

**“Once Again, Contentment”**  
**Philippians 4:10-14**

**January 8, 2017**

**SI:** Please open your Bibles to Philippians 4.

I promise we’re going to get back to 1 Samuel and the sober story of the reign and rejection of King Saul—

But we’re still at the very beginning of the new year, and for me this has always been a reflective time, perhaps more so because this is our first holiday as empty-nesters.

Will has the first semester of his freshman year under his belt.

Eliza will be graduating this May.

Adrienne is getting married in June—and her fiance, Eliot, is here today.

Allison and I are blessed in many ways, but over the holiday I wrestled with an old enemy of mine—that enemy is discontentment.

At times in my life I’ve been very content, I’ve pursued and gotten contentment. But sometimes it wanes and I get stabs of discontentment—which I hate.

So anyway, without going into the details, a conversation made me think about my stage of life and made me wish in a discontented way that I had done some things differently—but you know going down those paths is frustrating.

So that brought me back to Philippians 4:10-14.

This passage, along with Psalm 131, and 1 Timothy 6:6-8 are my go-to passages on contentment.

I come back to these over and over again.

**INTRO** A preacher said:

“True contentment is a scarce commodity in the world. Our world is fueled by discontent. It runs the engines of government, economy, and society. Everyone wants more than he has or wants something else than she has. They want to be happier, wealthier, prettier, whatever. Enormous amounts of time, energy, and money are devoted to seeking this elusive contentment and for its sake sacrifices are made, families are divided, the law is broken, great risks are undertaken, and pleasures hotly pursued.”

And what’s true in the world is too often true in the kingdom of God. There is certainly more contentment found in Christians than the people of world—but there is not nearly as much as there should be.

In 1648 the English Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs wrote a book titled: *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. So even in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, at the high tide of Puritanism, Christian contentment was a rare jewel.

And even in the early church, Paul felt the need to preach contentment. Remember when Paul wrote this letter, he was in prison in Rome, awaiting trial. He had been a free man all his life, now he was in chains facing great uncertainty. The Philippian church found out about his circumstances and sent him a financial gift that was delivered by a church member, Epaphroditus. Paul wrote this letter to thank them for the gift, and he finally gets around to that here at the end.

But Paul was faced with a pastoral dilemma.

He wanted to thank them for their gift, he wanted them to know how moved he was by their kindness and generosity. At same time, wanted them to know that he was completely content.

In thanking them, didn’t want to detract at all from the reality of his experience of complete contentment in Jesus Christ.

So it’s a strange sort of thank you. It almost sounds rude in our ears.

Thank you for your gift. My heart is warmed by your concern for me.

But I hope you understand that I didn’t need your gift to be content.

Whatever my circumstances, whether in plenty or in want, I’m content in Christ.

Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles.

Paul wasn’t being rude, he was simply expressing this tremendous reality of his Christian experience.

And he was holding it before the Philippians as something they could have too.

He wanted them to experience the same thing.

He wanted them to have this amazing contentment in all circumstances.

Wouldn't that be amazing?

To be able to look at your position, your accomplishments, your work,

your spouse, your family, your checkbook balance,

the clothes in your closet, the car in your garage,

your health, your stage of life—and be able to say from the heart:

I've learned to be content. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

Yes, that would be amazing. That would be wonderful.

So how do you get there? Two points for note-takers.

1. Contentment defined
2. Contentment acquired

Let's look at each and apply them to our lives.

## MP#1 Contentment Defined

Word translated “content”—I have learned to be content—Greek word *autarkeis*.  
Has the sense of being self-sufficient,

independent of your circumstances, conditions, and surroundings.

This dictionary definition just enough to see that Paul is making a remarkable claim

I have arrived at a condition in which I can honestly say

that I am independent of my circumstances, I am free, I am at liberty.

My life, my happiness, my joy, my experience is independent

of the things happening around me and even too me.

Paul lists these contrasts—content in plenty and in want, when well fed or hungry.

There are challenges to contentment when you are poor, challenges when rich

Paul says, I have known both and I have learned contentment

Then he covers all the bases when he says, “whatever the circumstances

Before we define contentment more carefully, address two false understandings

1. Contentment is not hardening yourself to life.

I know you’ve heard of the Stoics, the Greek philosophical school, Stoicism—

This word *autarkeis*, self-sufficiency, was their most important concept.

According to them, to live a self-sufficient life,

you had to systematically harden yourself against anything that might hurt you.

Desires can hurt you. That’s where discontentment comes from.

So instead of trying to fill those desires by adding possessions.

Eliminate your desires. Crush those wants that spring up in yourself.

Emotions can hurt you. So systematically suppress and deny them.

