

Sermon 26: Philippians 4:10-13: Learning Contentment

OUTLINE

Rejoicing in the Lord
Contentment in all circumstances

INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that we live in a first world situation, we have a schizophrenic like shift between anxiety and discontentment. What is the relationship between anxiety and discontentment? One commentator answers the question this way, 'Anxiety frets over the question "Will I have enough to survive, to meet my family's basic needs?" To such fear Anxiety typically answers, "Maybe not," or even "Probably not."¹ 'Discontent asks, "Do I have enough to make me happy, to satisfy my desires?" To that question Discontent *always* answers, "No, not enough, not yet." Therefore, Discontent, like Anxiety, keeps a tight grip on its treasures, and Discontent resents the fact that it doesn't have even more.'² Will I have enough to survive or will I have enough to make me happy? These are the questions that our lives are so often taken up with. If we are not under the burden of care for survival; we are enslaved to the desire to be more satisfied. Anxiety usually arises in the bad times, and discontentment during the good times. No matter whether things are going badly for us or well, we are not content.

Contentment though can be and should be the portion of the believer. Heb. 13:5, 'Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." 1 Tim. 6:6;8, 'But godliness with contentment is great gain, ⁸ But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.' Contentment was one of the great goals of Stoicism. But in our portion we see that Paul has learned the lesson of contentment through Jesus Christ. 4:10-13, '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.'

Paul has finished the list of what to do in order to stand firm. And we are now entering the closing parts of the letter. Paul is thanking the Philippians for their ongoing support of him while in prison, and in the midst of his thanks discusses this matter of contentment. We will divide our portion up into two parts, in v10 we will look at Paul's rejoicing in the Lord for their gift; and secondly in v11-13 we will look more deeply into how Paul is able to be content in all circumstances.

Rejoicing in the Lord

¹ Dennis E. Johnson, [Philippians](#), ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, 1st ed., Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 279.

² Dennis E. Johnson, [Philippians](#), ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, 1st ed., Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 279–280.

V10, '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.' We entered the personal closing remarks of the letter and here we are reminded of the wonderful relationship between this church planter and church. Paul has received support from the Philippian church once again. Paul you will remember is in prison. Prison was not like we have it today where our tax dollars keep people in a very comfortable position. No, Paul had to finance his own appeal to Caesar and pay his own way. The Philippians were faithful partners in financially supporting Paul and the work of the ministry.

This church has the highest commendations when it comes to financial sacrifice. There was a famine which affected all Judea, and Paul in a bid to unite Jewish and Gentile believers encouraged the gentile churches to help their Jewish brethren. He got contributions from all the gentile churches and even took representatives with him when he visited Jerusalem. As Paul is writing to the Corinthians to encourage them to give, he writes about the Philippians who are in Macedonia, 8:1-4, 'We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, ² for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³ For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints.' Here are some generous saints, Paul describes them giving despite being in a 'severe test of affliction' and 'extreme poverty', so that in abundant joy and in a wealth of generosity they shouldered the burden to give to those in need. This event would have happened around 6 years before the writing of the letter to the Philippians.

Apart from this we know that the Philippians have also supported Paul personally, v15-16 spell out specific instances. It is also indicated in the word 'revived'. This is a descriptive word which means something like 'blossomed again.' Think of their giving as a sign of being alive, it was not a one off spurt but continuous. I have been rebuked recently for not preaching enough on encouraging people to give. I spoke about how I don't like to do so because my salary is paid by the church. Yet I was strongly encouraged to make the point that as believers we ought to be generous in our giving to support the Lord's work. So let me do that now. The Macedonians were faithful in giving and sacrificial in giving. They had a deep personal concern for their fellow saints who were suffering in poverty; they felt for Paul in his needs in prison; and they had a deep desire to see the word of God go forth. If Paul had to write about our giving would he write using us as an example of giving like the Philippians; or would he need to use their example to remind us.

