

“Contentment”

PHILIPPIANS 4:10-14

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This morning I would like for us to study a request from one of our members, and it goes back to a feeling that most of us have had at least from time to time, the feeling that we are missing something, the feeling that we need more of something, the constant craving that we need something that we do not have. The request was for a sermon on the idea of being content. Of course, there are many forces in this world that are continually standing in the way of contentment. In our nation in particular, it seems that we are practically born wanting more. As children grow up, many are told that they must get good grades so that they can get into a good college so that they can go out and get a good job so that they can make a lot of money so they can get a lot of stuff so that they can be happy. In our nation, in fact, one of our founding documents refers to our God-given right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” the pursuit of a prosperous life. It is a constant struggle, then, not just to understand the concept of contentment, but for us to live a life that is free from the love of stuff.

With this struggle in mind, I would like for us to look at several verses in the last chapter of the New Testament book of Philippians – Philippians 4:10-14 (p. 1839). For a little bit of background, I would remind you that in the last few chapters of the book of Acts, the apostle Paul is about to be murdered by the Jews, so he appeals to Caesar for a fair trial. Every Roman citizen had a right to appeal to Caesar, and so in the closing chapters of Acts, we have the record of Paul making his way to Rome. In the last few verses of Acts 28, we find that Paul is allowed to stay in Rome in his own rented apartment, basically under house arrest, and we know that he is most likely chained to a Roman soldier. This goes on for at least two years when the book of Acts comes to an end, and as he is stuck there in Rome, he is able to teach out of his rented quarters. Without a way to really make a living during that time, the apostle Paul depends on financial support from several of those churches that he had established over the past 20 years. The church in Philippi was one of those churches, and the book of Philippians is basically a thank you letter – a note written back to the church thanking them for their participation in the spread of the gospel to Rome.

I know we used Google Maps last week, but I thought it might help to do it again this week, to give us an idea of the effort that the church in Philippi went to in order to get a gift to Paul in Rome. The church in Philippi had sent a messenger by the name of Epaphroditus. As you can see on the wall back here, that is a trip of exactly 1,300 miles. To give us a little perspective, that would be like walking from here to Salt Lake City, Utah, or from here to Tampa, Florida. Those cities are also about 1,300 miles from Madison. And what I love about Google

Maps is the “Walking Directions.” You can tell it that you want to walk this trip, and they estimate that this 1,300-mile journey from Philippi to Rome will take 443 hours! If we assume 10 hours of walking every day, we are talking, then, about a journey that took a month and a half – 44 days of walking!

So, the book of Philippians is a thank you note for the gift, and Paul sends this letter back with the messenger. He is extremely thankful, and that brings us to Paul’s words in Philippians 4:10-14,

¹⁰ But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity. ¹¹ Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. ¹² I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. ¹³ I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. ¹⁴ Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction.

As we look very carefully at this paragraph, I would like to address the request that was turned in for a lesson on contentment by bringing out several very basic lessons on this very important subject.

I. **And as we begin, I would point out first of all, that CONTENTMENT IS A LEARNED BEHAVIOR.**

Notice what Paul says in verse 11, ***“I have learned to be content.”*** In other words, contentment does not come naturally, but it is something that we have to learn. I am amazed that we sang the song that we sang right before the lesson today, “Whatever my lot, you have taught me to say, ‘It is well with my soul.’” Contentment, then, is something we learn. It is something we are taught. The easy path is to go around always feeling as if we need something. Most of us have probably heard the old poem, “As a rule, man’s a fool. When it’s hot, he wants it cool. And when it’s cool, he wants it hot, always wanting what it’s not.” I think of the thermostat on the wall back there. We set it at 70 degrees in the winter, and people complain that they are too cold. We set it at 70 degrees in the summer, and people complain that they are too hot. We might say that that is almost like our default position, always wanting something or some situation that we do not have. Paul, then, had to learn to be content. And we notice in this paragraph of scripture how Paul puts the emphasis on the fact that he personally has learned something about contentment – in verse 11, ***“I have learned,”*** in verse 12, ***“I know,”*** and also in verse 12, ***“I have learned the secret.”*** That word ***“learned”*** in verse 11 has the same root word as our word “mathematics.” We sometimes think of math as the study of numbers, but literally, mathematics is the science of learning. Paul, then, had to learn to be content, just as we might learn something at school. He had to study it. He had to learn it by experience. And then, in verse 12, when Paul says that he had ***“learned the secret,”*** that goes back to one word that is only used here in the entire Bible. It is a word that was used in the ancient world to refer to some kind of secret initiation ritual. We think of maybe some kind of club that has an initiation ritual. That ritual is secret until the one joining the club experiences it. In a sense, that is what Paul is saying here. He learned contentment through experience.

