

Filling in the Blank

Philippians 4:10-23

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ July 27, 2025 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



¹⁰I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹²I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me. ¹⁴In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.

¹⁵You Philippians indeed 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. ¹⁶For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. ¹⁷Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. ¹⁸I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. ¹⁹And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁰To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

²¹Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The friends who are with me greet you. ²²All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor's household.

²³The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. (Philippians 4:10-23, NRSV)



What's the missing piece for you in life right now? Fill in the blank: "If _____, then I believe I would be content in life." How would you complete that sentence?

We all know what the answer *should be*. We'll get to that. For now, just be honest. What circumstance do you really want to change? What problem do most want to go away? What dream do you pray will be

realized? What relationship are you pinning all your hopes on? What's standing in the way of you finding contentment?

I know what it is for me right now, this one part of my life that I believe, if it were different, I would be truly content. What is it for you? "If _____, then I believe I would be content in life." For many of us, it might be more than one thing.

What is contentment? It might help to define the word first. A good way to think about contentment is food. Imagine sitting down hungry for a wonderful meal. All of your favorites are spread out before you. For me, it's Mexican food. What is it for you? And you begin to eat, not rushing through the meal, but savoring every bite, every sip. And when you are done eating it's just right. You've eaten just enough to satisfy your hunger. But you haven't eaten too much so that you will regret it now, or in the morning. That's contentment, at least in gastronomic terms. And it's not that different in life, where contentment is having your deepest needs satisfied, but not to the point of overindulgence.

All of us are seeking contentment. It's the great human desire, to satisfy the deep needs we find within ourselves. I like to describe those needs as the need for identity, security and meaning. You want to know that you are worth something. You want to be assured that your life is not threatened. You want to know that you are spending your life on something that matters. Am I wrong? Don't you desire these things? Everybody does. But not everybody seeks to satisfy these desires in the same way. In fact, I think we can break people up into three groups here.¹

Some people seek to find contentment in the material things of this world: money and wealth, career success, reputation, romantic love, children, knowledge, good health, pleasurable experiences. All these are good things. But the illusion is that true contentment can be found in each. You see, a good job, a great meal, a wonderful vacation, good sex, healthy children - all of these can make us feel fulfilled in the moment, or for many moments.

¹ I'm indebted here to Timothy Keller in his sermon, "Commandment (10th)", *Gospel in Life*, January 28, 1990. Listen to the full sermon at <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/contentment-10th/>

The problem is, eventually the high wears off. The American poet Wallace Stevens once wrote, “In contentment I still feel the need of some imperishable bliss.” These material things are all perishable blisses. And the problem with this first group of people is that when the high wears off, instead of then turning to seek true contentment in something beyond the material, they just double down on the material. This job didn’t do it; I must need a new job. This much money didn’t do it; I must need more money. This marriage didn’t do it; I must need a new partner. It’s like a drug. The next hit, though it satisfies initially, also eventually wears off and leaves us even more dissatisfied than before. So we go looking for a stronger hit.

This endless search has created a second group of people who basically become cynics. Hopelessness sets in. “Yes, I have these longings inside me, but experience has taught me that there is nothing in this world that can ever truly satisfy them.” Maybe these people keep working, stay married, raise their kids as best as they can, but it’s all motion without expectation. Life becomes a grind.

But there is a third group, and I’m guessing that many of you fall into this group. C.S. Lewis summed up this group well when he described them as people who conclude,

Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.²

We were. Or at least we were made to be satisfied by something, or someone, who is beyond this world. And yet, from the very beginning, we have stubbornly refused to acknowledge this truth. The creation accounts in Genesis make clear that when the Lord created Adam and Eve and set them in the garden, if they continued to trust him they would always know contentment.

But they wanted more. In fact, they wanted the one thing God told them they should not desire because it would destroy them. “If we could just eat the fruit of that tree, then we would be truly content in life.” You might say that the original human sin was the sin of discontentment with the Lord and his provision.

That could have been the end of the story. It wasn’t. And that’s good news. The God who created us is a God of love and grace beyond what any of us might imagine. It’s actually illogical how much God desires to be in relationship with us when we often don’t want the same in return. And so even though we have all followed Adam and Eve’s lead and turned away from the Lord and made a disastrous mess of things, God has moved heaven and earth to re-acquire us and make things right.

