Learning to Be Content

Phil. 4:11-13

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*11 Not that I was ever in need, for I have learned how to be content with whatever I have.*

*12 I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little.*

*13 For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.*

Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., observes that our society is marked by "inextinguishable discontent." Our quest is better and what is next.

* We want a better job with better pay and a better boss.
* We want better relationships and a better car and a better golf swing in golf.

We tend to live endlessly for the next thing - the next weekend, the next vacation, the next purchase, and the next experience. We are never satisfied, never content, and envious of those who have what we have not attained or accumulated.

**I. What is contentment?**

Paul, the apostle, wrote, "I don't say this out of need, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am" (Phil. 4:11). How could he make such a bold statement? Because he knew that contentment lies not in what he has, but in whose he is.

When we come into a relationship with God through his Son, Jesus Christ, we need to understand **whose I am and what I have**. A lack of contentment causes me to look horizontally - at what others have so I am never satisfied. Contentment invites me to look vertically - at God. When I look in his direction, regardless of my possessions or lack of or status or lack of, I know that He is enough.

A man once went to a minister for counseling. He was in the midst of a financial collapse. "I've lost everything," he bemoaned. "Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that you've lost your faith.' "No," the man corrected him, "I haven't lost my faith." "Well, then I'm sad to hear that you've lost your character." "I didn't say that" he corrected. "I still have my character." "I'm sorry to hear that you've lost your salvation." "That's not what I said," the man objected. "I haven't lost my salvation." So, hold on...the minister said. "You have your faith, your character, your salvation. Seems to me, that you've lost none of the things that really matter."

We haven't either. Maybe you and I could pray like the Puritan. He sat down to a meal of bread and water. He bowed his head and declared, "All this and Jesus too?"

John Stott wrote, "Contentment is the secret of inward peace. It remembers the stark truth that we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. Life, in fact, is a pilgrimage from one moment of nakedness to another. So, we should travel light and live simply. Our enemy is not possessions, but excess. Our battle cry is not 'Nothing!' but 'Enough!' We've got enough. Simplicity says, if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that."

For the Christian, contentment knows that if we have Jesus we have enough.

**II. How can I be content?**

Contentment comes when we can honestly say with the apostle Paul, "I know both how to have a little, and I know how to have 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" (Phil. 4:12-13). Contentment is learned.

* Doug McKnight could say those words. At the age of thirty-two he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Over the next sixteen years it would cost him his career, his mobility, and eventually his life. Because of MS, he couldn't feed himself or walk; he battled depression and fear. But through it all, Doug never lost his sense of gratitude. Evidence of this was seen in his prayer list. Friends in his congregation asked him to compile a list of requests so they could intercede for him. His response included eighteen blessings for which to be grateful and six concerns for which to be prayerful. His blessings outweighed his needs by three times. Doug McKnight had learned to be content.
* So had a leper on the island of Tobago. A short-term missionary met her on a mission trip. On the final day, he was leading worship in a leper colony. He asked if anyone had a favorite song. When he did, a woman turned around, and he saw the most disfigured face he'd ever seen. She had no ears and no nose. Her lips were gone. But she raised a fingerless hand and asked, "Could we sing 'Count Your Many Blessings'?" The missionary started the song but couldn't finish. Someone later commented, "I suppose you'll never be able to sing the song again." He answered, "No, I'll sing it again. Just never the same way." Such contentment is learned. It isn't natural. We're not born with it. It is not a gift.

Our tendency is to look for things that will make us content - those things that are better or those events that are next, rather than putting forth the effort it takes to learn how to be content. The first time you go ice skiing, you can’t ski down the mountain like the people on the slope you see as you showed up. Skiing isn't like that, and neither is becoming content. It takes a willingness and effort to learn anything. We can't just wish things into existence. Contentment is no different. It too must be learned.

May I ask you a question? What is the one thing separating you from joy? How do you fill in the blank: "I will be happy when \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_?"

* When I am healed.
* When I am promoted.
* When I am married.
* When I am rich.

How would you finish the statement?

Now, with your answer firmly in mind, answer this. If your ship never comes in, if your dream never comes true, if the situation never changes, could you be happy? If not, then you are living in claws of discontentment.

**III. Where does contentment reside?**

**A. Contentment is of the heart**

* Contentment isn't denying one's feelings about wanting and desiring what they can't have, but instead it exhibits a freedom from being controlled by those feelings.
* Contentment isn't pretending things are right when they are not, but instead it displays the peace that comes from knowing that God is bigger than any problems and that he works them all out for our good.
* Contentment isn't a feeling of well-being contingent on keeping circumstances under control, but instead it promotes a joy in spite of circumstances, looking to God who never varies.
* Contentment is not based on external circumstances, but rather on an internal source.
* Contentment is of the heart.

The majority of people in our society is like thermometers and suffers from a counterfeit high that quickly evaporates. They hope the next superficial satisfaction will last, but external happiness is like cotton candy. It's sweet for a moment and dissolves an instant later. A person who is happy because she is vacationing on Maui is a person who has only a few days to be happy. But a person who has learned to cultivate deep-down contentment will be a consistently joyful person wherever they are.