Let me add in making this application that you should pray for us as elders. When we meet we regularly discuss the need to direct our funds to those mission works that agree with God's priorities. At the moment I can tell you that we are looking at a possible partnership with Shore to support some missionaries in Papua New Guinea; and we are looking at helping support a Reformed Baptist Church that is helping needy children in the Philippines.

Like Paul I am not wanting to shame us into giving, but to remind us that we have so much in Christ; we have the example of Christ, and a Christlike generosity is one of the characteristics of those who know the Lord. 2 Cor. 8:8-9, 'I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. ⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that

though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.'

Let's talk about Paul's joy, he talks about rejoicing in the Lord. Now many have commented on the apparently weird way that Paul says thank you. Imagine giving a gift at great cost and sacrifice and the person you are giving it to says, 'thanks I did not need it.' We will open this up next time, but it is clear that Paul's joy is more about the Philippians showing their faith than him getting his physical needs met. V17 is clear, 'Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.' Paul does not want to give the impression that he has been languishing in prison in self-pity wondering when the Philippians will think about him and support him again. No, he has been doing a lot of teaching about joy, calling us to rejoice always. He wants to make clear that he is joyful and content, and that his contentment is not determined by external circumstance. He is determined to acknowledge the kind gift, but he is also the determined teacher who wants to remind the giver that our contentment is not dependent on things always going well for us. For this reason Paul talks about rejoicing in the Lord, this is the last time that he uses this phrase in this letter. The others being 3:1 and 4:2.

Contentment in all circumstances

V11, 'Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.' As with the surprising statements like rejoice always; or be anxious for nothing, to be content in whatever situation is one of the show stoppers. It is one of those verses that highlights how much we complain; how discontent we are; how fickle our contentment is as we get angry; depressed; anxious; fragile; lustful; greedy, etc. It does not even have to be the big things that upset our equilibrium but it can be the little things.

Let us begin with this word 'content.' It is actually a term used by the stoics, but here Paul is appropriating and repurposing it. The word is *autarkeia* which literally means self-rule. 'The Stoics regarded contentment, *autarkeia*, as the essence of all virtues. For them contentment described the mind-set of the person who had become independent of all things and all people. The Stoic line was, "man should be sufficient unto himself for all things, and able, by the power of his will, to resist the force of circumstances." The Stoic Seneca put it this way: "the happy man is content with his present lot, no matter what it is, and is reconciled to his circumstances."³ The Stoic ideal was a kind of self-contained superman who could rise above it all in independent self-sufficiency and serenity.'³ If you follow self-help literature today you will know that stoicism is often heralded as way to live wisely, you can readily find quotes from Seneca and Marcus Aurelius as part of popular psychology. You may have encountered some of them, 'How ridiculous and how strange to be surprised at anything which happens in life.' 'We suffer more often in imagination than in reality.' They are all over the place. Is Paul just a repackaged version of the same pop psychology? Definitely not!

Contrary to popular perception Stoicism avoids discontentment much like Buddhism through detachment. All attachment to family, friends, and country are avoided. In order to be content as a Stoic you have to consider everything

³ R. Kent Hughes, [*Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 183.

disposable. Avoiding pain through avoiding attachment is very different to accepting God's gifts with gratitude, using them according to their purpose, finding our deepest satisfaction in God, and awaiting a greater inheritance in the new creation. Stoicism teaches you to remember that everyone is going to die so don't be dependent upon anyone, be a self-made man. This is contrary to the interdependent way God has made us putting us into families, the church and communities. No man is an island in this regard, we are made to need and serve one another.