So, if Paul learned it, then what is it? What does it mean to be content? Literally, the word refers to someone who is self-sufficient or self-satisfied. It is the idea of being self-contained – everything I need, I already have, I am self-sufficient. One ancient writer used the word to refer to a country that supplied itself and had no need of imports. Another ancient writer used the word to refer to a city under siege and cut off from all outside resources, and yet the city had enough provisions inside the city gates for the residents to survive. That city did not need anything coming in from the outside, they were not dependent on others, but they were self-sufficient, they had enough, they were ***“content.”***

Now as we apply this to ourselves, we have to remember that being content is something that we learn. We might say that contentment is an acquired taste. We might not like it at first, but we do it anyway, and over time, maybe the concept gets more familiar to us. To me, it might be a little bit like eating collard greens. A lot of times when we go to Cracker Barrel I will get the collard greens, because I figure anything that tastes that bad has to be good for you. There are some things that might not be pleasant, but we learn to appreciate those things because we know that there is a value to it. In a similar way, we learn to be content. It is not always fun to be content, but we know that being content is good for us.

And so the first idea in this paragraph is that contentment is something we learn. It takes some effort to look at ourselves as being self-sufficient. It takes some effort to think of ourselves as already having everything that we need. And it will be a struggle. If we turn on the TV or the radio or go online, we will have those constant reminders that we are not complete, that we can only be happy if we run out and get the hot new item. Paul, though, had to learn to be content – just as we also need to learn. It is a matter of constantly making sure we are focused on what is truly important. It is a matter of learning.

II. **There is a second big idea in this paragraph, and that is: OUR HAPPINESS DOES NOT DEPEND ON OUR STUFF OR ON OUR CIRCUMSTANCES.**

Contentment is not found in things. I think we understand the picture on the wall back here – the grass is always greener on the other side. But no! In fact, contentment has nothing to do with what we do have or don't have. But instead, contentment is a state of mind. Contentment is a decision that takes place in the heart. And what I love about this passage is that this is not some rich and privileged man telling the poor and hopeless Philippians that they just need to keep quiet and be happy with what they have. But instead, this teaching about contentment is coming from a man who knew what it was like to live in humility. The apostle Paul knew what it was like to be hungry. He knew what it meant to suffer need. Remember: At this point, Paul had been either in prison or under house arrest for roughly four years – two years in Caesarea and two years in Rome. He had already suffered multiple beatings, he had been beaten so bad on one occasion that he had been left for dead, he had suffered at least one shipwreck on the Mediterranean Sea. At this point in his life, financially and physically speaking, Paul had hit rock bottom. And yet through all of this, Paul had learned the secret of being content.

On the other hand, we find in verse 12 that Paul also knew how to live in prosperity. He knew the secret of being filled. The apostle Paul knew the secret of being content while having abundance. How interesting! The apostle Paul knew how to survive while having more than what he needed! We might think: That's ridiculous! Of course you can survive spiritually while having too much stuff in your life! However, maybe we start to remember some of what the Lord said about the danger of riches. In the parable of the sower and the soils, we remember how the Lord referred to the seed sown among the thorns, ***"...these are the ones who have heard the word, but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful"*** (Mark 4:18-19). Riches, therefore, are ***"deceitful"*** and riches have the power to come in and choke the word of God. We remember what the Lord said after his conversation with the rich young ruler who turned and walked away. As the man walked away, the Lord said to his disciples, ***"Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."***

Beyond the warnings from Jesus himself, we think of Paul's warning to the young preacher Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:8-10,

⁸ If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. ⁹ But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

That is a pretty graphic picture. The desire to get rich can plunge us into destruction. The love of money is pictured as piercing ourselves with many griefs. I picture someone taking a sharp object and just stabbing himself over and over again. That is how Paul pictures the danger of falling in love with money. That is the danger of constantly wanting more. A number of years ago, one of the news magazines did a story about the American dream, and as part of the story, they took a poll. The story reported that for Americans with household incomes under \$25,000, the poll showed these people thought it would take \$54,000 to fulfill the American dream in their lives. The same survey also found that for those who make \$100,000, they would like to make about \$192,000 for their version of the American dream. In other words, the American dream is to have pretty much twice what we are making right now! That is the trap that we are talking about here.