At infinite cost to himself, he came into the world and, in the person of his Son Jesus Christ, became one of us to die for us and redeem us. The only thing that will stop the Lord from re-uniting with us in ways that finally and forever satisfy all the discontentment in our souls is our stubborn refusal to allow him to do so. If only we could see that the most probable explanation for the fact that the things of this world keep leaving us discontent is the fact that we were made to find our contentment beyond this world in the one who made this world.

And here we find Paul declaring with confidence that he has discovered the secret to such contentment. That gets our attention, especially if we know his story. Because here is a man who has known hard times. In fact, he’s writing these words from prison where he is awaiting a judgment that could lead to his execution. He’s also known plenty in life, times of abundance and comfort. And yet, he writes here in verse 12, **“I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty.”**³

Here is the secret that many, many people never learn, *that true contentment is never tied to the circumstances of this life*. To be clear, contentment is not a carefree existence. It’s not the absence of relational conflicts or anguish. It’s not a life without longing or groaning.

² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Collins, 1952), 118. Here’s the full quote: “The Christian says, ‘Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or to be unthankful

for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that country and to help others to do the same.”

³ This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

It's not even a life free of doubt or struggle against sin.⁴ Nobody escapes these things in life.

On the flip side, the person who knows ease and comfort is often not content. And so again, true and lasting contentment comes only to the person who looks beyond circumstances to Christ as the only source of true satisfaction in life. It's the person who comes to realize that if I have everything the world has to offer but I do not have Christ, I will still be discontent. And if I have nothing in the world, but still have Christ, I will know what it means to be content.

Scripture gives some beautiful images of this. One of the most beautiful is the image David gives us in Psalm 131.

**O Lord, my heart is not lifted up;
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is with
me.⁵**

Having just spent a couple of weeks around my daughter and her infant son, I find this image particularly striking. My grandson, Solomon, is not a weaned child yet. His wants his mom, but he also wants the milk she has to give him. But some day he will not need her milk. Then, though he will not understand this at a conscious level because it is too marvelous for him to understand, he will simply be satisfied with his mother, her very presence. He will have been given what he needs from Isabel, so now all he will want is her. At least until he becomes a teenager!

Paul has all that he needs from Christ. His identity is satisfied. He knows that he is a beloved son of a Father in Heaven who takes great delight in his life, even on his worst day. His security is satisfied. He knows that God will never fail him, that nothing in all creation can threaten the love God has for him, and the destiny laid out for him in heaven. His meaning in life is satisfied. He knows God has given him the greatest purpose any human being could ever hope to be given, sharing the message of the gospel with those who do not yet know how they too are loved beyond imagination.

As the great English preacher, Charles Spurgeon, once declared, "If Christ were only a cistern, we might soon

exhaust his fullness, but who can drain a fountain?" Paul is drinking from that fountain and is satisfied. Now, all he wants is Christ, meaning whatever circumstances come in life, scarcity or plenty, he is content.

This week I heard recounted the famous story from the English Reformation of Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley. In the 16th century, Latimer was an influential preacher and chaplain, Ridley the Bishop of London. Because they both insisted on faithfulness to Christ instead of conformity to the corrupt religious powers that be, they were condemned to death.

At the site of the execution they were given a 15-minute sermon urging them to disown the truth. They refused to do so, and were tied back-to-back at the stake. As the fires were lit, it is recorded that Hugh Latimer said to his friend, "Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man; we shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England as shall never be put out."⁶

Can any of us think of worse circumstances? "If I can just avoid being burned at the stake, then I believe I would be content in life." But that's not what these men believed. Even as they were about to die a painful and premature death, they knew contentment. Happiness? No. Not in that moment. Pleasure and freedom from pain? Certainly not. A good reputation? No, they were killed because they were hated. But even in all of it that, they, like Paul, had discovered the secret to being content in Christ alone.

The secret is spelled out in verse 13: **"I can do all things through him [Christ] who strengthens me."** This, by the way, is one of the most hijacked and misquoted verses in the Bible.⁷ Clearly, when read in context, Paul is not suggesting we have a blank-check when it comes to going to God with our wants and needs. Paul doesn't think he can fly like a bird through Christ, or become the Emperor of Rome through Christ, or create a rainbow in the sky through Christ.