Epictetus said that if cup or vase breaks, say, “I don’t care”

You have some glassware that belonged to your grandmother, it has great sentimental value to you. It breaks. Don’t cry—That was grandma’s!

Say, I don’t care. And even if you do care, if you say that enough, eventually

you won’t care and you’ll be free from painful desires and emotions

no matter what your circumstances. You’ll be self-sufficient.

Someone said that the Stoics turned their hearts into stone and called it peace.

This has nothing to do with Christian contentment.

Paul was a man who felt deeply—he grieved, he sang, he feared, he was angry—

and he longed for things. Not the usual things people long for, did have desires.

He never hardened himself or denied himself for it’s own sake.

Only when necessary for the ministry of the Gospel.

Christian contentment is not just saying—I’m going to tough it out.

That's anti-Christian and it destroys your personality and feelings.  
Paul used the Stoics' favorite word, but he infused it with Christian meaning.

2. Contentment is not passively accepting life.

One of the accusations thrown against Christianity by Communism and other social revolutionary movement is that it keeps people from opposing disgraceful and unjust conditions. Religion is the opiate of the masses.

This is the hand God has dealt me, I'll just sit back and wait for heaven.

Well, I guess this is God's will and I just have to accept it.

That's a fatalistic view of God's sovereignty that the Bible doesn't support.

And that's not Christian contentment either.

We are called, in every sphere of life where God has placed us to plan and work and strive to make things better for other people and ourselves.

Paul was never passive in the face of the abuse of power.

Demanded his rights as a Roman citizen to the full extent of the law.

He argued passionately and well his case before Jewish and Roman courts.

Sometimes this false contentment keeps a person from bettering himself financially, building a business, moving up the ladder.

Well, this is where God has me, I can't do anything about it.

Once again, the Bible commands the opposite—within boundaries of God's law, and your particular calling, you are to do all you can to better yourself.

Shorter Catechism: What is required in the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment?

The 8<sup>th</sup> commandment requires the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others."

Christian contentment is not hardening yourself to life, not passively accepting life.

Christian feels things deeply, Christian works hard to make things better.

So what is contentment? What is this holy self-sufficiency that Paul had and that all Christians must cultivate?

Reach back 350 years to the definition of Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs:

Christian contentment is the inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.

An inward work of God's grace so that your whole frame of reference changes, you look at every circumstance of life and say, God's hand is in this for my good.

Even if you are in a position where you say—I've got to work to change this—

God's hand is in that situation too, which brings an inward quietness to the work.

Look at Paul's life, see demonstrated over and over again.

Acts 16 in jail in Philippi, beaten and in stocks, with Silas singing and praying.

Acts 27 on ship, in storm for 14 days, crew demoralized, eat, breaks bread, thanks  
2 Cor 12, Paul's thorn in the flesh, my grace is sufficient for you.  
Throughout ministry Paul threatened, ridiculed, backstabbed, abandoned,  
suffers slings and arrows of every kind but this contentment always evident

Our culture says the way to become content is by things you accomplish or acquire.  
Paul challenges this in a thought-provoking way. He says:

“I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation,  
whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.”

Paul is saying that contentment doesn't come automatically when you go from  
being hungry to being well-fed. Or when you go from plenty to want.

It doesn't just come with a change of your circumstances.

In fact, it would be an interesting debate to have: When is it harder to be content?

Is it harder when you are hungry and in want, or when well fed and in plenty?

It's hard to be content when you are suffering want—

It's hard not to feel bitter and worried when things are tight and you feel pinched.

On the other hand, it's hard to be content when you have plenty.

Because it's never quite enough. Not exciting enough. Not new enough.

You compare yourself with those who have more and you feel bored and trapped.

Brides and grooms promise to be faithful to one another  
in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health.

But do people have marriage problems only in times of want and sickness?

Is that the only time when people say, I'm not happy and I want out?

Not at all. There are a great many divorces in times of plenty and health!

Paul is really making a comment about the human heart.

It's not naturally inclined toward contentment.

There has to be a supernatural re-orientation—

an inward work of God's grace so that your whole frame of reference changes,

you look at every circumstance of life and say, God's hand is in this for my good.

Brings us to the second point—how do we get it?

## **MP#2 Contentment Acquired**

So how did Paul become content in all circumstances?

vs. 11 “I have learned . . .”

vs. 12 “I have learned the secret . . .” “been initiated”  
Paul learned it.

He was a proud, sensitive, active person—contentment didn’t come easy.  
But he learned it. Which means it didn’t happen overnight.

It was an art mastered, had to go back and relearn, and practice.  
How did he learn? How we learn it.

### **You learn contentment by a great argument.**

Paul learned contentment by arguing it with himself until he became convinced.

Paul is often doing this in his letters.

Romans 8:18 is a great example.

