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The Philippians Series #14
Philippians 4:10-13
(This commentary corresponds with Sermon #16 that was preached on July 23rd)

(ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY)

THE SEARCH FOR CONTENTMENT

Are you content? Consistently content? Content as the Bible defines contentment? I recognize that these are loaded questions. Most Christians recognize that there is a “Christian way” to answer these questions. We know that Christians are supposed to be content and so we are tempted to answer these type of questions in an outwardly appropriate way. But what about how you really feel on the inside? Are you content?

Let’s do some work at defining this very important term. The word “content”, as we find it being used by Paul in Philippians 4:11-12, is an amazing word that will challenge how many of us are accustomed to thinking. Please remember that the goal of this study is not to make you feel guilty! To experience contentment as God defines it is a wonderful blessing for us and it greatly glorifies God. My desire is to grow personally in this area (I have much work to do) and to help others grow as well. By way of definition, to be content is to be self-sufficient. There are many implications to this, and there is a danger of misunderstanding what God means when His Word calls on us to be self-sufficient, so let’s dig deeper.

The word content in Philippians 4:11-12 is a translation of the Greek word *autarkēs*. This is the combination of two words, autos, which means self (as in automatic, automobile, autopilot) and arkeō, which means suffice. In other words, contentment means to be self-sufficient. Normally, when we think of someone or something being self-sufficient, it means that no help from the outside is needed. There are many ways to illustrate this, but one way is to think of a house with its own electric generator. Most houses depend on an outside source for electricity. Everything is fine until there is a severe storm or some other event which causes a blackout. With the loss of electricity comes the inability to refrigerate food, use the plumbing, heat or cool the house and operate the lights, computer or television. Such a house is clearly not self-sufficient.

There are some houses that have generators stored in a garage or basement for just such an emergency. When the regular power goes out the generator is started and the house has the electricity that is needed. What happens externally on the local or regional power grid does not control what happens in the house. It is self-sufficient.

When Paul testified in Philippians 4:10-13 that he was content, he was not saying that he was self-sufficient from God. ABSOLUTELY NOT! Paul was saying that he was self-sufficient from his circumstances. His peace, his joy and his contentment did not depend upon those circumstances which were external to him. He had experienced a wide range of circumstances, some pleasant and some difficult. He had experienced seasons of plenty and seasons of famine. He knew what it was like to have people admire and respect him, and he knew what it was like to be hated and persecuted. And as he wrote this letter, he knew what it was like to be in prison even though he had committed no crime. Through it all, Paul had learned to be self-sufficient from his circumstances.

For most people, joy comes and goes depending on whether their current circumstances are pleasant or difficult. Their joy and peace is not autarkēs/self-sufficient, it is dependent upon their external circumstances, and no one can fully control his/her circumstances (although some people try mightily).

Think of all the things we are tempted to look to in order to find contentment:

- “if I just had an extra \$25,000”
- “if I could just have my health back”
- “if my spouse would just change his/her mind”
- “if I could just have a different job”
- “if I could just win that award”
- “if my child would just do what I say”

To this list could be added hundreds more. I think it is accurate to say that everyone of us has, at some point in time, looked to one of these external things to be the basis of our contentment. It is not that these particular things are wrong (in the proper context), but if we think they can deliver genuine and lasting peace/joy/contentment then we are sadly mistaken. Circumstances can change, and we certainly cannot control what other people think, say or do. It is very foolish, therefore, to depend on circumstances or people to suffice for us. Biblical contentment means to be self-sufficient from those things.

Before continuing, a word of clarification is warranted. When Paul testified to being self-sufficient he did not mean this in a stoic sense of the word. When we call someone a stoic we usually mean someone who not only hides his or her emotions, but someone who controls them to the point of suppressing them altogether. Apathy, emotional detachment and extreme isolation from other people might keep us from depending on our circumstances, but it is not biblical. God does not want our contentment to come from shutting off our emotions and burying them. Such a solution is as much a recipe for trouble as the opposite extreme of dependence.

Let's look at what else Paul said about contentment and it might fill out the picture of what God wants us to know about contentment. In verse 11 Paul wrote that he had "learned to be content". This is a very revealing phrase. First of all, by saying that he had learned contentment, Paul revealed that he had gone through a process of learning. Just like us, Paul had not been instantly zapped with a dose of permanent contentment. God is a full-time teacher and is constantly seeking to teach us, change us, refine us and build us through the difficult times in our lives (and the good times, too). Paul's learning curve undoubtedly included some failed quizzes and low grades. God never gives up on His students. Let us endeavor to be the best students we can be.

Even today God is seeking to teach you and refine you through your current circumstances. Are you seeking to learn the lessons He has for you and to apply what Philipians says about true joy?

The next thing to note is that Paul said he had learned "the secret". This could imply that true contentment is something that continues to evade most people. Since only a small minority of people are genuinely content, we can describe it as though it were a secret. While this is true, a more literal understanding of Paul's words is that he had been initiated into contentment. Who or what initiated Paul? His circumstances. With the passing of time and having experienced a wide variety of circumstances, Paul had learned from his circumstances that real contentment can only be found apart from, or self-sufficient from, those circumstances.

Finally, we come to verse 13 where Paul wrote that he could do all things through Christ who strengthened him. Paul was teaching the Philipians that it is Christ who must occupy the very center of our lives, our desires and our priorities. When a person becomes a Christian, he/she is supernaturally joined to Christ and is permanently connected to Him (see Ephesians 1:13-14; Colossians 1:27). Our union with Christ is the source of the strength we need to be content, for that strength comes from Him.

Don't underestimate the centrality of Christ. In Philipians 1:20-21 Paul wrote:

*I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed,
but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body,
whether by life or by death For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*

Paul viewed everything in his life in the context of his relationship with Christ. This mindset was instrumental in Paul learning to be self-sufficient from his circumstances. Please note that when our circumstances are pleasant it is altogether appropriate that we enjoy them with grateful hearts. It is okay to be happy with our circumstances! But when those circumstances change, as they inevitably will, Christ is still with us and He

is completely sufficient to meet even our deepest needs. Perhaps we can conclude that when we reach the point where we can say, “I have Christ, and that is enough”, we will have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation.

DIGGING DEEPER

1. What do you think most people have in mind when they talk about “contentment”? _____

2. What is so dangerous about depending upon our circumstances to provide contentment, peace or joy?

3. What is the greatest temptation you face when you think about which circumstances you wish would change? In other words, is your struggle for contentment found in the area of finances? Health? Relationships? Awards? What specific circumstance have you not yet become self-sufficient in?

4. Please read I Timothy 6:6-10 and Hebrews 13:5. How do these verses challenge your current outlook on life and the quest for contentment? _____

5. How does remembering that our citizenship is in Heaven (see Philippians 3:20) contribute to contentment?

6. Earlier in this study we explored the truth that **there is power in a thankful heart**. Paul mentions thankfulness again in 4:6. What is the relationship between thankfulness and contentment? What do you do to grow a thankful attitude in your daily life? _____