Paul's words would have struck like lightning in his day because everyone would be aware of the teachings of Stoicism as the way to find contentment. And counter to Stoicism Paul is teaching us to be dependent upon God not independent; finding our sufficiency in God not ourselves; leaning on the resources he has in Christ not an emotion management technique. We need this teaching today. Our culture is pointing us to the empty cisterns of our own resources, and our strength, our own determination. We have all tried to keep our own promises to ourselves, to change ourselves, and learned the hard way that we are broken and need help. There is a necessary courage that is willing to do hard things, but there is also a self-deception which pretends strength it does not have, and will never have. When we need more than we can get from the resources of our fallen hearts or our fallen world. Paul has a strength that comes from weakness because when we are weak, God is strong.

Paul says that he had to learn this contentment, v11. It is not something that we have automatically. You have to go through a number of tests which will help you improve your contentment. Paul reminds us of some of the extreme situations he has faced, v12, '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.' He talks about needing to learn contentment not only through the tough times but the good times as well. Paul talks about being brought low; being hungry (when was the last time we were hungry when we weren't dieting?); and being in need. A single glance at Paul's life as a minister of the gospel can help us see what this means. 2 Cor. 6:4-10, 'but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; ⁷ by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸ through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹ as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.' Paul in being brought low suffered more than physical pain and deprivation, he was treated as an enemy of the state by Romans and Jews, he was hated, his name was mud. There are many who don't mind being poor as long as they are famous, this is not Paul. Yet we see he is able to overcome it and be content.

But the more interesting and perhaps more relevant part is that fact that Paul has learnt to be content when he abounds. John Calvin makes some pertinent remarks: 'He who knows how to use present abundance soberly and temperately with thanksgiving, prepared to part with everything whenever it may please the Lord, giving also a share to his brother according to his ability, and is also not puffed up, that man has learned to excel and to abound. This is an excellent and

rare virtue, and much greater than the endurance of poverty.’⁴ How do we react in our windfalls, are we generous to others or quick to spend it all on self? It has been pointed out that Paul is content with whatever situation he is in; he is content with whatever amount of possessions and wealth he may have; but he is not content with his level of sanctification. Too often this scenario is reversed in us, we are complacent and content with how holy we are but unhappy about our situation or how much we have.

Now we come to the million dollar question. How did Paul learn this secret of contentment? V13, ‘I can do all things through him who strengthens me.’ Now how many times have you seen this verse mounted somewhere? Too often this verse is taken out of context. Especially today with the prosperity teaching going on in the name of Christianity, this verse is misappropriated to mean that in every situation you can always have success. You can have your best life now; you can be a winner every time. Joel Osteen talks about how this verse teaches us that we have a can-do strength and so need to get rid of a cant-do mentality. This verse is not triumphalistic; this is not a promise that you claim just before you go out and do a difficult task, speaking God’s blessing into existence. We must reject the positive psychology and the new age materialization techniques that have infected undiscerning parts of the church. We have already seen that Paul’s life was not smooth, it was more pain than pleasure, more need than abundance, more low than high. We must reject any notion that says that the Christians life is plain sailing. That if we just have the right attitude and the right amount of faith, we can confess ourselves to success. Rubbish! That is not what this verse is teaching. Paul is assuming the lows but reminding us that we have all the resources we need in Christ to be strengthened to meet these difficulties.

How does Christ strengthen you? We must avoid any type of mindless cultivation technique where we absorb some sort of energy to build us up, this is an infiltration of new age into Christianity. Secondly, we must avoid positive thinking, or confession mentalities that try and create realities of success through the power of the will. Christ strengthens us by the Spirit that He has put within us. Christ strengthens us through the application of the truth, of the realities He has made possible through the gospel, by reminding us of what we have in Him, and who He is for us. Christ strengthens us through a process of testing where we develop through many difficult trials the ability to find our contentment in Him and not in how much we have or don’t have. What does this look like?

In many ways Paul has already demonstrated this when we spoke about rejoicing in the Lord; or being anxious for nothing. A Christian’s contentment in suffering is by faith not by sense/sight. These things are opposite to each other and we need to nurture seeing by faith not by sense. Some of the greatest teachers in this are the puritans and those who followed. They lived a difficult life and lived out a simple faith in the midst of their trials. Ebenezer Erskine a Scottish minister shows us the difference between faith and sense in 9 ways.