And so with these warnings in mind, I think maybe we understand why Paul said that he had learned the secret of living with abundance. Living with more than we need really is a challenge. Some of you have probably heard the story about a devout Quaker leaning on his fence watching his new neighbor move in next door. The guys from the moving company were carrying in all of the latest appliances, all kinds of electronic gadgets, and all kinds of beautiful furniture. As the moving van closed up and pulled away from the house, the man called out to his new neighbor and said, "If you find that you are lacking anything, neighbor, let me know, and I will show you how to live without it." That seems to be what Paul was saying here. We might think that we need to have all of this stuff to be happy, but that is not really the case. In fact, the constant pursuit of stuff can actually be dangerous. So, just to be clear: The Bible never says that it is a sin to be rich; however, there is some danger involved, and we do need to be aware of it. The point of this passage is that our happiness does not depend on our stuff or our circumstances.

III. **There is something else we notice in this paragraph, and that is: ESPECIALLY WHEN IT COMES TO BEING CONTENT, WE FIND OUR STRENGTH IN JESUS.**

In this context, with the idea of being content in all circumstances, notice what Paul says in verse 13, "***I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.***" Sometimes we hear this verse taken out of context, kind of like the time when Jesus said, "***Do not judge.***" A lot of people take that verse and separate it from the rest of what the Lord said in that chapter. In the same way, Philippians 4:13 is a favorite of many, and some will use it to support the idea that God will help us do just about anything – the Lord will help me leap over this building in a single bound. However, in context (when we look at the verses around it), we find that this statement Paul makes is really about being content. Yes, it is hard to be content, but God gives us the power that we need. When it comes to contentment, "***I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.***" That word "***strength,***" by the way, goes back to the basis for our English word "dynamite." The word refers to power. God, therefore, enables our contentment. The power to be content comes from Jesus. In other words, being content is not something that Paul just mastered on his own one day. This was not a matter of Paul just suddenly flipping some kind of switch, but the mastery of contentment was something that Paul did with God's help. His strength came from the Lord.

In the same way, when we look around us at the challenge of being content in a world like ours, it is definitely an ongoing challenge. However, if God wants us to be content, then he will give us the power to be content – in times of plenty and also in times of need, in times of comfort and also in times of pain. And you know, as

the Philippians were reading this letter for the very first time, I can see them shaking their heads in agreement: Paul can be content in all circumstances and the Lord gives him strength. Yes! They knew that was true because they had seen it with their own eyes. As this letter was being read for the first time, there was a man in that audience who several years earlier had beaten Paul with his own hands. He took Paul and put him in prison and put him in the stocks in the deepest and most secure part of that prison, but you might remember that at midnight, Paul and Silas were ***“praying and singing hymns of praise to God”*** (Acts 16:25). Remember: That happened in Philippi, and by the end of that night, the jailer had a change of heart, he washed their wounds, and the Bible tells us that he was then baptized immediately. Paul’s life in Philippi was a living example of what it meant to be content in every circumstance – even in prison, even in chains! Now certainly, Paul did not enjoy being in prison, but even in prison he was self-sufficient, he was content, and that attitude caused him and allowed him to praise God.

Conclusion:

As we close, I would invite all of us to think about our own level of contentment. Are we satisfied, or are we upset that we don’t have more? Are we self-sufficient, or are we distracted by all of the stuff that surrounds us? We do not always realize this, but Paul had a pretty comfortable life before he obeyed the gospel. He had a top-notch education, he was a leading scholar in one of the major religious parties of the day, and yet when Paul obeyed the gospel, he gave all of that up. In fact, we read about this change in the previous chapter, in Philippians 3:7-8. He lists everything he had going for him in life, and then he says, ***“But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ.”*** Once Paul found the Lord, nothing else really mattered. Yes, he needed food, he needed a place to live, but he was content. He was satisfied. Everything else fell into place. He quickly learned that Christ was sufficient. As a Christian, Paul could stop worrying about the non-essentials and he could start concentrating on those things that are eternal. And that is where this passage lands with us this morning. This passage is a gentle reminder that contentment is something we learn, it is a reminder that happiness and more stuff are not necessarily connected, and this passage is a reminder that the Lord Jesus Christ means everything to us.

If you are not yet a Christian, this morning we would invite you to follow Paul’s example. On one of his trips to persecute the early church, Paul met the Lord on the road, he was blinded by the light, the Lord told him to go on into town and to wait for a Christian named Ananias. After three days of prayer and fasting, Paul was not yet saved, because at the end of those three days of prayer, Ananias said (in Acts 22:16), ***“Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.”*** Here we are nearly 2,000 years later, and God’s plan is still the same. We make our appeal to God (we call on His name) through baptism – we turn away from sin and we are then buried with Christ in baptism so that our sins are forgiven. If you have any questions, let us know, give us a call, send us a message. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

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