“For I consider that our present sufferings are not worthy to be compared to the glory that will be revealed in us.”

For I consider. KJV, For I reckon . . .

The word has a sense of weighing reasons, deliberating. Origin of word logic.  
Paul learned contentment by thinking it through.

No doubt he looked at life and made these arguments.

1. Circumstances in life are always changing, therefore I must not depend on them.
2. What matters most is my soul and my relationship to God.
3. God is concerned about me as my Father, nothing happens apart from Him,  
Even the hairs of my head are numbered. Can never forget that.
4. God moves in a mysterious way, but I know that whatever He wills is for my  
good, not for my harm.
5. So every situation in my life is an unfolding of some aspect of God’s love and  
goodness. I must look for, be prepared for His blessings, even in strange places.
6. I must look at all the circumstances of my life, not by themselves, but as part  
of the Holy Spirit’s work in perfecting me, making me like Christ.
7. Whatever my condition at this moment, only temporary, only passing,  
cannot rob me of the joy and glory that ultimately await me with Christ.
8. Christ is with me and promises always to be with me and give me strength  
to fulfill the callings he has placed on my life.

And so forth.

Whenever you talk to a Christian who is content and ask how—

some Gospel truth or some passage of Scripture will come out of mouth.

You have to do the very same thing.

Yes, these are the circumstances. Yes, these are my emotions.

Yes, I have a tendency to become frightened, resentful, or discontent.

But—I know that the Lord’s hand is in this for my good. So whatever happens,

I am unmoved. Know God Father watches me, Know Jesus Christ is with me

**You learn contentment by Christ's strength.**

Here we come to verse 13, that great and mind-boggling verse which is so precious.

“I can do all things through him who gives me strength.”

You may remember that way back Tim Tebow wore a reference Phil 4:13.

He said that lots of people looked up that verse and read it and asked him if he thought it was a promise he would win football games.

He said no: It's a promise that if Christ is in you, you can be content with anything.

Which is exactly what Paul meant. Christ infuses so much strength in me that I am strong for all things and circumstances.

Ultimately, the reason I am content in all circumstances,

The reason I am unshaken and always joyful,

The reason why I can write these things to you, even now in prison is

Because I am intimately, inseparably united to Jesus Christ and

Christ Himself is constantly infusing His strength into me.

Is that true of you? Are you “in Christ”? Is knowing him your highest aspiration?

Do you say with Paul: “I want to know Christ, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings”?

Or, like so many in the church, do you just give Him lip service because hope Jesus is going to help you win football games, and fulfill your agenda for happiness and contentment.

Do you come to Him with list of things that must have to make life worthwhile?

Happy marriage, happy children, no financial worries, good health, fulfilling work, never bored—Jesus help me, Jesus bless me.

I've got to have these things to be content.

If that is your idea of a relationship with Jesus—

He's your butler not your Savior,

And you're going to miss the greatness and glory of what He has for you.

He wants to infuse you with His strength, enable you to face all circumstances, times of plenty and want—and agree in your heart with the ways of God.

That brings us to the final way you learn contentment.

**You learn contentment by experience.**

You walk with God through times of plenty and want.

And over the course of your Christian pilgrimage you learn it.

I mentioned 2 Corinthians 12 earlier, where Paul talks about something



he called his thorn in the flesh.

We don't know what it was—bad eyesight, epilepsy, some painful disease.

Whatever it was, Paul very impatient that God remove it so he could continue  
Three times pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.

In one of Tim Keller's sermons

he gave an illustration of prayer that has always stuck with me.

You're in a canoe going down a rushing river.

Suddenly you see in front of you a huge boulder.

You're going to smash into it and lose your life. So pray. God, help me.

There are two ways God could supernaturally answer.

He could move the rock or he could raise water level, so you go over rock.

Keller said: Those are the two ways God always answers prayer.

He either moves the rock, changes your circumstances.

Gives you or takes away from you what asked. Changes things.

Or he doesn't move the rock, but he raises the level of grace in your life.

So that you gain contentment and joy and peace over circumstances.

When we pray and God moves the rock—that's great. And he does. Often.

Maybe he answers prayers that way more at certain stages of our lives,  
when we are younger and immature.

But to really learn contentment, you have to experience his other answer.

You have to experience the water level rise carrying you over the rock—  
the rock that is still very much there.

That's also an answer, but it's harder to accept and harder to be happy with.

And I wonder if God waits and gives that answer more when ready to handle it.

But my point is

Same with you. You have to learn contentment by the sheer experience of  
living in the presence of God, walking the Christian life.

There are no shortcuts and no substitute for experience.

God the Father teaches you. Some of you are slow learners, lots of lessons.

But God in His kindness does what is necessary to teach you contentment.