

Session 12

living contentedly

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

Philippians 4:10–13

BUILDUP THEME



INTERNALIZE GODLINESS

God teaches us contentment
that transcends our lot in life.

MEASURABLE RESPONSE

The learners will list reasons they
can find contentment in Christ.

MEMORY VERSE

“Not that I speak in respect
of want: for I have learned, in
whatsoever state I am, therewith
to be content” (Philippians 4:11).

Teacher Preparation

- Facebook and other social media sites are great for sharing updates and keeping people connected. But they also provide a medium for people to show and tell. People post pictures and tell stories about their lives to generate comments and likes. If some were honest, they are also motivated to make others feel bad about their own lives. For those people, their show and tell becomes showoff and tell.
- Read Philippians 4:10–13. Suppose Paul had put these verses out as a social media post. On whom does Paul focus? What might you write as a response? Paul learned contentment the hard way. He learned to trust God as he endured painful, dangerous, and miserable conditions.
- This session will help your learners understand that contentment comes from God and not from things. Challenge your learners to consider how content they are with their present circumstances. Encourage them to find joy and contentment from God rather than from Facebook likes and comments.

Session Summary

Paul wanted to thank the Philippians for their gift to him. He also wanted to let them know that he had learned contentment, which allowed him to be just fine whether he had a lot of resources or whether he had very few. We know from other passages in the Bible that Paul had suffered greatly in many ways. He’d also had times of peace and refreshment along the way. But whether he found himself destitute and hungry or cared for and full, he would be content because Christ would strengthen him and give him courage for whatever path he was called to walk.

Session Starters

Option 1—Social Media Posts

Gather

- Paper and pens.

Steps

1. Have the learners write a short social media post for the apostle Paul's time under house arrest.
2. Learners share and discuss their posts.

ASK: What did you imagine would be Paul's motivation for his post? To gather likes or followers?

ASK: What did you think would motivate Paul's post?

ASK: What often motivates you to make social media posts? Is a quest to find contentment one of them?

3. Transition to the Bible lesson.

Paul didn't make social media posts, but he did write about himself in letters. His goal was never to gather followers or get likes, though. He pointed people to Christ, the source of his contentment. He points us to Christ too. We can be content through Christ's power in us. This session will challenge us to do that.

Option 2—Social Media Evaluation

Steps

1. Have learners evaluate their most recent social media posts.

ASK: What are your top two or three reasons for making social media posts?

ASK: What are your underlying motivations?

ASK: What might your social media posts reveal about your contentedness?

2. Transition to the Bible lesson.

Paul didn't make social media posts, but he did write about himself in letters. His goal was never to gather followers or get likes, though. He pointed people to Christ, the source of his contentment. He points us to Christ too. We can be content through Christ's power in us. This session will challenge us to do that.

Bible Study

In the next section of Philippians, Paul stated his contentment, presented his process of learning contentment, and ended with the Person Who made his contentment possible. To be content, we must know there is a process, and more importantly, a Person Who oversees the learning process.

I. Be Content by Living Like Christ (Phil. 4:10)

A. Live joyfully

The Philippian church members had sent Epaphroditus to deliver a financial gift to Paul and to minister to him during his imprisonment (2:25). Epaphroditus became an additional gift from Philippi to Paul in that he served Paul selflessly. In response, Paul wanted to express his thanks to the Philippians. That was partly why he wrote them and planned to send his letter with Epaphroditus back to Philippi.

READ: Philippians 4:10.

Once again, Paul spoke about joy. This time it is in the context of rejoicing in the Lord for the Philippians, his faithful partners in the gospel. Paul didn't mention the Philippians' gift but rather their care for him. They had demonstrated thoughtful concern for him during his bleak confinement in Rome.

As mentioned earlier in this course, Epaphroditus risked his life to push through illness to get Paul the gift he needed to buy food and provisions (2:25–27). Epaphroditus illustrated the Philippians' sacrificial care for Paul.

ASK: What is often true of the spiritual level of those who give generously and sacrificially? *Sacrificial givers are often spiritually mature or well on their way to becoming spiritually mature.*

No doubt Paul was happy to get the financial gift, but he would spend all the money eventually. It wouldn't last. The Philippians' generous care, however, would remain forever. The evidence of the Philippians' spiritual maturity caused Paul joy. We too should be thrilled to see people mature in their walk with the Lord.

Perhaps nothing speaks of a believer's maturity more than his or her willingness to give generously. For many believers, their toughest step toward spiritual growth is giving Christ full access to their wallets.

Paul rejoiced in the Lord for bringing the Philippians to maturity in the area of giving. Only God could make the Philippians so caring and generous.

B. Exercise patience

Evidently the Philippians had long desired to send a gift to Paul but had lacked the opportunity. When the logistics worked out and Epaphroditus volunteered to take the trip, the Philippians sent him with eagerness. Unfavorable circumstances, not their lack of interest, had kept them from helping Paul earlier. Paul graciously acknowledged that the Philippians' giving spirit hadn't waned.

