

BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE.®

Advanced Bible Study

FALL 2019 | CSB

STUDY 1:

*Simplicity:
Finding Contentment
in a Busy Life*

STUDY 2:

*How to Know
God's Will*



LifeWay | Adults

SESSION 1

A Centered Life

THE POINT

When your life is centered in Christ, everything else falls into place.

THE PASSAGE

Matthew 6:25-34

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

In our tech-oriented society we have no lack of gadgets and apps that inform, alert, and direct us about a variety of things every day. In fact, sometimes we are overloaded with news and reminders about things that are good and valuable to us, such as family, work, church, and other responsibilities. Most of us would consider these our priorities—the things that are most important to us.

In recent decades, however, we have become accustomed to thinking about priorities (plural) rather than priority (singular). We want to make multiple things most important in our lives. Such thinking, however, can create problems, because by definition, the word *most* limits the answer to just one thing at a time. With so many things that are important, how can we know we are giving them the right attention at the right time? All of us know what it's like to focus on what might seem like the right thing (or at least a very good thing) at the wrong time. It's only after the fact that we sometimes discover we prioritized the wrong thing. As a result of misplaced priorities, we may experience stress, frustration, fatigue, and even regret because we neglected something important. Wouldn't it be great

if we had only one priority—just one thing to focus on?

Jesus said just one thing should have priority—His kingdom and righteousness. Though ancient people knew nothing of technological overload, because they were human they did know about making wrong choices regarding what is most important. While Jesus' words were relevant to His listeners in the first century, they may be even more relevant to us in this modern day when so many things cry for our attention. When we obey Jesus and give the priority in our lives to God's kingdom and His righteousness, everything else falls into place.

THE SETTING

In what may be Jesus' most well-known discourse, the Sermon on the Mount, He introduced the attitudes and actions that should characterize the lives of people who have come into a relationship with Jesus. His words provide a summary of how people can please God and live as He desires.

Jesus' audience was knowledgeable about the Jewish Scriptures, particularly the Law and the Prophets. Yet the insights Jesus offered were different from what they had heard throughout their lives from parents, religious teachers, and others. Several times in His sermon Jesus declared, "You have heard that it was said" (Matt. 5:21,27,31,33,38,43) as a point of connection with His audience related to Scripture, but then departed from the traditional interpretation by repeating, "but I tell you" (vv. 22,28,32,34,39,44). Jesus went on to provide a greater understanding of a sacred text that went beyond the letter (the literal interpretation) and encompassed the true spirit (the broader application) and meaning of the words God had given His people.

Jesus taught on various topics—anger, lust, divorce, giving, fasting, forgiving, praying, and more. His teaching on each subject was clear and concise. Little doubt could have

remained about His meaning or the resulting application of Scripture He prescribed. Thus, Matthew noted that those who first heard the sermon were “astonished” at Jesus’ words, “because he was teaching them like one who had authority, and not like their scribes” (Matt. 7:29).

While Matthew 5–7 presents standards and actions that should characterize Jesus’ disciples, none of us can measure up to these standards—at least not in this lifetime. Still, they provide the ideal for which we must strive through the power of the Spirit as we seek to follow Jesus and impact our world for Christ.

STUDY THE BIBLE

Matthew 6:25-30

²⁵ **“Therefore I tell you: Don’t worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Isn’t life more than food and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Consider the birds of the sky: They don’t sow or reap or gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren’t you worth more than they? ²⁷ Can any of you add one moment to his life span by worrying? ²⁸ And why do you worry about clothes? Observe how the wildflowers of the field grow: They don’t labor or spin thread. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was adorned like one of these. ³⁰ If that’s how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and thrown into the furnace tomorrow, won’t he do much more for you—you of little faith?**

Don’t Worry. The previous section of the Sermon on the Mount began with Jesus’ teaching on possessions and wealth (Matt. 6:19-24). Jesus wrapped up that teaching by emphasizing we “cannot serve both God and money” (v. 24). In verse 25 **therefore** serves as a transition—connecting

what Jesus said previously with what He would say next.

Jesus started with a simple statement most of us have heard from others throughout our lives: **Don't worry.** The King James Version translation—"take no thought"—has caused a serious misunderstanding of Jesus' words. At one time some people believed Jesus was prohibiting His followers from planning for the future, which was not at all what Jesus intended. Instead, the Greek verb used here for worry (*merimnao*) literally means to be anxious, uneasy, disturbed, or troubled about something. Jesus used a form of this word five times in this passage (vv. 25,27,28,31,24) and only one other time in the Book of Matthew (10:19), where He told the disciples not to worry about what they would say when they were brought before the Roman or Jewish authorities.

Jesus used a present imperative (an ongoing, continual command), which can be translated, "Stop worrying!" or "Don't be worried!" Whenever worry creeps up on us—and it will, because we are human—we should issue it a "cease and desist" order. When we are troubled or fret about something it is the result of a self-sufficiency mindset—thinking we are the only ones who can provide for ourselves. This mentality, however, is the opposite of what Scripture teaches us about God's ongoing provision for His people. The word *merimnao* may have been derived from a Greek root word that pictures something as being divided or distracted—pulled in different directions. In a very real sense, worry is characteristic of a person who is torn between trusting God (at least in their words) and trusting self (in their thoughts and perhaps with their actions).

The initial focus of Jesus' words was concern about the necessities of **life**. The Greek word *psyche*, rendered *life*, has different meanings depending on the context. It can refer to the natural existence (which involves breathing) of humans and animals. The greater meaning of the word, however,

which Jesus pointed to here, relates specifically to humans. It can be translated as *soul* and refers to the part of us that reasons, shows emotion, aspires, and wills.

The necessities of life—those things that are critical for our basic existence—include what we will eat and drink. Jesus also commented on what we will wear. The most basic needs of humanity have been referred to as physiological needs—food, clothing, shelter, and so forth. These things are essentials; throughout much of the world meeting these needs are of daily concern for many people, just as they have been throughout history for countless numbers of people. Most Americans, however, give little thought to where our next meal will come from, where we will sleep, or if we will have clothing to cover our bodies. Perhaps the only times these become real concerns for us are in times of natural disaster (such as a hurricane, flood, or wildfire) or during an economic downturn (such as a recession, depression, or unemployment).

No matter the historical time frame or the affluence of a society, many things can cause people to be anxious. Thus, Jesus' words here are just as applicable to us as they were to those who first heard His teaching. When we have committed to serve God rather than money (6:24), we can be certain our loving heavenly Father will provide for all of our needs, so there's no reason for us to worry. Of course, there is a difference between needs and wants. Thus, we shouldn't expect God to provide us with things that aren't really necessary for life.

Jesus expected an affirmative answer to His rhetorical question at the end of verse 25: **Isn't life more than food and the body more than clothing?** While food is a necessary provision and clothing is a necessary protection, these are not of the greatest significance for us as humans. There is more to life than just these basic elements that sustain life.

When we are anxious about lesser things such as food and clothing, we miss out on the higher or greater matters that are essential for real life, which humans alone can experience because we are made in God's image (Gen. 1:27). Later in His teaching, Jesus would address these greater concerns.

In verse 26 Jesus provided practical illustrations from nature to emphasize His point. To **consider** means to contemplate or investigate; this involves more than a brief glance. **The birds of the sky** are representative of the animal kingdom. Like humans and all other living, breathing creatures, they must have food in order to stay alive. Yet Jesus emphasized **they don't sow or reap or gather into barns**. These agricultural activities require hard work but are limited to the human species. With His words Jesus did not intend to disparage or discourage productivity. Jesus' emphasis, rather, was to contrast God's care for the birds with His care for humans. While our **heavenly Father feeds** the birds, still they must work hard to obtain the food—seeds, berries, worms, insects, and so forth—that they need and the Lord provides. Again, Jesus closed this section with a rhetorical question that demanded an affirmative answer—yes, humans are indeed **worth more than** the birds. While such thinking is contrary to what many in our society believe and promote, here Jesus gave us a brief glimpse into God's thinking about the ultimate value of human life among all created things.

Noting again His primary emphasis, Jesus asked another rhetorical question in verse 27, **Can any of you add one moment to his life-span by worrying?** The expected answer is "no," because of course worry does not extend or enhance anyone's life. To the contrary, we now know that worry can actually reduce and diminish our time on earth.