I've heard this verse misquoted before football games. "Through Christ we can win this football game, even though we are severe underdogs!" That's not what Paul is saying. If you want to use this verse correctly in a pre-game locker room speech, then say, "If we win this game, we will be content, not in the victory but in Christ. And if we lose the game, we will be just as content because winning or losing football games has nothing to do with the true contentment we are after."

⁴ Melissa Kruger, "Looking for Contentment? It's Not What You Think", *The Gospel Coalition*, September 13, 2016. Read online at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/melissa-kruger/contentment-is-not/>

⁵ Psalm 131:1-2. Charles Spurgeon said this is one of the shortest psalms to read, but one of the longest to learn to embrace. Another beautiful

image is that of the tree planted by streams of water described in both Psalm 1 and Jeremiah 17:7-8.

⁶ Cited by Keller.

⁷ Somebody once said, "I can do all things through a good proof-text!"

Now, I know what some of you are thinking. “This can’t be me! Maybe giants in the faith like Paul, and rare men and women like Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley, can discover this secret for living with contentment in Christ regardless of circumstances, but such a thing is out of reach for ordinary people like us.” But is it?

I’ll give you this much, it does seem unnatural. But notice that even Paul says that this sort of unshakable contentment is something that he had to *learn*. In fact, never does the Bible suggest that anybody naturally seeks to be content in Christ alone. But neither does the Bible ever suggest that anybody is excluded from learning, with God’s help, from doing so.

It’s the 10 Commandments, of all places, that make this clear. The 1st Commandment declares, “**You shall have no other gods before me.**”⁸ It’s first for good reason. Your god is the person or thing from whom you seek ultimate identity, security and meaning. The Lord commands us to never seek these things anywhere apart from him.

Then in the 10th Commandment he declares, “**Neither shall you covet your neighbor’s wife. Neither shall you desire your neighbor’s house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.**”⁹ This is essentially a command to be content with the circumstances of your life, whatever they are. To covet what others have is to imagine that you will be more satisfied if you have more of those things.

And do you see how the 1st and 10th Commandments are bookends, one flowing from the other. If you trust God alone above all other gods, you will find that he will satisfy your deepest desires regardless of how your wife, house, field, or donkey compares to your neighbor’s.

So let me ask you, which of us is exempt from the 10 Commandments? These are not commands God gives to just a select few to honor. These are standards for all of God’s people, including ordinary men and women like you and me. Which makes sense. If God loves us all, why would he not want to let all of us in on this secret that it is in him that we find true satisfaction in our souls? In other words, I absolutely believe that the Lord wants you to come to fill in the blank this way: “If I could just learn to trust Christ in all things – which I can! – then I believe I would be content in life.”

You may not want to hear this, but one of the main ways we learn this contented dependence is by going through times of hardship and scarcity. Yes, such circumstances often make people bitter, cynical or hopeless. That’s not uncommon. But if we continue to turn to Christ in hard times, we will eventually discover that he is always enough.

James 1:2-3 declares, “**My brothers and sisters, whenever you face various trials, consider it all joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance.**”¹⁰ If your life is always easy, comfortable, and pain-free, it is very unlikely that you will ever come to discover the one who truly satisfies your soul. This is one of the reasons why our loving Father in heaven allows us to experience hardship.

But notice that Paul learned contentment in times of plenty as well. This doesn’t always happen, so wisdom is necessary here. But if we are clear-eyed and sober-minded, do we really believe that the people who come to possess all the best that the world has to offer are always content. We know that they are not.

In his book, *The Paradox of Choice*, sociologist Barry Schwartz points out that it is a sociological fact that there is very little correlation between money and happiness. Specifically, once a person has their very basic material needs met – food to eat, shelter, clothes – having more money won’t make you happier. He writes, “Once a society’s level of per capita wealth crosses a threshold from poverty to adequate subsistence, further increases in national wealth have almost no effect on happiness.”¹¹ We all should know this by experience, that the richest, most famous, most talented and prosperous people in the world are not necessarily the happiest people in the world. Often times they are among the least happy!

So you see, even in times of plenty we can learn contentment if we realize the plenty hasn’t done what the world promises it will do. In his classic work, *The Imitation of Christ*, Thomas à Kempis put it so well when he wrote, “The prudent lover considers not the gift of the lover so much as the love of the giver. He looks for affection more than the value, and sets all gifts lower than the Beloved. The noble lover rests not in the gift, but in Me above every gift.”