ASK: What might Paul have written if he had become impatient with the delay in their giving? *It's about time! I'm in bad shape here. Try harder to get me the gift next time.*

The contented exhibit patience even in the most trying circumstances. They don't waver in their trust in God or complain when God delays His provision.

II. Be Content by Learning from Christ (Phil. 4:11, 12)

A. Learn to be abased (4:11, 12)

READ: Philippians 4:11.

Paul wanted the Philippian believers to know he was not rejoicing simply because of their gift, and he certainly was not hinting that he would like another. Paul carefully explained that God had worked in his life to make him content in any situation.

Contentment must be learned, though some believers learn the lesson faster than others. Paul learned to be content through the inescapable, helpless circumstances God allowed him to experience. Being under house arrest and unable to work but still responsible for his own provisions put Paul in a place of dependency. He had to depend on others to meet his basic needs. When no one could help Paul for periods of time, he had to be patient and learn contentment.

ASK: Why is contentment difficult to learn? *We naturally want more things and better things. We compare our lives to others and want what they have. The world assigns value to people based on what they own and the experiences they can afford.*

Paul learned to be content in whatever state he was in because Christ remained with Paul and in control of Paul's circumstances. When Paul began to feel sorry for himself or pine for something better, he turned to God to find his satisfaction and joy. He learned to be content by learning to trust God's goodness and wise control over his life. Contentment is all about deepening one's relationship with God rather than changing one's circumstances.

ASK: When have you failed to find contentment by changing your circumstances for the better?

Paul did not seek satisfaction from things that he lacked but had

learned to maintain his joy and gratitude, finding his fulfillment in God. This independent state allowed Paul to conduct himself according to God's will even when he suffered from a lack of provision.

The more we allow ourselves to dwell on our lack of satisfaction in life, the more we are drawn to the things of the world, leading to attitudes of greed or jealousy. But when we learn contentment in God, we will have His peace and His attitudes within our hearts in all circumstances.

READ: Philippians 4:12.

Paul had to learn what to do when God allowed him to be abased or brought low.

READ: 1 Corinthians 4:11; 2 Corinthians 11:23–27. **ASK:** What do Paul's experiences reveal about circumstances and contentment? *There are no circumstances in which contentment isn't required or possible. Paul experienced terrible circumstances and dire needs but learned to be content in them all.*

Paul had faced frequent imprisonments, stoning, close encounters with death, numerous beatings, and shipwrecks; he had experienced hunger, cold, and nakedness. Paul knew how to be abased, to suffer, to be hungry. Through all these experiences, Paul had developed the spiritual maturity to endure trials with grace, trusting in God to provide. No doubt, he saw all these hardships as means to becoming more like Christ, sharing in His sufferings.

READ: Acts. 16:25. **ASK:** How did Paul and Silas express their contented peace even when imprisoned in Philippi? *They sang at midnight in prison.*

Learning to be abased takes a surrender of the demand to control our lives. It means trusting God fully to meet our needs in His time.

B. Learn to abound (4:12)

Paul also knew how to abound, or to be full. Paul had stayed at the home of a wealthy, prominent Philippian woman, Lydia (Acts 16:14, 15), and many scholars believe he came from a prosperous Jewish family. It might seem strange to think one might need to learn how to handle prosperity, but those lessons are perhaps the hardest ones to learn.

ASK: Why do people still need to learn contentment even when they have all their needs met? *Enough is never enough for our greedy hearts. Even when we have all we need, we can be discontented with what we have and want more, different, or better.*

ASK: Do you think it's harder to be content with little or content with much? Why?

Perhaps Paul learned to be content with much during the days he had suffered hunger and need. Sometimes we don't realize how good we have it until we lose it all. When we do have something again, we appreciate it more.

Learning to abound means to praise God for His blessings and to look for ways to use it to help others in need. That's what Lydia had done. The Philippians met in her home (Acts 16:40). She used her wealth to spread the gospel. Perhaps her testimony also influenced Paul.

III. Be Content by Leaning on Christ (Phil. 4:13)

Today, we're led to believe that external circumstances can determine our contentment. Certainly, things like relationships, careers, and financial concerns have significance in our lives, but none of them can guarantee contentment. Paul's contented state came from something deeper than his situation, something apart from poverty or prosperity. Paul had learned the secret of contentment in any circumstance is dependence on Christ for courage and strength.

A. Leaning on Christ for strength

READ: Philippians 4:13.

Paul chose a word for "content" often used by the Stoics of his day. The Stoics' highest aim was to develop a state of mind that let them feel self-sufficient. Their goal was to break the natural human tendency to depend on things and people. They believed they could eventually reach a state of being in which nothing was essential. Epictetus wrote, "Begin with a cup or a household utensil; if it breaks, say, 'I don't care.' . . . If you go on long enough and if you try hard enough, you will come to a state when you can watch your nearest and dearest suffer and die, and say, 'I don't care.'"