For another practical example of God's care, Jesus pointed to the plant kingdom in verses 28-29 to note the futility of worrying **about clothes**. The Greek word for *observe*

(*katamanthano*) refers to careful and thorough examination; study and contemplation to apply what one learns to life. **The wildflowers of the field** could have been lilies or another type of flower in the Middle East including iris, crocus, or gladiolus. Regardless of the variety, Jesus emphasized that their beauty didn't depend on any type of strenuous **labor** or tedious activity. Instead, it was a gift of God.

While the Bible does not give a description of King **Solomon** in his robe, crown, and other adornment, we do find passages that emphasize the awe-inspiring possessions of his kingdom. For example, 1 Kings 10:4-5 notes: "When the queen of Sheba observed all of Solomon's wisdom, the palace he had built, the food at his table, his servants' residence, his attendants' service and their attire, his cupbearers, and the burnt offerings he offered at the Lord's temple, it took her breath away." Despite all this, Jesus emphasized there was no comparison between the majestic Solomon and the simple wildflowers, whose beauty surpassed the splendor of one of Israel's greatest kings.

In verse 30 Jesus asked a conditional, rhetorical question to highlight God's concern for His people. Utilizing typical Jewish logic, Jesus contrasted something of lesser value—**the grass of the field**—to something of greater value—human beings. Jesus noted the short life span of ordinary grass, which was often dried and used as a source of fuel for baking in a common household oven. That was Jesus' point when He stated the grass **is here today and thrown into the furnace tomorrow**. Since God makes such provision for the lower elements of His creation (like flowers and grass) that are temporary, there is no question that He will give better care to the higher members of creation (humans, who are eternal). The Greek words translated **much more** can refer not only to the far greater care God gives to us but also to the far greater confidence we can have in His care.

Jesus closed this section by referring to His listeners as people **of little faith**. This translates a Greek word (*oligopistos*) that Jesus used only five times in the Gospels (three of which were in connection to the Twelve). The term combines elements of both reprimand and encouragement. In one sense Jesus was admonishing the people for their lack of trust in Almighty God, their heavenly Father. In another sense, however, Jesus wanted to inspire His listeners to grow in their assurance and confidence of God's care for them. Jesus' word of rebuke and challenge are just as applicable to us as twenty-first century believers as they were to first century Jews.

What are some lasting truths in Matthew 6:25-30?

- ▶ Worry indicates self-centeredness rather than God-centeredness.
- ▶ God's concern for humans is far greater than His concern for all other things He created. Real life is about more than the necessities of life.
- ▶ Faith means trusting our heavenly Father to provide for our needs.

Matthew 6:31-32

³¹ **So don't worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'** ³² **For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.**

Trust God to do what is best for you. In contrast to Jesus' previous usage of **don't worry** in verse 25 (which was present imperative—an ongoing command to stop worrying), here He used a tense of the verb that could be understood as “don't start worrying.” Jesus used the Greek conjunction *oun* (which can be translated **so**, therefore, or accordingly)

to connect this command with His previous statement about our assurance of God's loving care for His children. Again Jesus emphasized we do not have to be concerned about our needs: **What will we eat ... drink ... or ... wear?**

Jesus gave this command after having previously set the example. He practiced what He preached, as seen in His conversation with the devil in the wilderness during His temptation (Matt. 4:1-11). Jesus was very hungry after fasting for forty days, but He did not worry about food or take matters into His own hands (as the devil suggested) to provide for Himself. Instead, Jesus trusted His Father to provide for His needs.

Jesus previously contrasted God's care for animals and plants to His greater care for people. Jesus used another comparison in verse 31, noting the difference that should be evident between the lives of God's people and those of **the Gentiles**. Typically in the New Testament the Greek word *ethnos* refers to nations or people groups. Here, however, it refers to those who don't have a relationship with God (these were non-Jews, sometimes called heathens or pagans). Because they don't know God or His provision, they **eagerly seek** fulfillment of their basic needs—it is a continual pursuit for them. This was certainly characteristic of people who worshiped pagan deities and often went to great extremes trying to get the attention of their unresponsive gods. They also carried out regular rituals, including bizarre, dangerous, or immoral activities, to appease their capricious deities as they hoped for good crops and other signs of favor.

Jesus said those who know God as their **heavenly Father** should recognize that He knows what they need. God is both omniscient (all-knowing) and omnipotent (all-powerful). We don't have to do things trying to get His attention, and we don't have to beg Him to take care of us. Jesus assured us that God not only knows our needs but also provides for

those needs. We have no reason to live like non-believers who think they have to take care of the essentials or believe they must bribe their gods to receive anything from them.

What are some lasting truths in Matthew 6:31-32?

- ▶ God hasn't failed us in the past, so we do not have to worry that He won't provide for us in the future.
- ▶ A believer's trust in God should stand in contrast to a non-believer's anxiety about meeting basic needs.
- ▶ God knows our needs and will provide for them.

Matthew 6:33-34

³³ **But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you.**

³⁴ **Therefore don't worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.**

Seek the things of God above all else. Whereas Jesus previously issued two negative commands, here He gave a positive command that highlights the focus of His message. The Greek word for **seek** is *zeteo*, and its usage in the New Testament carries the sense of intense searching, carefully investigating, eagerly desiring, craving, or aiming at something. In Matthew 6:33 the verb form is a present imperative, which emphasizes continuous action—to keep on seeking or desiring. Jesus probably used this word in intentional contrast to the activity of the Gentiles (v. 32), who “eagerly seek” (*epizeteo* = *epi* + *zeteo*, which denotes greater intensity) after the necessities of life.

Jesus commanded that His followers should be intensely focused or eagerly desiring **the kingdom of God and his righteousness**. This should be the **first** thing—the ongoing priority, purpose, or preoccupation of believers.

God's *kingdom* is His rule or reign over everything, especially human lives. This kingdom was a frequent topic in Jesus' teaching. While Jesus most often spoke of the "kingdom of heaven," perhaps here Jesus emphasized the "kingdom of God" because the context reflects God's personal nature—our heavenly Father who cares for His children who willingly submit to His authority.

God's *righteousness*, as used here, is probably synonymous with God's kingdom and refers to right living—attitudes and actions that follow God's commands. The greatest example of prioritizing God's kingdom and righteousness is seen in the life of Jesus. He had earlier taught His disciples to pray, "Your [God's] kingdom come" (v. 10), and this prayer is an important aspect of living under God's control and according to His standards.

When our lives are focused on God's kingdom and His righteousness, Jesus assured us that **all these things**; that is, the necessities of life He had just mentioned in v. 31, **will be provided for** us. Jesus did not downplay the importance of things that are essential for life. Instead, He wanted His disciples to prioritize something far more important—God's standards and His control—and trust that their heavenly Father, the benevolent King, would take care of their needs.

In verse 34 Jesus repeated again the command, **don't worry**. This time, however, Jesus broadened the scope to include the things we might worry **about tomorrow**. This statement dovetails with Jesus' previous words on prayer, "Give us today our daily bread" (v. 11). Our focus should be on seeking God and His kingdom rather than being worried about meeting our basic needs today or being anxious about any other issue we might face tomorrow.

It's possible that some in the crowd may have misinterpreted Jesus' previous statements to mean the life of a disciple

would be easy. Perhaps this is why Jesus closed this section with what some people call a reality check—the truth about a situation. Jesus’ words are a certainty of what we will experience as His followers. In the New Testament, the Greek word for **trouble** is often translated wickedness, malice, or evil. The word is a reminder that we live in a world marred by sin that impacts everything. In addition, our “adversary the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for anyone he can devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). Following Jesus is not a carefree life in which we can dodge difficulty or escape evil. In fact, Jesus emphasized we will face these things each day. Regardless of what any day brings, however, we can have confidence that God knows about our situation, cares for us, and will meet our needs. We should trust Him to do what is best rather than worry about concerns for today or issues we could possibly face tomorrow (which might never happen).

What are some lasting truths in Matthew 6:33-34?

- ▶ Allowing God to control our lives and living according to His standards should be the priority of our lives.
- ▶ While we should expect trouble, worry should not be part of the life of a disciple who trusts God for grace in every situation.

LIVE IT OUT

What things do you worry about?

How many of those things are really essential for your life (or someone you love)? _____

How do Jesus' words in Matthew 6 help you stop worrying and trust Him to take care of you? _____



For a deeper dive, check out the article ***Bins and Barns: Food Storage in the Biblical World*** in the current issue of Biblical Illustrator.