Most people thirst for what the apostle Paul had: enduring contentment, a deep-down, soul-satisfying contentment. That kind of contentment can only come from within. Contentment is always an inside job. It has everything to do with what is going on inside you, not what is going on outside. It has only one source. That source is found in a soul satisfying relationship with our Heavenly Father that cares for us and promises to meet us where we are.

**B. Contentment is of the will**

Contentment is a matter of accepting from God's hand what he sends because we know that he is a good God and wants to give good gifts to his children. We accept, therefore, from God's hand that which he gives. All that is needful he will supply. Even pain and suffering that seemingly cannot be corrected, he can redeem.

If we fail to surrender, we will forever be discontent.

* Our freedom will be suffocated. We will be in bondage to our desires.
* Our relationships will be poisoned with jealousy and competition.
* Potential blessings will be sacrificed.

Discontentment has the potential to destroy our peace, rob us of joy, make us miserable, and tarnish our witness. We dishonor God if we proclaim a Savior who satisfies and then live discontent.

IV. What is the secret of contentment?

Those things we expect to bring contentment surprisingly do not. We cannot depend upon contentment to fall into our laps from education, money, or status because contentment arises from a divine source that money and material possessions cannot purchase.

**The secret of contentment is hidden from the casual observer. What is that secret?**

**A. Remember the cross**

*"For me, living is Christ and dying is gain" (Phil. 1:21).*

The cornerstone of contentment is the cross. Remember what Jesus has done for us on the cross. Because of the cross we are freed from the chains of sin. Because of the cross, our salvation is secure. Because of the cross, our friendship with God is possible. Because of the cross, our future in heaven is guaranteed. Isn't that enough? What else really matters? The really big things are taken care of!

**B. Let go of the past**

*"Brothers, I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead" (Phil. 3:13).*

We cannot hope to ever gain contentment while holding on to past failures and mistakes - others or ours. There's a difference between ignoring past wrongs and forgetting them. Forgetting means that we work through the process of forgiving others and allowing God's forgiveness to cover us. We need to let go of such statements that begin with "I should have," "If only," and "If they hadn't." True forgiveness requires that we see the wrongs clearly, articulate them, release them to God, and then walk away from them. This process may take some time and some assistance, but without it we will never have a contented heart.

**C. Live one day at a time**

*"And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19).*

Here we wait on God. We need to surrender our timetable and future to him. Discontentment is due to a wrong focus. If we focus on things and others, we will be discontent. But, if we focus on God, living each day in the light of his glory, the things of this earth will pale in comparison.

**D. Find sufficiency in Jesus Christ**

*"I am able to do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13).*

The term content suggests "self-sufficiency." But in the context of this text, it means being at peace with Christ's sufficiency. When his powerful presence is consuming us, we can do all things. Christ has not given us unlimited strength. But we can experience contentment because we are a continual recipient of supernatural strength. Our human determination may help us to endure adversity and pain. Our emotional toughness will help us get through job loss and financial hardships. But only Christ can generate a contented spirit within us amidst all that is happening around us.

**Conclusion**

In the early 90s after graduating from college, a young man named Tim took a job at Johnson Controls. He scurried up the ladder of success about as quickly as anyone can. On a rawboned, wind-whipped November afternoon, He called his good friend and former professor. Professor Brown said, "Hey, Tim, how you are doing?" A weak, trembling voice said, "I'm not doing so good." Professor Brown said, "What's up with you?" Tim said, "I'm in the hospital. I got the flu or something. My folks are out of the country."

Professor Brown said, "I'm going to be in Grand Rapids later today. Maybe I can stop by and see you. Would that be okay?" Tim said, "I'd like that a lot." By the time Professor Brown visited Tim, the doctors had already been there. It wasn't the flu. It was leukemia. And that began a three-year, battle that he would lose - or win, maybe.

Now come to Room 5255 in Spectrum Hospital three years later. Professor Brown walked into Tim's room. His mother was sitting in the corner crying. You can't blame her. Tim is lying on his side. They had positioned the pillows between his skinny little legs. His hair wasn't curly anymore. There wasn't enough energy for him to look at the professor, so he got down on one knee so he could look him eyeball to eyeball. He said, "Hi, Tim."

Tim said, "Hi, Professor." There was a long, awkward pause. Professor Brown had been a pastor for twenty years and still didn't know what to say. Tim broke the silence, "I've learned something." The professor said, "Tell me, partner, what have you learned?"

Tim said, "I've learned that life is not like a VCR." The professor didn't get it any more than you are not getting it now. So, the professor said, "I don't get it. What do you mean?" Tim said, Life’ not like a VCR; you can't fast forward through the bad parts." There was a long pause. The professor is thinking to himself: Where does he get this stuff? Then Tim interrupts the silence again to say, "But I have learned that Jesus Christ is in every frame, and right now that's enough."

**Contentment is learning the lesson that Jesus is enough.**

If you know Jesus, you have a God who hears you, the power of love behind you, the Holy Spirit within you, and all of heaven ahead of you. If you have Jesus, you have grace for every sin, direction for every turn, a candle for every corner, and an anchor for every storm. You have everything you need in Jesus who is your strength for everything!