The gifts and blessings we receive from God are good and we welcome them. But it is never the gifts we are ultimately after, but always the Giver of those gifts.

hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

¹¹ Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice* (Harper, 2004), 106.

⁸ Deuteronomy 5:7

⁹ Deuteronomy 5:21

¹⁰ I think also of Romans 5:3-5 – “**And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and**

The weaned child is content just to be in the arms of his mother. It is enough. Christ is enough.

A friend sent me a poem this week based on the idea that sunflowers always turn towards the sun as way to maximize their exposure to the sunlight to help them thrive.¹² It's a phenomenon called *heliotropism*, a word made up of two Greek words meaning "sun" and "turn" or "change". Towards the sun.

I love that. I want that to be a picture of my life, always turning towards the Son, Christ, regardless of what is happening elsewhere all around me. All we could ever need can be found in him who is willing to share with us all that he has.

So, what do you desire? What is it that you really need? What would make you content?

Rest? Come to Christ and he will give you rest for your soul.¹³

Security? Christ is a rock which will never be shaken.¹⁴

Friendship? Christ no longer calls you his servant, but his friend.¹⁵

Family? Through Christ you have been made a child of God with more brothers and sisters than you could ever hope for.¹⁶

Justice? In time, Christ will set all things right, heaven on earth.¹⁷

Forgiveness? Christ is far more ready to forgive you than even you are ready to receive his forgiveness.¹⁸

Freedom from shame and guilt? Christ has already covered you with his grace. You are naked before him, but unashamed.¹⁹

Direction in life? Christ doesn't just know the way; He is the way!²⁰

Are you hungry? Christ is the bread of life.²¹ Thirsty? Christ has living water.²²

Even in death, Christ is the resurrection and the life!²³

Today is the day to make a decision to seek true contentment in Christ and Christ alone. Maybe today is the day to make that decision for the first time. Do not wait to make it. Or maybe today is the day to reaffirm that decision you made long ago. It's always good to reaffirm our trust in Jesus.

He is enough. He will always be enough, more than enough. If we could just learn to trust in you, Jesus, we believe we would be content in life no matter what else is happening in life.

Let us turn and make this into our prayer. Pray with me...

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The Next Step *A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read Philippians 4:10-23. Focus on verses 11-13. What stands out to you here?
2. Define contentment. How would you describe the person who is truly content? Do you know such a person?
3. When have you been most content in your life?
4. How would you fill in the blank right now in your life: "If _____, then I believe I would be content in life." We know the answer is supposed to be Christ. We'll get to that. First, let's be honest about other ways we want to fill in the blank.
5. Paul says that contentment is something that he learned. Do you agree? How can a person intentionally learn to be content?

¹² He shared this in a poem he sent me by Steve Garnas-Holmes, entitled, "The Prayer of Jesus".

*Loving womb of us all
at the heart of all being,
we your sunflowers turn always to you.
Your hope unfurls among us,
a dream we can't imagine but can be.
Each breath is you.
You are in this present moment;
you free us to be in this present moment,
and to free others.
Transform our desires into love alone.
Guide us free of the power of fear.
Amazing: all this universe,
and all its energies, and all its beauty*

*are yours, who are infinite, yet here.
May we be so mindful always.*

¹³ Matthew 11:28-30

¹⁴ Psalm 62:6

¹⁵ John 15:15

¹⁶ Matthew 19:29

¹⁷ Revelation 21:1-4

¹⁸ 1st John 1:9

¹⁹ Isaiah 54:4-5

²⁰ John 14:6

²¹ John 6:35

²² John 4:14

²³ John 11:25

6. How can times of hardship and scarcity teach us about true contentment? How can times of plenty and comfort teach us true contentment? Speak from your experience if you can.
7. Verse 13 is one of the most hijacked verses in the New Testament, often pulled out of context to mean something it doesn't mean. What do you think it means?

8. What is the main thing that you sense Christ is wanting to teach you here? How will that change the way you think or live?

Table to Table: For kids and adults to consider together.



What sorts of things do we really need in life? What sorts of things do we need to make us happy? What is the secret that Paul is telling us here about all this?