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SESSION 2

A Daily Pursuit

THE POINT

Deepen your relationship with God by spending time with Him every day.

THE PASSAGE

Philippians 4:4-9

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Preventative maintenance can have a great impact on the life of our vehicles. When we follow the manufacturer's guidance about the seemingly small things (like checking tire pressure and changing oil), as well as adhering to the schedule of larger things (like having the timing belt replaced or the transmission fluid and filter changed), our vehicles will operate better and it will be easier to avoid the frustrations that come when we ignore a small issue that can develop into a major problem. Doing the right things on an ongoing basis will help preserve the value and functionality of one of our greatest assets.

The same is true in the Christian life. Just like we shouldn't expect a vehicle to operate properly when key systems are neglected, so we shouldn't expect to experience the abundant life Jesus promised (John 10:10) if we neglect the development of our hearts and minds.

We must do certain things if we want to nurture this development and grow in our relationship with the Lord. As we grow in this relationship, we will be better prepared for whatever comes our way—the easy and the hard, the delights and the sorrows. Throughout history this has been

demonstrated in the lives of Christ's followers. Many disciples through the ages have also discovered that a deep relationship with God is more valuable than anything else they could experience.

Thus we would do well to consider the words of Paul—a man whose relationship with the Lord may have been deeper and richer than any of us can imagine—to discover what it takes to experience the fullness of life that comes through Christ. As we study Paul's words and put them into practice in our own lives, we, too, will experience life that goes beyond anything we've ever known.

THE SETTING

The apostle Paul planted the church at Philippi during his second missionary journey (around AD 49). It was the first church Paul started in Europe after experiencing the vision of a man begging Paul to "Cross over to Macedonia and help us!" (Acts 16:9). Paul taught and preached in the city about Jesus Christ for a short time before he was wrongly arrested, flogged, and thrown into prison. Following the miraculous release from prison, the conversion of the Philippian jailer, and the eventual release of Paul and Silas from prison, the pair stayed in the city for a short time before leaving the city. From that time the apostle had a close connection with the believers in Philippi.

The Book of Philippians is the apostle Paul's most personal correspondence to a church. It was written while Paul was imprisoned, most likely in a type of house arrest in Rome sometime during the period of AD 60-62. In addition to thanking the Philippian believers for the financial support they had sent him (on more than one occasion), Paul updated them on his situation and the impact it was having on the spread of the gospel message. Because he had heard news from the church, Paul also encouraged the believers to

practice humility toward each other (following the example of Christ) and to live in unity as members of God's family.

Paul warned the Philippians about the persistent teaching of the Judaizers—those false teachers who stressed legalism in contrast to Paul's good news of God's grace. Finally, the apostle wrote to encourage the believers in their spiritual growth and to explain how they could continue to live for Christ regardless of the circumstances they faced.

Much like his conclusion in other letters, in 4:4-9 Paul included a series of short, pithy imperatives that emphasized devotion to God and highlighted the thoughts and actions that should characterize a disciple's life.

SYUDY THE BIBLE

Philippians 4:4-5

⁴ **Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!**

⁵ **Let your graciousness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.**

Begin your day with praise. In this section, Paul utilized staccato-like admonitions to encourage his readers in their spiritual growth—both in thought and action. While his directives seem to be disconnected, there is actually a connective element that links them: the persecution the Philippian believers were facing.

Paul began the exhortations by telling the believers to **re-joyce**. The Greek word for *rejoice* (*chairō*) shares the same root as the words for *joy* (*chara*) and *grace* (*charis*); thus, all three words are closely connected. Paul used a form of the words for rejoice and joy over a dozen times in this short letter! To rejoice is to be glad or happy, to delight in, to celebrate, or to express joy.

It would be pointless simply commanding people to be glad because life doesn't always give us reason for having a

joyful attitude. Paul had a reason, however, as did the Philippians, even in their persecution. They had experienced God's grace—His undeserved kindness that brought salvation through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. As believers, we also have this same reason to rejoice. This is why Paul added that this rejoicing is to be done **in the Lord**—He is the focus of and the reason for our rejoicing. When we consider the life we now experience, in contrast to our lives in the past, we should rejoice because of the amazing gift of eternal life God has given us. This joy should come no matter what we face, because biblical joy is not dependent on circumstances. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), which means it is a product of living in relationship with Jesus. Paul could command believers to rejoice because it is an attitude we must choose and an action we can express as a result of God's control in our lives.

The verb form Paul used here emphasizes an ongoing, habitual action—to keep on rejoicing. Lest anyone miss this emphasis, however, Paul specifically noted a time frame for rejoicing: it should happen **always**. Rejoicing should be a never-ending expression for believers.

As one of the first missionaries to Asia and Europe, Paul suffered as he sought to share the gospel with people who had never heard it. He experienced severe beatings, stoning, shipwreck, angry mobs, robbers, hunger, and other troubles. Many of the Philippian believers probably knew the story (recorded in Acts 16:16-40) of how Paul and Silas had been arrested in Philippi, then they were beaten and put in prison, and yet at midnight they were joyfully singing hymns to God! When Paul wrote this Letter to the Philippians he was also imprisoned, most likely (as Acts 28:30 notes) in a rental house in Rome. While this was no miserable dungeon like he experienced later in Rome (when he wrote his Second Letter to Timothy), he was still a prisoner and was

likely chained to a guard at all times. It is quite amazing that Paul could portray a joyful attitude and encourage others to do the same in the midst of these circumstances, but this is what he did.

There will be times when life for us is difficult too. We will experience discouragement and maybe questions about whether God knows or cares about us. Especially in these times, when we really don't "feel" joyful, the best thing we can do is to express joy. As someone has said, it's easier to act our way into a feeling than it is to feel our way into an action. We can express our joy, as the old hymn notes, by counting our blessings and thanking God for each one. We can also express praise to God for who He is and what He's done. Our Lord is real and He is with us in the good times as well as the difficult ones. His grace is sufficient for whatever we experience (2 Cor. 12:9).

Rejoicing wasn't just a passing thought for Paul. It was a constant attitude—one he wanted other believers to make a part of their lives too. Because it was so important, he repeated again his command for them to rejoice. This not only had a beneficial effect on their lives, but also could impact the lives of non-believers who witnessed their attitude (especially in the face of adversity) and wondered what was different about them.

This type of positive example was what Paul noted in verse 5, where he exhorted the believers to **let your graciousness be known to everyone**. The Greek word for *graciousness* (*epieikes*) has been translated gentleness, reasonableness, and considerate, but it isn't really easy to translate into English because no one word offers a good understanding of the term. The word pictures an unselfish person who doesn't demand their rights; one who is yielding to others, especially in situations where retribution would be expected. This same Greek adjective is used only four other

times in the New Testament (1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 3:2; Jas. 3:17; 1 Pet. 2:18) but Paul also used a noun form of the word in 2 Corinthians 10:1 to emphasize the attitude of Jesus. This was how Paul wanted the Philippian Christians to live, especially so that non-believers in their midst would see and learn about it from personal experience (which is the meaning of the Greek word *ginosko*, “be known”).

Bible scholars disagree as to whether Paul’s statement, **the Lord is near**, relates to his previous words in verse 5 or to his words in verse 6. It’s likely he intended the statement to apply to both. In addition, there is some uncertainty as to whether the nearness of the Lord in this verse refers to His abiding presence or to His second coming. Again, both ideas could apply. Paul could have been thinking of the promise in Psalm 34:18, which states “The Lord is near the broken-hearted,” which might have been especially comforting to the suffering Christians in Philippi. As to the Second Coming, the New Testament writers emphasized we are in the end times (1 Pet. 1:20; 1 Cor. 10:11; Heb. 1:2), so this could have been in Paul’s mind as well. Jesus’ constant presence with believers can enable us to live differently and His certain return should motivate us to do so.

What are some lasting truths in Philippians 4:4-5?

- ▶ We can experience joy regardless of our circumstances; especially in difficult times.
- ▶ Rejoicing should be an ongoing expression for believers.
- ▶ Believers should live differently because they are aware of Jesus’ presence and are certain of His return.

