Are you more like a thermometer or a thermostat? I wonder if you know what I mean by that question. The point is this—a thermometer doesn’t change anything around it; it just registers the temperature. It’s always going up and down. If it’s hot out, then the thermometer is hot. If it’s cold, the thermometer is cold. But a thermostat regulates its surroundings, and changes them when they need to be changed. The setting on a thermostat remains the same, always constant.

So are you more like a thermometer or a thermostat? When you are in a hot situation, do you get hot? Or do you remain set at a constant temperature and turn on the air conditioning to cool down those circumstances? When things are cold, do you get cold yourself or do you manage to remain constant and turn on the heat to warm up your surroundings?

Do you get the idea of what I’m talking about? Actually, I’m talking about contentment. A thermostat is a good illustration of the meaning of the word in Philippians 4:11 translated content! Literally, the Greek word has the idea of self-sufficiency, though it isn’t the man-centered stoic self-sufficiency built upon pride that causes a man to think that he doesn’t need God or any other people. I’m not referring to humanistic self-confidence or personal self-satisfaction. Those things are a barrier to the gospel. Instead, the idea of self-sufficiency is independence. That is to say, independence from circumstances. Contentment really is the ability to be a thermostat, the ability to remain constant and stable no matter what is going on. It is the ability to change the surroundings instead of being changed by them. Thus,

**Contentment**
Philippians 4:10-13

I. CONTENTMENT MEANS THAT WE LIVE WITH INDEPENDENCE FROM OUR EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES.

v.11
Let me put that as an exhortation.

A. We must remain constant, whatever the circumstances.

Most of us can be content, constant, when things are going well. That’s not too hard a task. When the surroundings are familiar and unchanging, it’s not hard to be content. And we all need familiar surroundings. Think of little children. A child’s lack of emotional maturity requires stability. The same routine, day after day, is exhilarating to little children. And change is exasperating. Indeed, there is a sweet and simple routine that must be a part of healthy and normal domestic life. And that is true for adults as well. I’m sure many of you live with many regular, ordinary routines that do not change much from day to day.

There is, of course, a danger in that. Change is impossible to avoid, it is inevitable. And maturity means that you must learn to adapt to change. Or, to emphasize again, to remain constant, even in the midst of change. Even in the midst of difficulties. Of struggles. Constant! Stable. Unmoved.

Contentment is a difficult goal, because we are human. We have feelings. We hurt. We suffer. We are called upon to endure any number of things in life over which we have no control. Yet contentment is the ability to remain constant, no matter what the circumstances. A life that remains constant.

And the second part of contentment is that,

B. We must remain satisfied, whatever the circumstances.
That's even harder. Not just constant no matter what the circumstances, but satisfied. The ability to be still. And remain unsettled. Here is how Paul would define his sense of contentment,

v.11-12

Paul has learned to be full and he has learned to be hungry. Satisfied with either one, no matter what the circumstances, whether he abounds or suffers need. But the unsettledness of dissatisfaction can ruin your life, causing you to always want more. More money, a better job, a bigger house, a new car, etc. Our world, in fact, teaches such dissatisfaction. We are taught at every turn to reach for everything you can get.

Never is the danger of that more clear than in Paul's instructions to Timothy, found in,

1 Tim. 6:9 “But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”

Just before those verses, Paul wrote,

1 Tim. 6:6 “Now godliness with contentment is great gain. 7 For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. 8 And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.”

That's the proper perspective on life. It is the godly attitude so well demonstrated by Job at the outset of his travails,

Job 1:21 “Naked I came from my mother's womb, And naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; Blessed be the name of the LORD.”

It is a difficult task, but a necessary one, to identify and put to death all seeds of discontentment. Sometimes those come in obvious forms of jealousy or envy. Sometimes they come in the form of psychological disorders of compulsive or addictive behavior, or in the insecurities of the perfectionist. There are many ways for this evil to rear its ugly head. And we must beware of them all, seeking to be satisfied and content, no matter what!

That's the goal. But how? That's a good question. How can you go about developing such a thing as this? The ultimate answer is by faith, by faith in Jesus Christ, and that is where we will end this afternoon, but first let me stress something that is very obvious in Paul's words to us in Philippians 4.

II. CONTENTMENT CAN BE LEARNED ONLY FROM THE EXPERIENCES OF LIFE.
Paul says, “I have learned to be content.”

v.11-12

This learning is not book learning. It is not a doctrine to be taught. Contentment is not a proposition to be memorized, it does not consist in a set of facts to be understood. Rather, it is learning by experience. It is something that is acquired as a habit as the result of proper responses to the varied circumstances of life. It is, perhaps, the idea of being initiated into a secret.

And the teacher is not a human being. The teacher is life itself, and Paul states the obvious extremes in life that teach contentment. First,

A. Contentment can be learned through prosperity.

v.12
To abound means to overflow. To have more than enough. To be full is to be fully satiated, that is, to have your desires completely satisfied. Immediately, you might think light-heartedly to yourself, “Lord teach me that kind of contentment,” but actually, this is a very difficult lesson to learn. For one simple reason, sin.

The presence of sin in us creates the opposite of contentment. When we are full and satisfied, the power of sin within us makes us want more! In the frustrated words of the writer of Ecclesiastes,

Eccl. 4:8  “There is one alone, without companion: He has neither son nor brother. Yet there is no end to all his labors, Nor is his eye satisfied with riches. But he never asks, "For whom do I toil and deprive myself of good?" This also is vanity and a grave misfortune.”

