LESSON 10

Gratitude and Contentment

I don't say this out of need, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I find myself. I know how to make do with little, and I know how to make do with a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content—whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need. I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me.

— Philippians 4:11–13

Give thanks in everything; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

— 1 Thessalonians 5:18

Paul had to learn contentment in good times as well as hard ones, and Christ taught him. Gratitude is where that learning starts, because there is something to thank God for in every circumstance.

Enough

MOST OF US CAN REMEMBER A RAISE THAT WAS GOING TO FIX EVERYTHING. Maybe it was the first paycheck that cleared a certain number, or the move from an apartment into a house with a yard. For a few months it felt like enough. Then the car started making a noise, the kids needed braces, and a friend at church bought a boat. Within a year, the number we had prayed for was the number we were living on, and we had a new one in mind.

We don't outgrow this. A twelve-year-old's phone works fine until a friend shows up with a newer one. Adults do the same thing with houses, cars, and retirement accounts. Whatever we have, the next thing always looks like enough.

The previous lesson asked whether God leaves us when the times turn hard, and the answer stood at the cross. This lesson takes up a different question, one that comes up in easy years as often as hard ones. How do we come to rest in what God has given? Paul's answer starts with the word *learned*.

A Thank-You Note from Custody

Philippians 4:10–20 is a thank-you note. Paul was under guard when he wrote it, and he tells the church his chains had *become known throughout the whole imperial guard,* Philippians 1:13. The church at Philippi had sent him a gift by the hand of Epaphroditus, and Paul closes the letter by thanking them for it. *I rejoiced in the Lord greatly because once again you renewed your care for me,* Philippians 4:10. Then he adds a gracious line: *You were, in fact, concerned about me but lacked the opportunity to show it.* He gives their long silence the kindest reading he can.

Then he heads off a misunderstanding. *I don't say this out of need, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I find myself,* Philippians 4:11. The word *content* was a favorite of the philosophers of Paul's day. To them it described a man who needed nothing and no one, complete in himself.[57] Paul

uses their word in a very different sense, and two verses later he tells us where his contentment comes from.

Look at the verb again. Nothing about the road to Damascus made Paul content on the spot. He learned it the way we learn most things, by repetition and by failure, over years and in a great many places. That should encourage anyone who reads this verse and feels far behind. If Paul had to learn contentment, we should expect to learn it the same way.

Plenty Is a Test Too

I know how to make do with little, and I know how to make do with a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content—whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need, Philippians 4:12.

Last week's reading asked us to count the circumstances Paul names in this verse. There are six, set in three pairs: little and a lot, well fed and hungry, abundance and need. Half of them are good times. We tend to read the verse as a lesson for lean years only, yet Paul says he had to learn how to have a lot.

Plenty carries its own danger. Moses warned Israel about it before they ever crossed the Jordan: *When you eat and are full, you will bless the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you don't forget the LORD your God,* Deuteronomy 8:10–11. A wise man named Agur asked God to spare him from both ends of the scale. *Give me neither poverty nor wealth; feed me with the food I need. Otherwise, I might have too much and deny you, saying, "Who is the LORD?"* Proverbs 30:8–9. Hard years tempt us to doubt God. Easy years tempt us to forget that we need him, and that temptation is harder to catch because it feels so pleasant.

Learned the secret is a striking phrase. Paul borrows the ritual word the mystery religions used for initiating someone into their hidden teaching.[58] He has been let in on something. The cults kept their secrets for the initiated, and Paul tells his to the whole church in the very next sentence.

All Things

I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me, Philippians 4:13.

This may be the best-known verse in Philippians, and it is one of the most misused. It gets painted on locker-room walls and printed on T-shirts for 5K races. Read that way, it sounds like a promise that Christ will help us win the game, close the sale, or land the job. Paul has already told us what *all things* means. It means the six circumstances of verse 12, hungry and full, lean and flush. Christ gives him strength to stay faithful in every one of them, including the ones he never would have chosen.

Strengthens is in the present tense, so Christ keeps on strengthening him. Paul used the same verb near the end of his life, about a hearing in Rome where every friend he had walked away: *At my first defense, no one stood by me, but everyone deserted me,* 2 Timothy 4:16. Then: *But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me,* 2 Timothy 4:17.[59] So the secret is Christ himself. The philosophers prized a man who needed no one; Paul's contentment depends on Christ at every step.

Contentment did not make Paul cool toward the gift, either. *Still, you did well by partnering with me in my hardship,* Philippians 4:14. A content person can still be glad of help and still say thank you for it. The Philippians were not wealthy; Paul says the Macedonian churches gave out of *their extreme poverty,* 2 Corinthians 8:2. So he turns the promise back toward them. *And my God will supply all your needs*

according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus, Philippians 4:19. The same God who had been strengthening Paul in his chains would take care of the people who had given so much to help him.

Thanks in Everything

Paul gave a younger church the same lesson in three short commands. *Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in everything; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus,* 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18.

The Thessalonians had reason to find that hard. Their church was born under pressure. Paul reminds them that they *welcomed the message with joy from the Holy Spirit* in spite of *severe persecution,* 1 Thessalonians 1:6. A mob had gone looking for Paul in their city, and the brothers had to slip him out of town at night, Acts 17:5–10. To people like that he wrote *give thanks in everything*.

Pay attention to the little word *in*. The thanks is given from inside whatever is happening, and it goes looking for what is still true of God there. A widow can thank God at her husband's graveside for forty years of marriage and for the hope of the resurrection. Nobody expects her to be thankful for the grave.