Philippians 4:6-7

⁶ Don’t worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present

your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Pray and leave your concerns in the hands of God. Paul issued his first negative command in this section, **Don't worry**, though he quickly moved on to a corresponding positive exhortation. The tense of the Greek verb *merimnao* (a present imperative), combined with a negative, means to stop being anxious, disturbed, or troubled, and to do this on an ongoing basis. Often when the word *merimnao* is used in the New Testament it is given against the background of persecution. Evidently the Philippian believers were already worried, probably about threats from their "opponents" (Phil. 1:28) who were causing trouble for them. Even so, there was much more they could have been worried about, which was the reason Paul added the qualifier: *about anything*. Often our worry is more about things that could occur in the future, though in our minds we have seen them through to the end and thus we get worried about the outcome of something that may never happen. Regardless of the variety of things that do or might happen, believers should terminate any worry that has already begun and keep it from starting again. This calls for more than wishful thinking, however.

Rather than just expecting the Philippians to obey his negative command, he offered a positive command to displace the negative. Paul told the believers that **in everything** they experienced, they should pray instead of worrying. Nothing was too big or too small to take to God.

Prayer is the most effective remedy for worry. In the New Testament, the Greek word for *prayer* (*proseuche*) indicates the person's worshipful, devoted mindset toward God. It is commonly used for requests that are more general in nature. Paul also referred to **petition**, which can mean asking or

requesting related to a specific (often personal) need. Our **requests** reflect our petitions—the specific needs we **present ... to God** and ask Him to meet. Here Paul used another imperative (command)—we must keep on doing this. The idea behind presenting something is to disclose it, make it known, or tell about it. Of course, we don't have to inform God about anything, since He is all-knowing. Even so, when we present our requests to God it is an act of humility—an acknowledgment of our dependence on Him. As we do this, we demonstrate our confidence and trust in His care and provision for us.

Paul emphasized that an essential element in our prayers is **thanksgiving** (*eucharistia*), a grateful attitude toward God and an expression of gratitude that acknowledges His care and concern for us. In Paul's letters, expressions of thanks and demonstrations of joy are ways believers can praise God. To be an effective antidote to worry, our prayers should not only tell God our specific needs but also express to Him our thankfulness, especially for the needs He already has met.

When we pray with thankfulness and release our concerns to God, Paul noted a result we will experience—an answer (of sorts) that we probably weren't expecting. This is **the peace of God**, which Paul mentioned in verse 7. The Greek word for *peace* (*eirene*) is used more than ninety times in the New Testament. *Peace* is a fruit of God's Spirit (Gal. 5:22), and while it's not surprising that Paul refers to "the peace of God," this is the only time in his letters he used this specific phrase. Since this peace is presented as a contrast to worry, Paul wanted us to understand it as a state of well-being; an inner tranquility, ease, rest, and contentment that comes from God. This is what Jesus promised in John 14:27, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you"

The Greek language at the end of verse 6 may picture a person in God's presence, so the words in verse 7 expand on this image. Just as an anxious young child might mention to her father a concern about something she sees, her father's embrace and reassuring words "I'll take care of it" or "It won't hurt you" will often calm his child and assure her that it's nothing that need concern her.

Paul noted that this peace of God **surpasses all understanding**. By this Paul could have meant it is beyond our ability to comprehend (as in Eph. 3:20). This phrase could also refer back to those who opposed the Philippian Christians (Phil. 1:28-30). The peace that comes from God in the midst of conflict and difficulty is something unbelievers cannot fathom. Because they don't have God's Spirit they can't "receive what comes from God's Spirit, because it is foolishness" and they are "not able to understand" or comprehend it (1 Cor. 2:14).

Believers, however, have the "mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16); thus, we can understand (at least somewhat) how God works, especially in the situation Paul described in Philippians 4:6-7. When we trust God as our all-powerful, heavenly Father and place our concerns in His hands, He will replace our anxiety with His peace. Paul pictured God's peace as a guard who stands watch like a Roman soldier. Rather than protecting a Roman city however, this guard watches over our hearts and minds. Paul may have intended these as a whole, reflecting our inner parts that create anxiety. The heart was considered the center of emotions and feelings. The Greek word for mind is used only by Paul in the New Testament and only in this instance is it a positive reference, where it refers to our thoughts. The prerequisite for receiving this peace of God is to have peace with God through faith in Christ Jesus, and to live in a growing relationship of trust in Him and dependence on His provision.

What are some lasting truths in Philippians 4:6-7?

- ▶ Praying to our loving heavenly Father is the best alternative to worrying.
- ▶ Our prayers should be specific and should reflect our devotion and gratitude to God.
- ▶ God's peace will protect us from anxiety.

Philippians 4:8-9

⁸ **Finally brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable—if there is any moral excellence and if there is anything praiseworthy—dwell on these things.** ⁹ **Do what you have learned and received and heard from me, and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.**

Fill your mind with the things of God. The word **finally** does not indicate the end of Paul's letter. Rather, it serves as a transition, introducing how believers should live "in Christ Jesus" (v. 7) and avoid worry. Rather than allowing our hearts and minds to fixate on troubles, concerns, or needs (which bring anxiety), believers should instead **dwell on** (*logizomai*) certain things. The Greek word *logizomai* means more than just to think about something. As used here it means to carefully and continually consider, reason, or meditate on.

The virtues Paul noted probably would have been familiar to the Philippians from their background of Greek moral teaching. Thus they were to take into account (*logizomai*) some of the good things they had previously learned (when they were unbelievers), as long as those things conformed to Christ. Paul first mentioned **whatever is true**, which refers to what is reliable—it aligns with truth (particularly as found in God's Word). **Honorable** things are respectable,

revered, or dignified, while **just** refers to those things that harmonize with what God says is right—aligning with His standards. Paul also noted we should dwell on things that are **pure**, which are undefiled or uncontaminated; things we could take into God’s presence without hesitation. **Love-ly** things are admirable, acceptable, attractive, or pleasing, while **commendable** things refer to reputable things—those that are worthy of praise or are well spoken of by others.

Moral excellence (*arete*) was a word Paul used only once in his writings, perhaps because of its usage by the secular moralists in the vague sense of virtuous, which could reflect a person who stood out because of certain qualities. This could be why Paul introduced it with the phrase **if there is any**. Even so, Paul may have wanted to emphasize a concept the Philippian believers understood and urge them to consider those things that were morally excellent from God’s viewpoint. The Greek word for **praiseworthy** likewise generally carried a humanistic viewpoint of something that is commendable or someone who had the approval (praise or applause) of others, but Paul would have focused on actions that are in keeping with what God says is right and best.

While we can’t always control the situations we face or the thoughts that come to our minds, we can decide where our minds will go during and after those situations. When we habitually **dwell on** positive things (from God’s perspective), we can avoid the negatives (like worry) and so our lives will set a good example for those around us. We encounter and fill our minds with these godly virtues as we read, study, and meditate on God’s Word.

Paul had already encouraged the believers to “live ... worthy of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27) and to “be blameless and pure, children of God who are faultless in a crooked and perverted generation, among whom you shine like stars” (2:14-15). He wanted them to set a godly example for others (especially

unbelievers) in their region. In addition to the words he gave them about how they could do this, Paul also mentioned the example he lived before them—what they had **learned and received and heard from** him, as well as what they had **seen in** him. Paul was effectively repeating what he had urged them previously (“join in imitating me,” 3:17). If they had any questions about dwelling on the virtues he had just noted (4:8) or how to practice the rejoicing and praying he had commanded, they needed only to remember how Paul lived and recall the things he taught them. As they continually lived according to God’s standards, imitating Paul as he imitated Christ (1 Cor. 11:1), they could be certain that **the God of peace** [would] **be with** them.

What are some lasting truths in Philippians 4:8-9?

- ▶ There really is power in positive thinking, but only when we focus our minds on godly virtues.
- ▶ When we live as Jesus lived, our lives can have an impact on unbelievers around us as well as believers we know.
- ▶ Following God’s ways brings God’s peace.

LIVE IT OUT

Life presses in on us. Even when things are going well, we can experience stress and anxiety from the responsibilities that call to us on a daily basis. When we experience trouble and difficulty, we have pressure of a different kind that can also have a negative effect on us. Regardless of our situation, the best thing we can do in life is to take time each day to develop our relationship with God. As we spend time praying to Him, meditating on His Word, and applying it in our lives, we will realize an antidote to life's pressures—whether good or bad—and experience the incredible life God planned for us to live.

