

Philippians

Part 21 – The Secret of Contentment

“Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.”

- From *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* by Jeremiah Burroughs (19)

Philippians 4:10-13

The world in which we live is fueled by discontent. It runs the engines of government, economy, and society. Everyone wants more than he has or wants something different from what she has. They want ever increasing health, wealth and happiness. Enormous amounts of time, energy and money are devoted to seeking this elusive contentment and for its sake sacrifices are made, families are divided, the law is broken, great risks are undertaken, and pleasures hotly pursued.



Long ago the prophet Habakkuk described today's man or woman well: "He is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied" (2:5). May it not be so among us who profess Christ as Lord. The secret of contentment is not a particular prayer, breathing exercise, visualization, or other spiritual technique. The secret of contentment is not stoic detachment. The secret of contentment is a Person. The soul-satisfying treasure of Jesus is so great that when facing plenty or lack, comfort or persecution we can say, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Main Idea: Through Christ God has provided His people with the strength to be content in any circumstance.

Vs. 10 – Paul once again gives voice to joy. This time it is in reference to the financial assistance the church sent to him through Epaphroditus. The second sentence of the verse is designed to correct any possible misunderstanding of the first: as if Paul were irritated that their gift had not come sooner. Their lack of opportunity may have consisted in not knowing at first where Paul was (It was a long and tumultuous period of several years between the time Paul was arrested in Jerusalem and the time he arrived a prisoner in Rome). Also the journey to Rome was a long one and at some point Epaphroditus became seriously ill.

Vs. 11 – Vv.11-13 are designed to forestall another possible misunderstanding: that Paul had been chafing under his straitened circumstances and anxious for some help to arrive.

Vs. 12 – Stoicism, the reigning philosophical outlook of the Greco-Roman world of that day valued a sort of detachment as a means to rise above pain. They understood detachment as a way of achieving contentment. The term Paul uses in v. 11 translated "content" was a common term among Stoic writers.

Vs. 13 – Clearly, the "in him" is a reference to Jesus Christ. It is in and through Christ that the spiritual resources for contentment are found. The "everything" or the "all things" in v. 13 is the same word as is translated "any" in the phrase "any and every situation" in the previous verse.

1. Contentment does not depend upon pleasing circumstances.

Vv. 10-13 – "I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content..."

- Paul expresses his gratitude for the Philippian's financial gift. But he also wants them to know that his contentment does not depend upon money or pleasant circumstances. As he will make clear his gratitude toward them is great. But ever the teacher Paul draws upon his own experiences of depravation and suffering to teach them about contentment.

2. Contentment does not depend upon emotional detachment.

- Stoicism was likely the most influential school of philosophy at the time of Paul's writing. The stoic philosophers commended a kind of self-sufficient emotional detachment as the secret for avoiding pain. It is similar to the Buddhist ethic to have few loves in order to have few woes.
- It is clear from Paul's own life that his contentment was not the result of detachment. Paul was highly invested in churches from Rome to Macedonia. He felt deeply for the churches and for his fellow Jews. In the letter to the Philippian church it is clear that Paul abounds with love and concern for them.

3. Contentment is commanded by God.

- The reason Paul set his mind to learn contentment is because it is commanded by God. Paul used to be a Pharisee. He had been freed from legalism by the grace of Jesus. He was not about to start adding to the law of God. But he was quite serious about living in obedience to what God had commanded. Contentment is obedience to God's law. God called his people to be content with his provision during the Exodus. He then codified contentment in the Ten Commandments.

- Exodus 20:17 – "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's."
- 1 Timothy 6:6-8 – "Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world and we cannot take anything out of the world, but if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content."
- Hebrews 13:5 – "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for He has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'"

4. Contentment is learned.

Vs. 12 – "I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, *I have learned* the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need."

- Contentment is something in which we must be trained. We are not born contented. We learn it. Certainly a great deal of Paul's contentment was learned in the pressure of life's crucible. We only learn to be content in hunger and need by experiencing hunger and need. We only know how to be content when brought low by being brought low.

5. Contentment is made available by the strength of Jesus.

Vs. 13 – "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."

- The most direct application for the "all things" in verse 13 is what is written in verses 11 and 12. Paul's confidence is not that he will be strengthened to attain every desire that crosses his mind but that Christ will give him strength to do all of that which God has willed for him beginning with being content in all circumstances.