1. Sense looks to what a man has in hand to find present joy, but faith looks to what a man has in Christ to find joy.

⁴ R. Kent Hughes, [*Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 185.

2. Sense judges the love of God by providence, but faith reads the love of God in the face of Jesus Christ.
3. Sense fluctuates with circumstances, but faith is fixed on the immovable promises of God.
4. Sense only looks at things present but faith like a prophet looks at things to come.
5. Sense is a natural follower, but faith is a natural leader, sense should follow faith and not vice versa.
6. Sense is superficial and is easily deceived, but faith ponders a matter and goes deeply into it.
7. Sense is impatient and quick in its judgement, but faith is patient and waits to see God's end.
8. The life of sense is a life of danger, but the life of faith is sure and safe.
9. Sense has its confidence within, but faith has its confidence without.

In order for us to learn joy in our sufferings we need to live by faith not by sense/sight. We need to learn how God's ways are not our ways and learn the paradoxes of contentment. Jeremiah Burroughs one of the Non-Conformist/Congregational ministers that was present at the Westminster assembly has written an excellent book called, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*⁵. In it he covers every facet of contentment, but there is one section in particular I would like to summarise for you, he talks about the mysteries of contentment, in other words, the paradoxical nature of Christian joy and contentment, that we find our joys in different ways to the world and the ways of sin. He outlines 6 mysteries in how the Christian is able to find contentment and joy.

Mystery 1. The contented Christian is 'the most contented man in the world, and yet the most unsatisfied man in the world.'⁶ In other words the Christian can be joyful in the greatest sufferings with God, but would not be happy if he were given all the world without God. It is this most contented person who finds contentment in the least but with God as his portion who is also the most unsatisfied with all this world's goods. Since our hearts are restless until they find their fill in God, having tasted the fullness of God as our portion we will necessarily be discontent to the extent God satisfies us.

Mystery 2. 'The Christian comes to contentment, not so much by way of addition, as by subtraction.'⁷ Contrary to all advertisement campaigns true happiness is not found in the accumulation of new things. No the Christian finds joy and contentment not in adding to their possessions or pleasures but in subtracting from their desires. The secret is not in adding to our situation so that they fill the large heart of our desires, but rather in the shrinking of our heart's desires to fit our meagre circumstances.

Mystery 3. 'The Christian comes to contentment, not so much by getting rid of the burden that is on him, as by adding another burden to himself.'⁸ Burroughs writes, 'The way of contentment is to add another burden, that is, to labour to load and burden your heart with your sin; the heavier the burden of your sin is to

⁵ Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, (Chiltern Street, London, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1964), p42-54.

⁶ Ibid., p42.

⁷ Ibid., p45.

⁸ Ibid., p47.

your heart, the lighter will the burden of your affliction be to your heart, and so you shall come to contentment.'⁹

Mystery 4. It is not the removing of the affliction but the metamorphosing of the affliction that brings contentment. The sinners hard heart chaffs under difficulty and can see no way to happiness unless the trial is removed. However, the Christian is able to accept the trial when it is changed into something that produces good in us. Ambrose put it like this, 'Even poverty itself is riches to holy men.'¹⁰

Mystery 5. 'A Christian comes to contentment not by making up the wants of his circumstances, but by the performance of the work of his circumstances.'¹¹ A Christian is to fill their minds with the question of what God wants, not the temptations of the green grass of their whims. The 'if only' thinking must be replaced with 'Thy will be done.'

Mystery 6. Contentment comes not from having our own will but the melting of our will into God's. This is not simply submitting to God's will, but the wanting of God's will. This attitude is revealed when you would choose the same life the Lord has led you knowing that the Shepherd has chosen it, even with all off its pain.

⁹ Ibid., p47.

¹⁰ Ibid., p49.

¹¹ Ibid., p51.