Because of sin, the eye is never satisfied with riches, is it? Prosperity produces the desire for more, and thus it poses a great danger to our souls. Indeed, some of the most discontented people I have known in my life have been the most wealthy! And there is a good reason for that. Riches don’t satisfy. They don’t satisfy the deepest longings of a man. Yet the world keeps trying to tell us that they do!

There is a great lesson for us in,

Luke 12:13  Then one from the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." 14 But He said to him, "Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?" 15 And He said to them, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses." 16 Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. 17 "And he thought within himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?' 18 "So he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. 19 'And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.'" 20 "But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' 21 "So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

In the grave warning of,

Rev. 3:17  “Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’ --and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked--18 I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich.”

So when there is prosperity, when there is more abundance than is necessary for your most basic needs, beware of the dangerous attraction of those comfortable provisions, and learn the secret of contentment. Learn, in your prosperity, that there is more to life, much more, than the accumulation of worldly goods and pleasures. There is more to life than material and financial security.

And when you face shortages of the necessary things of this world, realize that,

B. Contentment can be learned through poverty.
Again, v.12

When you have to learn to go without things, then you learn satisfaction with the things that God gives you. I have to admit that I have never learned contentment through poverty, because I have never experienced poverty. Though never wealthy, as a child or as an adult, I have never had to miss a meal because of a lack of food. I have never lived in a home with empty cupboards.
Perhaps you haven’t either. Or perhaps you have.

I have always given great respect to the generation of those in this country who lived through the great depression, for that experience must color the way they view the world today. Sadly, many simply vow, “That will never happen again.” Many live their lives in fear, or in the compulsive pursuit of financial security to avoid the horror and trauma they experienced in poverty. Or they turn to government handouts to achieve their security.

But others, many others, recognize that life means more than material prosperity. And because of living through a period of want, the accumulation of prosperity brings great satisfaction and contentment.

My generation, and all those born since WWII, have never known what it is like not to have what we want. Or even to have to wait for it. Few people my age can say, “we really didn’t have anything when we started out.” Instead, with horrendous debt and selfish ambition, we want to enjoy the fullness of prosperity right now, with no waiting in line. No postponement of any desires.

And so we must learn that what you have is not what matters. How much you have is not the key to happiness. Rather, that key is contentment. Socrates was once asked, “Who is the wealthiest person in the world?” And he answered, “He who is content with the least.”

Dear friends, learn to measure your wealth that way. And let your experiences of suffering need teach you contentment. That goes beyond merely money. You might have areas of your life where you suffer need, and whatever they are, whatever the need, pray that God would work in you this wonderful, marvelous grace called contentment, what one Puritan writer calls “the rare jewel of Christian contentment.”

Indeed, it is a rare jewel, and more precious than any other. And one that is obtained by experience, learning from the experiences of life. And one that is possible only by faith.

III. CONTENTMENT CAN BE EXPERIENCED ONLY THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST.

Thus Paul declares, v.13

Those are the words of a Christian. You cannot walk up to your non-Christian neighbor and say, “If you could give away all your life savings, you would really be content.” You cannot say to the unbeliever, “The things of this world don’t matter.” Because they do. Without Christ, without the hope of eternal life, that is ALL that matters.

But for believers, it is an entirely different story. For,

A. Christ gives us strength in all circumstances.

There is a direction connection between Philippians 4:13 and John 15:5. Let me read both those verses together..

John 15:5 “Without Me you can do nothing.”

Phil. 4:13 “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”


In speaking of contentment, Paul is not saying, “just bite the bullet.” He is not saying, “Grin and bear it.” Nor is he saying,
“Keep a stiff upper lip.” None of that. Instead, he gives the strength to actually learn contentment from the difficult experiences of life. Not Stoic but superficial endurance. Not mere survival, but genuine satisfaction.

He gives us that strength. And when is that strength the most keenly felt? When we most keenly feel our own weakness! Thus Paul would say in,

2 Cor. 11:30 “If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity.”

And even more personally, he would say in,

2 Cor. 12:7 “And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. 8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 9 And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Have you ever been in such a difficult situation, such impossible circumstances, that there was just no way to make it without God's help? Have you endured some great difficulty or loss that challenged the very existence of your life? It is those occasions when Christ's strength is real, because it is then that you really need it.

You can suppress and deny the reality of those circumstances. You can let them produce bitterness and anger. Or you can trust God to give you strength, strength to endure and strength to learn the secret of godly contentment.

And I can say to you categorically, that is not possible without Christ. Christ gives us strength in all circumstances. And,

B. Christ enables us to be constant in all circumstances. Christ enables us! Contentment is something you must learn, but don't misunderstand me. Ultimately, it is something that Christ does in us.

The ability to remain constant when life is falling apart all around you is an ability that does not reside in any one of us. It is an ability that is in Christ, and in Christ alone. Therefore, the ability to remain constant, the ability to be a thermostat and not merely a thermometer, is a God-given ability that you obtain by faith.

If you want this sort of contentment that we’ve been studying this afternoon, then pray for it. Ask God for it. And abide in Christ, dwell with him and in him. Let his word dwell in you richly.

Therefore the self-sufficiency of contentment is not really self-sufficiency at all. It is, rather, a sufficiency in Christ. Because of Christ, and only because of Christ, you are made adequate for all demands of life. You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you.

That self-sufficiency and independency of circumstances is perhaps nowhere more strongly defined than when the prophet Habakkuk proclaims his faith, and I'll end with his words, some of my favorite in all of Scripture

Hab. 3:17 “Though the fig tree may not blossom, Nor fruit be on the vines; Though the labor of the olive may fail, And the fields yield no food; Though the flock may be cut off from the fold, And
there be no herd in the stalls-- 18 Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. 19 The LORD God is my strength; He will make my feet like deer's feet, And He will make me walk on my high hills.”