

## “LEARNING TO BE CONTENT”

Philippians 4:11-13

The apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians while in prison. Prisons of the First Century A.D. were not like modern correctional facilities. They were often dark, damp, rat-infested dungeons, where prisoners were routinely chained, beaten, and starved. No ACLU lawyers. No Bill of Rights.

Yet, in such a setting, the apostle Paul expressed contentment. He said: **“I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. 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. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength,”** Philippians 4:11-13.

These remarkable words teach four lessons about contentment; namely, that true contentment is a secret; that true contentment must be learned; that true contentment is independent of circumstances; and finally, that true contentment is found only in Jesus Christ.

**First, true contentment is a secret.** “I have learned the *secret* of being content,” wrote Paul. But in what sense is contentment a secret? True contentment is defined throughout the Bible; not simply in Philippians 4 but in passages like Psalm 37:4, **“Delight yourself in the LORD and He will give you the desires of your heart.”** Or Hebrews 13:5, **“Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’”**

Each year more than 100 million Bibles are sold, Bibles now available in 683 languages. And the secret to true contentment is contained in every one of them. So, why do so many people fail to understand contentment or pursue things that will never bring contentment?

The Greek word that Paul used for “secret” in Philippians 4:12, *MUEO*, is the source of our English word *MYSTERY*. In other words, even though publicly proclaimed, true contentment through Jesus Christ remains a mystery to people unless their hearts and minds are illuminated by the Spirit of God. They can know this secret, hear it, read it in large print, but they just don’t get it. Instead, they think that contentment can be found on a shelf at Walmart or

purchased in a lottery vending machine.

In fact, what is more commonly associated with contentment than wealth and material possessions? “If only I could win the Publishers Clearinghouse Sweepstakes. If only I was famous. If only I had better friends or a Harvard education or a six-figure income. Then I’d be content.” That’s the theory. And the theory is a myth. Yet, most product advertisements today perpetuate this myth by equating contentment with owning the latest, greatest, biggest, and most improved.

And this nonstop drumbeat of “more stuff equals more happiness” has made us forget what our basic needs are. Who thinks about water until the pipes freeze? Who thinks about the blessing of having a job, any job, until the job is gone and the bills are due? Who thinks about health until sickness sets in? I read a short story once about the September 11 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers specifically, how a woman refused to kiss her husband goodbye that morning because her lipstick was still moist. That was the last time she saw him.

Only by God’s grace can we say with Paul, **“I have learned the secret of being content.”** And yet, even as Christians we can still feel the tug of the material. “If only I had...then I’d be content.” How would each of us fill in the blank?

**Second, true contentment must be learned.** Paul noted this fact twice in Philippians 4, saying in verse 11, **“I have *learned* to be content;”** and again in verse 12, **“I have learned the *secret* of being content.”** Contentment is not inherited or innate in human beings; it must be learned. Contentment is not stumbled across or purchased; it must be learned. Contentment is not instant, like a scratch-off lottery ticket; it must be learned. And learning is a process.

And we learn contentment each time we learn from the Bible. The more we learn, the more content we will be. Just as Paul wrote of Scripture in Romans 15:4, **“Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”**

Hope is what God wants us to have. Hope. Joy. Peace. Confidence. Contentment. Not a “my life is rotten” attitude but an “I can do everything through Christ” attitude. Or do we instead think that God wants us to be miserable; that God wants us to suffer; that God wants to deceive us, betray us, and use us for target practice; that God wants us to be cowardly? Nothing

could be farther from the truth. Paul told Timothy: **“For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline,”** 2 Timothy 1:7.

In Scripture we learn that God wants us to be content and has made every provision for our contentment in Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself said, **“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full,”** John 10:10. Indeed, Scripture repeatedly calls us to contentment by showing us how God alone can satisfy our daily needs and eternal desires. Psalm 90:14, **“Satisfy us in the morning with Your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.”** Psalm 103:5, **“Who satisfies your desires with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagles.”** Proverbs 19:23, **“The fear of the LORD leads to life. Then one rests content, untouched by trouble.”**

Augustine, a theologian who lived in the Fourth Century A.D., said of God: “The thought of You stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises You, because You made us for Yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in You.” Or as Jesus said in John 6:25, **“I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me will never go hungry, and he who believes in Me will never be thirsty.”** Such a person will be full, fulfilled, and content.

In fact, in the example of Jesus our Savior we also learn the meaning of true contentment. Can you name even one time in the Gospels when Jesus sought anything for Himself? Did Jesus demand the glory, honor, power, and wealth rightfully His as true God? Did Jesus ever complain about a single meal or a single act of ingratitude or a single infringement on His time? Did Jesus ever insist on wearing designer clothes?