New Christians often ask how to find God's will for their lives. Here Paul answers part of that question without any mystery at all. Giving thanks is God's will for you, set in the same sentence with rejoicing and prayer, and every one of those can be done today.

Gratitude is where contentment begins. When Paul traces how the human race drifted from God, one of the first steps down is a failure to say thank you. *For though they knew God, they did not glorify him as God or show gratitude,* Romans 1:21. Ingratitude sounds like a small sin, yet Paul treats it as the start of something much worse. It works the other way too. People who keep naming what God has given them have a hard time believing he has shorted them.

Learning It

So how do we learn what Paul learned? We can start where he did, with thanks that is specific. "Thank you for everything" is a fine prayer, and it's easy to say without noticing anything at all. Thanking God for the hot water this morning and the friend who called on Tuesday teaches us to notice what God has already given.

We thank people too. Philippians 4 is a thank-you note, and Paul wrote it while under guard. When the good years come, we can pray Agur's prayer and remember who gave the plenty. When the lean years come, we can talk back to the voice that says we'd be content if only one thing changed.

The writer of Hebrews puts contentment and last week's promise in the same verse. *Keep your life free from the love of money. Be satisfied with what you have, for he himself has said, I will never leave you or abandon you,* Hebrews 13:5. Lesson 9 closed on the second half of that verse. Read the first half now. We can be satisfied with what we have because we have him, and he has promised to stay. Where has your sense of *enough* been tied to something that could be taken away?

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus sat at a table with men who would scatter before morning, and one of them had already sold him. Paul tells us what he did with the bread. *On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, broke it,* 1 Corinthians 11:23–24. A few hours from the cross, he thanked his Father over bread that stood for his own body.

Every Lord's Day we sit at that table and do what he did. The verb Paul uses for *given thanks* is the same one in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, and in time the church named the Supper itself after it.[60] Before we eat,

someone stands and gives thanks for the bread and the cup, the way Jesus did on the night he was betrayed.

Key Concepts

Complete each statement. Answers in endnotes.[61]

1. Philippians 4:11 says, I have learned to be _____ in whatever circumstances I find myself.
2. Philippians 4:12 says, I have learned the _____ of being content.
3. Philippians 4:13 says, I am able to do all things through him who _____ me.
4. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says, give _____ in everything.
5. Hebrews 13:5 says, be _____ with what you have.

Discussion Questions

Opening

1. What is something you were sure would make you happy once you had it? How long did that last?

2. Who is the most grateful person you know? What do you notice about the way they talk?

Core

3. Read Philippians 4:10–20. Paul is in custody, writing a thank-you note. What does he thank the church for, and what does he say he doesn't need?

4. Philippians 4:12 names six circumstances, and half of them are good times. Why might plenty be harder to handle well than need?

5. Read Philippians 4:13 right after verse 12. How does verse 12 change the way you hear verse 13?

Deeper

6. Read 1 Thessalonians 1:6 and 5:16–18. What does it look like to give thanks *in* a circumstance you could never be thankful *for*?

7. Read Romans 1:21 and Hebrews 13:5. Why do you think Scripture ties ingratitude to drifting from God, and contentment to his promise never to leave?

Journaling Prompts

15–20 minutes. Nobody reads these but you.

1. Write down the *enough* you are waiting on right now: the number, the change, the thing you think would settle you. Be honest about it.

2. Write down what God gave you this past week, as specifically as you can. Keep going until you run out of lines.

3. Think of a season of plenty in your life. Write about what it did to your prayers.

Weekly Practice

THIS WEEK. Give thanks out loud.

Each evening this week, before you ask God for anything, thank him out loud for things from that day, specific enough that you could point to them. Then, before the next class, write a thank-you note to someone in the church who has cared for you, and put it in their hand or in the mail.

Looking Ahead

Lesson 11 – Wisdom for Everyday Decisions, Proverbs 2:1–11; James 1:5; Ephesians 5:15–17; Psalm 90:12

Lesson 10 asked how to be content with the life God has given. Lesson 11 asks how to live that life well, one ordinary decision at a time.

James has a promise for anyone who feels out of their depth. God *gives to all generously and ungrudgingly,* James 1:5, and nobody gets scolded for asking.

Read Proverbs 2:1–11 and Ephesians 5:15–17 before the next class. In Proverbs 2:1–4, count the times the father says *if*, and then look at verse 6 to see who actually gives the wisdom.

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[57] *Content* is *autarkēs*, self-sufficient, found only here in the New Testament. The Stoics used it for the wise man who needed nothing outside himself. Paul uses the related noun *autarkeia* in 1 Timothy 6:6, *godliness with contentment is great gain*.

[58] *Learned the secret* is *memyēmai*, the perfect passive of *myeō*, the technical term for initiation into the mystery cults. It appears only here in the New Testament.

[59] *Strengthens* is *endynamoō*, a present participle in Philippians 4:13. The same verb stands in 2 Timothy 4:17, *strengthened me*, and in Ephesians 6:10, *be strengthened by the Lord*.

[60] *Given thanks* is *eucharisteō* in 1 Corinthians 11:24 and in 1 Thessalonians 5:18; Romans 1:21 uses the same verb, *show gratitude*. By the early second century Christians called the Supper the *eucharistia*, the thanksgiving, Didache 9.

[61] ANSWERS: 1. content · 2. secret · 3. strengthens · 4. thanks · 5. satisfied