring your salvation to completion, even through, perhaps ESPECIALLY through, the hardships of your life.

My favourite image of contentment in the Bible comes from the Psalms. This is what King David wrote:

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up;
my eyes are not raised too high;

I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.

2 But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child is my soul within me.

(Psalm 131:1-2)

The unweaned child frets and cries at his mother.

But the weaned child is content simply being in his mother's arms. He's calm and quiet. Why? Because he's learned to trust his mother. Just the presence of his mother is enough for him. He's learned to trust whatever his mother does, even though of course a small child can't possibly understand all the REASONS she does what she does.

So it is with Paul. He's no longer anxious when things don't go the way he wants or expects. He's content in any and every situation, because he's like a weaned child. Having his Father is enough.

Do you know that's why Christ came? So that you would see the beauty of his life and death for you, and see that you can TRUST Him completely. He says "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father". So you see the trustworthiness of Christ, and you know you can rest securely in the arms of the Father, like a weaned child.

Christ went through the agony of the cross not primarily so that you could be forgiven, or get into heaven, or get out of hell, as wonderful as those things are.

He went through the agony of the cross primarily so that you could be UNITED to Him. And what does that mean? It means His Father becomes YOUR Father. To rest in HIS arms IS to find lasting contentment. Regardless of what you have, or who you are.

Dark Clouds and Deep Mercy is the name of a book by Mark Vroegop about lament. Just a few days before her due date in 2004, Mark's daughter, Sylvia, was stillborn.

In his grief, he reached out to a fellow pastor, John Piper. I was really struck by the last line of the email John Piper sent to him. He wrote, “Keep trusting the One who keeps you trusting.”

That’s what contentment boils down to, doesn’t it? Can you TRUST him, whatever is happening to you. Are you like a weaned child who has learned to trust his Father completely, even though you don’t understand all his ways? IF ONLY you have HIM, would he be enough, even if everything else were taken from you?

On the day of Jesus Christ, as we look back over every moment of our lives, we will see that every hardship, every shed tear, every wound in our hearts, only served to bring us deeper into the arms of our Father.

The only question is: Are you able to see your life NOW with the eyes you will have THEN?

Let’s pray.