What circumstances make it particularly hard for you to rejoice in the Lord? _____

How might you pray more specifically for the things that concern you, handing each one over to the Lord? _____

Which of the virtues Paul mentions stands out most to you? Why? _____

¹ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 411.

² Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest's Word Studies from the Greek New Testament: 3-Volume Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973), 111.

SESSION 3

The Key to Contentment

THE POINT

True contentment comes through Christ alone.

THE PASSAGE

Philippians 4:10-20

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

You may have heard of “first-world problems.” These “problems” are really the basic annoyances that come with enjoying the blessings of living in one of the most prosperous nations on the planet. They’re the issues that we’ve blown out of proportion because we’ve grown comfortable in a first-world lifestyle. Don’t have time to get a cup of your favorite flavored coffee? That’s a first-world problem. Had to replace your third flat tire in the last four months? First-world problem. Wishing that new restaurant by your office would open a location closer to home? You got it ... a first-world problem.

It’s OK to admit we have first-world problems. We just need to recognize they are relatively minor inconveniences that are fairly simple to fix. Nothing more. When you stop and think about it, we’re incredibly blessed compared with others around the world. We’re just not always content. Too often, we fall into the trap of discontentment. We have more than we really need, but we somehow think we’re missing out. Our stomachs are full, but our spirits feel empty. We’re convinced we’ll be satisfied with just a little bit more. But we aren’t. We step across a line we think changes everything—only to discover another line that says we’re “almost there.”

The truth is, we'll never be fulfilled as long as we measure contentment with stuff. True contentment isn't tied to bank accounts or houses or cars. Peace and satisfaction start in our hearts. More specifically, it comes from a grateful heart focused on Christ. The apostle Paul understood our bent toward discontent. But he also knew the blessings of a life completely dependent on God. That kind of contentment doesn't come naturally, but it is doable. You just have to know where to start.

THE SETTING

The Book of Philippians is actually a letter written to a group of Christians in the city of Philippi. Located in Macedonian region of northern Greece, the city was considered a colony for Romans living outside the Empire's capital. Philippi holds biblical significance because of its strong connection with the apostle Paul and its role as the home of the first church in Europe.

Paul first visited Philippi in approximately AD 50 after facing a closed door on his original missionary plans. Through a vision, God turned Paul's attention to Macedonia and his first stop was in Philippi (Acts 16). The letter that became the Book of Philippians was written approximately a decade after the church was established. It has been called a "prison epistle" because Paul wrote the letter during two years he spent under house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:17-31).

Despite Paul's captivity, this letter has an incredibly positive tone. Rather than complaining about his circumstances, the apostle saw an opportunity to share the gospel in a way he never could have otherwise. He also expressed gratitude to the Philippians for a gift they had sent to encourage him.

"Joy" also plays a major role in Paul's message to the Philippians. Rather than happiness based on circumstances, the believers in Philippi should strive to experience joy based

on their relationship with Christ. Situations change, but He is unchanging. And because He is in control, they can trust Him to meet their needs.

Such trust in God's goodness and provision gave Paul a sense of true contentment even while his freedom was limited. He could be satisfied with a little or a lot because he saw both as a gift from God's hands.

STUDY THE BIBLE

Philippians 4:10-14

¹⁰ I rejoiced in the Lord greatly because once again you renewed your care for me. You were, in fact, concerned about me but lacked the opportunity to show it. ¹¹ I don't say this out of need, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I find myself. ¹² I know both how to make do with little, and I know how to make do with a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content—whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need. ¹³ I am able to do all things through him[d] who strengthens me. ¹⁴ Still, you did well by partnering with me in my hardship.

Acknowledge the strength and provision of God. Paul stated that he had rejoiced because the Philippians had renewed their care for him. The Philippian believers apparently discovered that Paul was under arrest and wanted to do something to offer support.

The Greek word for *concerned* (*phroneo*) appears throughout the letter. It was an attitude Paul wanted the believers in Philippi to nurture and reproduce. The wording indicates they had never lost their concern for Paul and his work, but they only acted in a tangible way when they discovered Paul's true circumstances. Knowing he had not been forgotten and they wanted to assist him added to his joy.

Most likely, this tangible support came in the form of a financial gift delivered by a representative named Epaphroditus. In general, Paul never took payment or support for his missionary work. He wanted to do all he could to remove additional burdens from those he helped. This practice also allowed him to refute claims made by some that he was only in ministry for the money he could fleece from trusting church members.

Some of this concern can be discerned in the way he addressed the Philippians. He never actually “thanked” them for their support. Instead, he appreciated their care and concern. The Greek verb translated *renewed* can refer to a flower that blossoms in spring.¹ This expressed Paul’s heart and his gratitude for the refreshment the Philippians provided.

Likewise, he did not initially refer to a “gift.” Again, the apostle acknowledged their generosity and the fact that they **lacked the opportunity to show it** earlier. While he never revealed why the Philippians were delayed, Paul clearly appreciated the renewed connection with his friends.

While the financial support undoubtedly helped Paul in his difficult situation, the spiritual relationships were what mattered to him. His joy was in the Lord first and foremost, so that joy served as the lens through which he saw any blessing. For him, the financial value of the offering was nothing compared to the love and fellowship it represented.

Ultimately, Paul recognized God as the lone source of his contentment. The Philippians were instruments of God’s blessings, but his complete trust ultimately rested in God. In his mind, he never felt like he was in need because he knew God was in control and would provide every need he had. Paul refused to focus on the particular circumstances of any given moment. Rather than angling (or even outright begging) for a second gift, Paul relied on God as his Provider. As a result, he had learned the value of true contentment.

The idea of learning a secret carried definite spiritual connotations. The Greek word Paul used (*memyemai*) was common in mystery religions. These pagan groups emphasized secret knowledge that could only be accessed through a special relationship with a divine being.² Paul, of course, rejected such mysteries. He had learned contentment from God, but such contentment was available to anyone willing to fully rely on Him in every situation.

The Greeks also had their own ideas about contentment. They saw it as an inner peace and sense of self-discipline that allowed an individual to weather any storm. Such people overcame their struggles through a proper attitude instead of being overwhelmed by them. Again, Paul was not interested in self-sufficiency. He acknowledged His complete dependence on God.

Modern readers might be tempted to confuse contentment with a fatalism in which people simply give up hope. They might believe that things will never improve so they might as well accept their situation. But that perspective removes God from the equation. And by taking God out, the entire meaning and message of genuine contentment is lost.

Through the power of God, Paul knew how to **make do with little** and **how to make do with a lot**. He could be hungry, or he could eat his fill. He could experience plenty, or He could experience want. In truth, Paul had been through all of those circumstances, and they only deepened his commitment to the Savior. Paul had proven time and again that he could survive—and even thrive—in any setting because His contentment didn't rest in material stuff.

It was all rooted in his personal relationship with God through Christ.

Indeed, Christ was the key to everything in Paul's life. Instead of worrying about the present or the future, he knew that he could **do all things** through Jesus because Jesus

would be the One providing the power in the first place. Many ancient philosophers believed contentment came through rigorous internal discipline, but Paul knew his strength was not the product of anything he could do. His faith was anchored in Christ (the “him” in v. 13), who had all the strength Paul would ever need.

Ironically, many Christians quote verse 13 as a confession of their dependence on God without understanding the whole context. They interpret it as a universal promise about what Christians can accomplish. In truth, contentment in the face of suffering and persecution provides a vivid backdrop for God’s demonstration of strength in this verse. Paul certainly believed in a mighty God, but he would never water down the importance of suffering in finding God’s strength. In fact, his use of **all things** likely refers back to the entire list of circumstances—both positive and negative—from verses 11-12.

Even though Paul relied on Christ for everything, he again praised the Philippians for being a part of God’s plan. He noted that they **did well by partnering** to meet his needs and to spread the gospel in his current situation. The Greek word-ing is related to the word for fellowship (*koinonia*) and paints a picture of two people walking in the same direction.³

What’s more, their fellowship joined them to his **hardship**. They were not simply casual acquaintances who stepped back when the heat was turned up. Rather, they were like family members who walked through fire and rain. Paul never viewed such suffering from a strictly physical perspective. He also filtered his trials through the lens of eternity. So, those who partnered with his hardship would also share in the eternal blessings of his work.

The Philippians’ example reminds contemporary readers that they also can be God’s hands and feet. We are all called to minister in our own setting. But by partnering with oth-

ers, we get to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. We get the chance to see the gospel's reach expand and the kingdom grow.