Amazingly, the only time the Gospels refer to the simple, homespun clothes the Son of God wore was at His crucifixion, when His garments were divided among Roman soldiers by a roll of the dice. In the Savior’s own words, **“Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head,”** Matthew 8:20.

And yet, such contentment did Jesus have in the will and provisions of His heavenly Father that, even in Gethsemane, when sweating great drops of blood, when knowing full well the horrors that lay before Him—the beating, mocking, spitting, and crucifixion, Jesus nevertheless contentedly prayed: **“My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from Me. Yet, not as I will, but as You will,”** Matthew 26:39. In other words, ‘Heavenly Father, I

am content with whatever You decree for My life or for My death.’

Remember, Paul himself had to learn the secret of contentment; not just the principle but the practice; not just the head-knowledge but the hurt-knowledge. And both good times and bad, gains and losses, joys and sorrows were his teachers: the **“whatever the circumstances”** in verse 10; the **“need or plenty”** in verse 11; the **“well fed or hungry”** in verse 12. Through these changing circumstances the great apostle himself learned that his contentment in Jesus Christ was unchanging.

Were the lessons painful? Yes. Did Paul hurt? Yes. Did he enjoy suffering? No. But he was no professor of theology writing about contentment from a comfortable, air-conditioned office. He was a man in chains because of his testimony about Jesus Christ. In that real-life setting he insisted: **“I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances,”** Philippians 4:11.

Thomas Watson, an author who lived during the Seventeenth Century A.D., wrote: “God’s end in all His cross providence is to bring the heart to submit and be content. And, indeed, this pleases God much. He loves to see His children satisfied with that portion He carves and allots to them. It contents Him to see us content.”

**Third, true contentment is never based on circumstances.** It is often learned through circumstances, but it is never dependent on circumstances. This is an important distinction. And it is vastly different from the worldly view of contentment, which is based entirely on circumstances.

How often have you heard this type of conversation? “Hi, Tom. Long time no see. How are things going?” And Tom answers, “Things are wonderful. I finished college and got a job with a starting salary of sixty-five thousand dollars a year and three weeks of vacation. And remember Jackie? Jackie and I are getting married in June. I couldn’t be happier or more content. Life is good.”

Yet, would Tom be just as content if he had failed to graduate, or if he had lost his job, or if Jackie had called off the engagement? This is why contentment based on circumstances is always conditional contentment. It can’t last. It can’t satisfy.

The type of contentment of which Paul wrote about was not based on circumstances but was independent of circumstances. Listen again to his words: **“I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances,”**

Philippians 4:11. **“I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation,”** Philippians 4:12. Some of the circumstances and situations he mentioned included being well fed or hungry, living in plenty or in want.

I can imagine a degree of fullness when devouring an all-you-can-eat-shrimp platter at Red Lobster; yet, not in a shabbily dressed homeless man holding a cardboard sign reading WILL WORK FOR FOOD. What then did Paul mean? What finally is the secret of contentment; a contentment that is not only independent of circumstances but defies circumstances?

Paul addressed this **fourth consideration** in the final verse of today’s text. With that final verse he offered one of the most powerful and important pieces of information you will ever know or teach to your children. And to think he did so in the middle of a brief, four-chapter thank-you note to the Philippians. And to think he wrote this thank-you note while bound by chains in a dark, damp rat-infested prison. He wrote: **“I can do everything through Him who gives me strength,”** Philippians 4:13.

Perhaps we should underline that verse in our Bibles. Perhaps we should print that verse in large bold letters, frame the verse, then hang the verse on the wall of our home or office or hospital room. **“I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.”**

The Greek word translated as strength in this verse, DUNAMIS, is the source of our English word DYNAMITE. Do we truly think that there is any circumstance, any situation, and problem, that the power of Jesus Christ cannot enable us to endure and overcome?

Someone once observed—I mentioned this once in a different sermon, but it is worth repeating: “Placing everything into the right hands really matters. In my hands a basketball is worth twenty dollars. In the hands of LeBron James, it is worth millions. In my hands a staff can help me walk. In the hands of Moses a staff parted the Red Sea. In my hands nails can build a birdhouse. In the hands of Jesus Christ, nails resulted in salvation for the whole world.”

My friends, let us place our dreams, goals, desires, indeed, our entire lives into the capable hands of Jesus Christ, and we will find true contentment.