ASK: Describe the life of the contented according to the Stoic. *It is essentially learning to live in denial. The Stoic life, if it were possible to attain, would be devoid of joy and other emotions. It would be a terrible way to exist.*

What was the difference between the Stoic and Paul if they both used the same word? Stoics depended on themselves—their willpower, their work, their strength—to get them through life and bury their feelings. Paul, on the other hand, remained independent of circumstances because he remained dependent on Christ. Consequently, his joy remained vibrant. Paul's contentedness is worth imitating.

"I can do all things" is the philosophy of a self-made man or woman. Paul said, "I can do all things through Christ." People may try other substitutes in their search for power, but substitutes fall sadly short of the goal.

ASK: What might people try to substitute for “Christ” in Paul’s statement that he can do all things through Christ? *Pleasure, education, money, status, relationships.*

Every substitute for Christ will fail. That’s why some of the most famous and most wealthy people in the world choose to end their lives. They got everything they could want and still felt empty and discontented.

Only through Jesus Christ could Paul be truly content no matter his circumstances because Christ constantly infused him with strength. Paul’s contentment was founded in a Person, not in circumstances.

ASK: What are some trying situations in which Christ will give us the strength to be content? *Illness, financial strain, job loss, death of a loved one.*

In life’s difficulties, we can’t depend on our own strength. Consider a newly planted sapling in a storm. If the young tree has not been supported with a strong stake, it will be blown and bent in all directions by the wind. Our lives without Christ can be compared to saplings in the wind. When we stake our contentment on the work and Person of Christ, we can resist the swaying control of our circumstances. We can be constantly content in Him because He never changes!

B. Leaning on Christ for courage

Paul didn’t claim in Philippians 4:13 that he could do *anything* his heart desired through Christ’s power in him. If he had thrown himself off a bridge, for example, he would have landed in a splat rather than landing safely “through Christ.” In context, Paul meant Jesus gives him strength to be content in tough situations and in good situations equally—to continue living for Christ through all challenges.

We can’t claim this verse for anything we choose to do ourselves, thinking that God will bless whatever enterprise we attempt. We can’t expect His blessing on the decisions we make without consulting Him. On the other hand, if we’re seeking God’s will, we can trust Him to provide all we need to fulfill His purpose for us. In Christ, God gives us courage to do His will, even when He calls us to do something challenging or difficult.

Paul desired to live for Christ, proclaiming the gospel wherever he found himself. Whatever task God had set for him, Paul found the courage to accomplish it. We, too, can take heart from Paul’s declaration. When we are in Christ, we draw our courage from Him to do whatever He asks of us, even if the task seems impossible or, as in Paul’s case many times, dangerous. We are not asked to deny our anxieties or to pretend that difficult situations don’t exist. Rather, we can bring them to the Lord, Who gives us the courage to act.

ASK: When do you need to lean on Christ for courage?

Session Application

Steps

1. Help the learners evaluate their level of contentment.

ASK: In what ways are you content?

ASK: In what areas of your life do you struggle to be content?

2. Give learners an opportunity to share how God has helped them be content. God can use testimonies to encourage other believers to work on their contentment.
3. Have the learners write out why they can be content in Christ. Have them include a list of His attributes that ensure their contentment.
4. Have the learners pray for one another to be content in specific situations.

giving graciously

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

Philippians 4:14–23

BUILDUP THEME



PREPARE TO SERVE

God supplies our needs as we give generously to support His work.

MEASURABLE RESPONSE

The learners will evaluate how and why they give to the Lord.

MEMORY VERSE

“But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19).

Teacher Preparation

- ☐ Read Philippians 4:14–23. Paul wrote verse 19 specifically to the Philippians, who gave sacrificially to support Paul’s missionary work. Many believers have wasted or mismanaged their finances only to claim Philippians 4:19. They expect God to pay for their bills regardless of how they spend their money. God will supply the needs of generous givers. That doesn’t mean God will make generous givers wealthy in this life. God will, however, reward them in eternity.
- ☐ Paul ended his letter with an emphasis on sacrificial giving. He wanted the Philippians to continue their practice so they might bear the fruit from their giving. What are those fruits? Among other things, they include contentment, joy, and peace.
- ☐ Emphasize to your learners that the world’s path to happiness is backwards and invalid. They think getting as much money and as many things as possible will make them happy and content. The fruit of selfish spending is debt, disappointment, and ultimately despair. Only through giving to the Lord will a believer find joy and contentment.

Session Summary

As Paul concluded his letter to the Philippians, he thanked them again for their generosity, not only in their latest gift but also in consistent giving over the years. While he appreciated their gifts, he also highly valued their willingness to partner with him in his struggles. He didn’t want gifts from them to pad his own pockets, but he greatly desired for them the spiritual fruit that would result from their generous giving. He emphasized that he was fully satisfied on receipt of their gift and that God was pleased with their offering as well. He assured them that God would faithfully provide for them as they had faithfully provided for him and that God has an infinite storehouse of riches, both physical and spiritual. Paul concluded with greetings from other believers, especially from those in Caesar’s household, and a blessing of grace for them.