What are some of the lasting truths in Philippians 4:10-14?

- ▶ Our contentment is not dependent on material possessions, but on Christ.
- ▶ God remains the ultimate Provider of our every need.
- ▶ Relying on God's provisions allows believers to thrive in any circumstance.
- ▶ Christians should take advantage of opportunities they have to partner for the sake of the gospel.

Philippians 4:15-18

¹⁵ **And you Philippians know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you alone.** ¹⁶ **For even in Thessalonica you sent gifts for my need several times.** ¹⁷ **Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that is increasing to your account.** ¹⁸ **But I have received everything in full, and I have an abundance. I am fully supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you provided—a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.**

Give generously from God's provision. Generosity is a mark of God's people. That's because the Bible clearly states that anything we "own" really doesn't belong to us. It belongs to God.

The Philippians apparently understood this concept because they had a history of being generous to Paul. He was the first person to bring the gospel to Macedonia, beginning with Philippi (Acts 16). And while the Philippians weren't the only ones to benefit from his ministry, he remembered

that they were the only ones who had partnered **in the matter of giving and receiving**.

What's more, Paul noted that their gifts were not one-time contributions. After his release from the Philippian jail, Paul moved on to minister in the town of Thessalonica. Even then, the members of the Philippian church continued to send gifts that met Paul's immediate needs.

The Philippians' generosity must have provided a special blessing for Paul on his journeys, considering what he received from others. While the gifts from Philippi followed him from town to town, enemies from other cities also followed him trying to cause trouble (Acts 17:13). One brought comfort and encouragement; the other simply created headaches.

But, aside from the Philippians, few—if any—other congregations in the region came to his aid. They may have been the “brothers” who supplied his needs in Corinth (2 Cor. 11:8). Again, Paul used the Greek word *koinonia* to describe the fellowship of the Philippians. The other churches missed out on the chance to be a tangible part of the gospel work that Paul was building.

Typically, Paul balanced recognizing the thoughtfulness of the gift with confessing his absolute dependence on Christ to meet his needs. He did not **seek the gift** from the Philippians. He never begged for their offerings or held his ministry to them over their heads. They gave willingly and voluntarily of their own accord. They wanted to bless Paul, and he saw them as agents of God's provision in his life. As one commentator has noted, Paul's letter was, in part, a receipt for their gift and giving them credit for their investment.⁴

Instead of focusing on the financial gifts he had received, Paul emphasized the spiritual blessings that the Philippians would experience for their obedience. He knew that God never allows obedience and generosity to go unrewarded.

As Jesus had noted, those who give will receive a return that far exceeds the gift (Luke 6:38). Paul used a pair of financial terms to describe the benefits of such generous giving. The offerings of the Philippians represented profit that would be credited to their account.

Just like today, church leaders in the first century were open to accusations of greed, and Paul was no exception. But he emphasized that this letter was not a fundraiser or an attempt to get more from the Philippians.

To be clear, Paul was not promoting what contemporary evangelicals would call a “prosperity gospel.” He was not tying the Philippians gift to a “name it and claim it” theology where large gifts guaranteed wealth and prosperity. In truth, God blesses generous givers because God blesses obedience of all kinds. Also, Paul did not indicate that the rewards would be financial or even material. The Philippians were not giving to have something they could hold over God’s head and demand reimbursement. They gave out of love and faithfulness—which God never fails to honor.

Returning to the provision of God, Paul reiterated that he had everything he needed. Again, he used business imagery to illustrate his point. He had received **everything in full**. God didn’t make a down payment or spread the blessings out over time, but met every need as it arose. In fact, He overpaid since Paul enjoyed an **abundance** that comes from being **fully supplied**. This confession also underscores that Paul was not trying to get more from his friends in Philippi.

In addition to the financial terms, Paul also used language from the Old Testament to explain how God viewed the Philippians’ gift. Comparing their contribution to the offerings made by the ancient priests, Paul said the Philippians’ generosity had three qualities. First, it was a **fragrant offering**. This was a common way to describe an appropriate offering in the Old Testament.

Second, it was an **acceptable sacrifice**. This was a major point for God from the beginning. Contemporary readers may recall the differences related to the acceptability of Cain and Abel's offering. In the law, God further clarified which sacrifices were acceptable and which were not. Obedience to those guidelines demonstrated faith—a quality shared by the Philippians as they gave to meet Paul's needs.

Finally, the gift from Philippi was **pleasing to God**. This closely relates to the offering's acceptability since God would never accept an offering that did not please Him. Readers may reflect on the similarities between the Philippians' gift and Paul's challenge to present a "living sacrifice" to the believers in Rome (Rom. 12:1-2).

One was a physical sacrifice while the other was financial, but they are both examples of faith. Financial generosity is a sign of personal devotion and discipleship. One cannot truly give financially from the heart until their heart has already been surrendered to God.

Paul's words should remind us that our offerings on behalf of kingdom work are actually gifts back to Him. While such gifts may be physically supporting a pastor or missionary, the goal of kingdom work always comes back to God. He will provide the reward in His way and in His time. And those blessings should inspire believers to continue their generous patterns moving forward.

What are some of the lasting truths in Philippians 4:15-18?

- ▶ God owns it all; we use His resources for His honor.
- ▶ Churches have an opportunity to generously give in support of the gospel.
- ▶ The gifts we provide are sacrificial, but God will reward our obedience.

Philippians 4:19-20

¹⁹ **And my God will supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.** ²⁰ **Now to our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.**

Trust God to supply your need. God's provision includes two main characteristics. First, He leaves nothing to chance. Paul said that God would supply all the Philippians' needs. Earlier in the passage, Paul had confessed to receiving everything in full and enjoying abundance from God (v. 18). God will never shortchange His people.

The second mark of God's provision is its limitless supply. Paul told his readers that God meets needs out of **his riches in glory in Christ Jesus**. Since God owns all things, everything is under His control and available for His use. He has the resources to supply whatever a believer lacks, whether physical or spiritual. This is a privilege only His people can receive. The Greek wording also indicates that God's resources are not just available, but they are appropriate (**according to**) for every circumstance.

As Paul thought about God's loving provision, He responded with an outpouring of praise. The apostle turned his attention to **our God and Father**, which emphasized the close relationship His children share with the Creator of the universe. While He is powerful and utterly beyond our human understanding, He is also close and available during our time of need. The use of "our" also highlighted the relationship Paul shared with his friends in Philippi.

More important, He is worthy of **glory forever and ever**. Like other cultures in the first century, the Philippians were bombarded with idolatry and paganism. But Paul reminded them that only one God was truly worthy of honor and glory. The God who can supply every need deserves all worship and praise. His doxology sheds a light on the future,

as well as the present, and reminded readers that their ultimate purpose in life is tied to bringing glory to God.

The eternal language in verse 20 also reflects the language of heaven in the Book of Revelation. (See Rev. 1:6; 4:9; 5:13; and 7:12.) In His model prayer, Jesus noted that the honor and glory accorded God in heaven should be replicated through the lives of His people each day (Matt. 6:9). Paul understood that as God's people responded properly to His generous provision of their needs, He would be glorified—and that would give humans a little taste of heaven on earth.

What are some of the lasting truths in Philippians 4:19-20?

- ▶ God supplies every need His children might have.
- ▶ God's resources are more than enough to meet the challenges we face.
- ▶ God's provision should prompt praise and reflect the honor He receives in heaven.

LIVE IT OUT

As you reflect on this session, respond to the following questions:

Who has been an instrument of God's provision in your life? What needs can you help meet around you? _____

What are some things you trust to meet your needs more than God? Why do those things have such a strong hold on you? _____

In what ways to do you partner with others in the gospel?
How can you find other avenues for partnerships? _____

Would you describe yourself as truly content in Christ?
How can you become more content in Him? What do you
need to eliminate to make that transition? _____

¹ Max Anders, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, vol. 8 in the Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1999), 263.

² Richard R. Melick, Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 32 in The New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1991), 153-154.

³ Melick, Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 155.

⁴ Anders, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, 264.



For a deeper dive, check out the article ***Debit or Credit? Paul's Use of Financial Terminology*** in the current issue of Biblical Illustrator.

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SESSION 4

Godly Contentment

THE POINT

Godliness with contentment is great gain.

THE PASSAGE

1 Timothy 6:6-11,17-19

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

John D. Rockefeller was an amazing study of contrasts. You might even call him an enigma of sorts. On the one hand, most considered him a ruthless robber baron in his day. In building the Standard Oil empire, he essentially cornered the market on American petroleum, often at the expense of much smaller businesses. When the company was finally declared an illegal monopoly in 1911, Standard Oil was broken into more than thirty different companies.

On the other hand, he was devoutly religious and an incredible philanthropist. Along with peers like Andrew Carnegie, Rockefeller donated millions of dollars to causes that were important to him. For example, one gift of \$80 million completely transformed the University of Chicago from a struggling school to a powerhouse in research. He also funded medical projects that helped to eliminate illnesses like hookworm and yellow fever around the globe.

In the eight decades since his death, Rockefeller has continued to be both a symbol of greed and a paragon of generosity—depending on whose opinion you believe.¹

A fine line always seems to exist between greed and generosity. It doesn't take much to tip the scale in one direction

or the other. But, from a biblical perspective, one quality can protect individuals—rich or poor—against crossing a dangerous line: godly contentment. When a people embrace true contentment, rooted in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, they can move through life with wisdom and compassion. More important, they can point others to Christ and His kingdom.

In today's passage, Paul instructs his young friend Timothy about how to deal with the wealthy members of his congregation. First and foremost, the aging apostle encouraged the young pastor to nurture a spirit of godly contentment. That can be a tall order for any believer, but when contentment takes root, it makes a difference in the lives of people now and for eternity.

THE SETTING

Paul's First Letter to Timothy is among three books known as the "Pastoral Epistles." Along with his Letter to Titus and his Second Letter to Timothy, this epistle marks Paul's teaching to younger pastors who were working to establish effective churches. Most conservative scholars believe these letters also represent the last known writings of Paul. They are, in some ways, his final works before his execution in Rome, which adds significance to their content.

At the time of this letter, Timothy was serving as the pastor of the congregation in Ephesus. This church had been founded by Paul on one of his earlier missionary journeys and would later have the apostle John as a pastor. For his part, Timothy wrestled with his own unique struggles as indicated in the letter.

One problem Timothy faced was false teachers in the area. Ephesus was a diverse city and some Jewish legalists were trying to work their way into the Ephesian church, so Paul challenged him to maintain a solid faith (1 Tim. 1:3-17). Paul

also helped his young protégé work through pastoral issues like prayer (2:1-7), relationships (2:8-15), qualifications for leadership (3:1-13), and support for weaker believers (5:1-25).

Ephesus was also one of the wealthier cities in the Roman Empire, and Timothy apparently ministered to members who were well-to-do by first-century standards. In today's passage, Paul advised Timothy to help those wealthy believers to develop a spirit of generosity and to live with contentment. This would benefit their personal lives and expand the reach of the kingdom.

The other Pastoral Epistles place a heavy focus on Christian living (Titus 3:1-11; 2 Timothy 1:8-18) and the second coming of Christ (Titus 2:11-15; 2 Timothy 4:1-8). But each of these epistles provides a foundation for church polity that remains viable and effective today.

STUDY THE BIBLE

1 Timothy 6:6-8

⁶ But godliness with contentment is great gain. ⁷ For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out. ⁸ If we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.

Godly contentment does not depend on possessions. In context, Paul introduced his teaching about contentment with a warning against false teachers (6:3-5). These individuals had created a system that fed on the fears of others—and had grown wealthy as a result.

By contrast, Paul understood two things about ministry. First, it was not necessarily profitable. Rather than growing wealthy, Paul suffered for the gospel. He worked as a tentmaker to support himself and to ensure the churches he served took on no extra burdens on his account (Acts 18:3; 20:33-35). And second, he knew **godliness** had

its own reward when combined with one powerful quality: **contentment.**

When Paul spoke of *contentment*, he referred to a calm assurance that he was in the best possible circumstances—even if those circumstances seemed grim from the outside. Paul did not allow anxiety or fear to rule his life. He told the Philippians to avoid worry (Phil. 4:6) and later reminded Timothy that God was not the author of fear (2 Tim. 1:7). Because he completely trusted God in every situation, he could be content in every situation.

Paul told his young friend that the partnership of godliness and genuine contentment actually produces **great gain.** Again, this might have seemed like an oxymoron to many believers in the first century—just as it does for many Christians today. But one must understand that Paul was not necessarily talking about financial gain. Instead, he was focused on intangible elements, like peace, faith, and security. Unlike transitory possessions, our relationship with Christ will never dwindle or be left to others after we're gone.

Also, Paul never connected contentment and financial gain because he knew that contentment did not come from material possessions. While money is necessary to survive in life, ultimate joy and satisfaction—contentment—is rooted in a personal relationship with Christ. As he told his friends in the church at Philippi, he could be content in any situation because he knew God would supply everything he needed (Phil. 4:10-20). And that assurance was all he needed.

The proof that material possessions held no permanent power, Paul noted, can be seen the origin of every human life. He reminded Timothy and the others in Ephesus that **we brought nothing into the world.** We were all born naked and helpless. Yet, God has still supplied our needs throughout our lives.

Likewise, **we can take nothing out.** The old cliché states that you will never see a hearse pulling a trailer. Material possessions belong to the material world, which is why Paul always emphasized heavenly treasures. Just as we came into this life empty-handed, we will leave the same way.

Paul's teaching here echoes the Old Testament experiences of Job and Solomon. After learning of his devastating losses, Job reminded his wife he had entered this life naked and would leave the same way. Despite all that, God was still in charge and worthy of honor and praise (Job 1:20-21). Likewise, the Preacher in Ecclesiastes—Solomon—bookended his work by admitting the “absolute futility” of material possessions (Eccl. 1:2) and by confessing that true meaning only comes from remembering our Creator (12:1-7).

With that perspective, it is much easier to identify our priorities—what really matters in life. As the apostle told Timothy, when God meets our basic needs—**food and clothing**—we can rest in that. While it is not a sin to have more, if that were all God gave us, we would be incredibly blessed. As Paul affirmed, **we will be content with these.**

The phrase *will be content* is in future tense, but it also carries an imperative that demands practical application. Believers must demonstrate contentment that depends on God and not possessions. Otherwise, we fall into the trap of the greedy false teachers and selfishly focus on accumulating as much as we can simply for the sake of accumulation.

What are some of the lasting truths in 1 Timothy 6:6-8?

- ▶ Godliness and contentment work together as a blessing to believers.
- ▶ We start and end life with nothing, so we shouldn't put our trust in stuff.
- ▶ True contentment is found in completely trusting God to meet our needs.

1 Timothy 6:9-11

⁹ But those who want to be rich fall into temptation, a trap, and many foolish and harmful desires, which plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and by craving it, some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. ¹¹ But you, man of God, flee from these things, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness.

Craving more possessions only leads to ruin. It should be emphasized that Paul was not demonizing wealth or demanding that every Christian take a vow of poverty. And, unlike many false teachers who tormented the early church, he did not believe material possessions were evil. His words didn't even condemn those who wanted to be successful and accumulate work through honest, hard work and personal sacrifice. Instead, he simply encouraged contentment—and warned of the dangers of crossing that line.

In describing the dangers, Paul went beyond warning that money never provides satisfaction. He also presented a line of pitfalls that build on one another and that we should avoid. The first of these pitfalls is **temptation**. Like a fish drawn to a lure, those who chase after wealth rarely see the hook attached. Once the hook is set, it leads to bigger problems.

Second, Paul told Timothy that those who surrender to the temptation and cross the contentment line **fall into ... a trap**. The wording paints a picture of a wild animal caught and unable to escape—completely at the mercy of the hunter. Their desire for more overtakes their lives and leads to serious and harmful consequences.

Finally, the apostle used strong language—**ruin and destruction**—to describe just how devastating the final result can be. Their personal shipwreck changes their priorities to

the point that wealth becomes an all-consuming obsession. One commentator has noted that such people transform into some kind of monster that holds little resemblance to the person who existed before money took over.

Such destruction can take many forms. In some cases, it could involve financial ruin. The pursuit for more often blinds people to the dangers and convinces them to take foolish risks with their money. The writer of Proverbs pointed out that the “borrower is a slave to the lender” (Prov. 22:7), also comparing debt to animals trapped by hunters (6:1-5).

But even if such individuals “win” with money, their greed generally takes a toll on relationships. Friendships can be strained, and families are often torn apart by a reckless pursuit of financial success. People may begin to see others only as sources of income instead of souls to be cherished. As the old saying warns, it’s dangerous to love things and use people instead of loving people and using things.

And, as Paul noted, the quest for more always has a negative impact on one’s relationship with God. At its core, such greed really represents a form of idolatry because individuals are pursuing material possessions instead of pursuing God. Their priorities have shifted, and they start relying on created things instead of their Creator.

When viewing Paul’s message about wealth here, we need to understand what he did not say as well as what he did. Verse 10 has often been misquoted, so that many believe Paul defined money as **a root of all kinds of evil**. But it’s important to catch his true teaching: it is **the love of money** that leads people astray. In other words, money itself is not really the issue. Money can keep the lights on at local churches and fund ministries around the world. At worst, it is neutral and depends on the heart and motivation of the user.

Paul also did not say that every form of evil springs from the love of money. While loving money certainly leads to

trouble, issues like uncontrolled sexual appetites or a basic lack of integrity also move individuals into sin. In fact, the first two sins mentioned in the Bible—the fall of Adam and Eve and the murder of Abel—came before money or wealth were practical issues in human history.

The key is maintaining a healthy perspective and a proper balance. Like so many other areas of life, believers should regularly step back and honestly examine their attitudes toward wealth. Such a ruthless critique will allow us to dig out the dangerous root so that good crops can grow.

In contrast, improper motives always lead to unabashed greed, which leads to covetousness and a general lack of concern toward others. Paul talked about **craving** wealth, which indicates a desire that stretches beyond any healthy limits. And the results are predictable. For example, an overweight person may suffer any number of physical ailments—diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, and even death—because he has an unhealthy craving for food. Likewise, those who crave money and wealth open themselves to devastating consequences. Without correction, they will even drift from the faith and bring themselves nothing but grief.

Paul compared it to being **pierced**. In a sense, they stab themselves and create pain that could be avoided. Today, we might call it “shooting themselves in the foot,” but the results are the same. The self-inflicted wounds run deep and leave marks.

Science tells us that nature abhors a vacuum; the same is true in the spiritual world. That’s why Paul never told believers to avoid something without giving them a godly alternative. As he urged Timothy to **flee from** the dangers of chasing after wealth, he challenged his younger friend to pursue the things of God. Instead of wasting energy on things that will not last, Timothy—and all the believers in

Ephesus—needed to invest in things like **righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness**. Those qualities never happen by accident. They must be nurtured. That requires hard work, but they produce eternal benefits.

Paul reminded Timothy that he was a **man of God**, which carried a particular responsibility. Like the prophets of old, God had placed a unique calling on the young man's life. What's more, He had placed the believers of Ephesus under his care. His life had to be different from the false teachers who were pointing people in the wrong direction.

What are some of the lasting truths in 1 Timothy 6:9-11?

- ▶ An unhealthy pursuit of wealth leads to temptations that result in sin.
- ▶ Money is not evil—but the love of money creates chaos.
- ▶ The primary problem with chasing wealth is that it takes God off the throne of our lives.
- ▶ Instead of pursuing wealth, we should focus on pursuing godly qualities.

1 Timothy 6:17-19

¹⁷ **Instruct those who are rich in the present age not to be arrogant or to set their hope on the uncertainty of wealth, but on God, who richly provides us with all things to enjoy.** ¹⁸ **Instruct them to do what is good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and willing to share,** ¹⁹ **storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of what is truly life.**

Set your hope on God and store up riches in heaven. After painting a disturbing picture of greed, Paul turned his attention to the current situation. He had initially focused on those who wanted to be rich. In this passage, he addressed

members of the church who already had built up wealth. In doing so, he was able to contrast the worst-case scenario with a hopeful potential.

Paul commanded Timothy to **instruct those who are rich in the present age**. The phrase *present age* indicates two truths. First, it demonstrates that wealthy people were already in the congregation. Ephesians was a prosperous city in the Empire, so wealth was not uncommon. And while we see no hint that they had gained their wealth immorally, they still needed to learn wise stewardship and contentment. It's also important to remember that even those who live modestly in some cultures would be considered wildly wealthy in a different context.

Second, he shared that the wealth of this present age is strictly tied to this present age. Material possessions are fine for this world, yet they have no impact on the world to come. Stocks rise and fall and leaders change economic policies on a daily basis. So wealth, like everything else in this life, is temporary and requires proper perspective.

Again, Paul did not see wealth as a sin or expect those who had earned their riches honestly to give everything away. He knew many godly saints were wealthy and used their riches for God's glory—people like Job, Abraham, David, and Solomon. The key is using those riches for kingdom purposes, remembering that God actually owns it all (Ps. 24:1).

Unfortunately, wealth can create two problems in a church. The first occurs when wealthy individuals abuse their position. But a related problem arises when church leaders attempt to gain special favor from wealthy members. James, the brother of Jesus, raised a red flag about this in his letter (Jas. 2:1-4). He noted that the sin was not in having much, but in denigrating those with less.

To make sure neither problem took root in Ephesus, Paul commanded Timothy to tackle the issue head on. Solid

teaching often uproots potential problems before they have time to blossom. In Ephesus, Timothy needed to remind rich people regularly about the Source of their wealth. In response, they should **not ... set their hope on the uncertainty of wealth, but on God** and His provision.

In the New Testament, the concept of *hope* carried much more power than we may give it today. We use the term *hope* loosely to describe a personal desire or wish. But when Paul used the word, he was thinking about eternity. That's why he told Timothy to teach the rich believers that their eternal destination had nothing to do with their bank accounts. They could not buy their way into heaven. Like every other human, their only chance was to accept the finished work of Christ on their behalf.

Paul stressed again that God provided the material possessions that made these Christians wealthy. What's more, He provided them for one reason: *to enjoy*. God is not a cosmic killjoy who punishes fun. He blesses His people with good gifts to be used with a proper, Christ-centered perspective. He does not want us to wander into either legalistic asceticism or wanton self-indulgence. He calls us to walk a straight line that creates pleasure while reflecting His priorities.

This aligns well with Jesus' teaching in the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30). He emphasized that God distributes wealth as He wishes and blesses those who use His resources faithfully. He even increases the amounts for those who can be trusted.

In the same way, Paul emphasized that greater wealth creates greater responsibility. Wealth is not just about personal enjoyment. God also expects believers to use His resources for His glory. That includes sharing them through good works grounded in a spirit of generosity.

This does not mean that good works produce salvation. Instead, they demonstrate the truth of our salvation to the

world around us. In his earlier letter to the Ephesian church, Paul made it clear that we cannot earn our salvation, but we are nevertheless created for good works (Eph. 2:8-10).

Generosity and good works done on behalf of Christ carry eternal benefits. Paul had mentioned this “great gain” earlier in the letter (6:6). But he circled back to complete the thought in verse 19. Blessing others in Jesus’ name may not expand one’s earthly bank account, but it does lead to **storing up treasure** in heaven. Jesus said as much in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:19-21). This is a good reminder to all that God views our true wealth through the lens of our generosity rather than basing it on our accumulation.

Generosity also helps believers **take hold of what is truly life**. While we certainly meet needs on earth as we share freely, we also make an eternal impact for the kingdom of God—and God never lets that go unrewarded. Ultimately, using God’s resources for God’s glory provides purpose for our years on earth and reminds us that this world is not all there is. Since God is a giver (John 3:16) and we are made in His image (Gen. 1:27), we reflect Him to the world when we give.

What are some of the lasting truths in 1 Timothy 6:17-19?

- ▶ Wealthy people should set their hope on God, not their riches.
- ▶ Wealthy people have a responsibility to share God’s resources through good works.
- ▶ A generous spirit leads to building up eternal treasure in heaven.

LIVE IT OUT

As you reflect on this session, respond to the following questions:

When has an unhealthy desire for money become the root of some evil in your life? How did you root it out? _____

What makes riches so unreliable? Why are we so bad about trusting them more than God? _____

On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being “not much” and 10 being “more than I should,” how would you rate your dependence on wealth? What can you do to trust Christ instead of your possessions? _____

When have you used the resources God has given you for good works? How did that generosity make you feel? _____

¹ “John D. Rockefeller,” http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/John_D._Rockefeller

² Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, Jr., *1&2 Timothy, Titus*, vol. 34 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 169.