



Temple Baptist Church
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The Lesson of Contentment
Philippians 4:10-13

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great 19th century British Baptist preacher, once told the story of man who had been bankrupted by a sofa. The poor soul said that he and his wife decided to buy a new sofa. But when they put it in their house, the old chairs looked awful, as well as their old table. So they had to be replaced. The new furniture made the old curtains look so bad that they had to go. Then it was the other furniture. Finally, the furniture and accessories were all just too fine for that house, so he bought a new one! “And now, here I am, bankrupt!” he said.

Contentment can be a precious and scarce commodity! The advertising culture we live in blatantly tries to make us dissatisfied with what we have, and to create the illusion that if we just have a little bigger house, a little nicer car, a little better this or that, our lives would be wonderful and carefree. The only problem is that once people get hooked and buy the products, the cycle starts all over again.

For some people, it's not things that they think will satisfy them more fully, but rather achievements, or relationships, or a host of other things. In the world we live in, discontent often seems to hold sway. Like most other folks, I've had my times when I've thought, “If my circumstances were just different, I could be content.”

And then I read what Paul says in our text here: **“for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.”**¹

Can he really be serious? Content, *whatever* the situation? Is that really possible? Can a person *really* be content no matter what he or she is facing? And if so, *how*?

Some context

This passage comes in the midst of a thank-you note that comprised the last part of Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. This congregation had sent him a love-offering to help meet his needs while he was a prisoner (probably in Rome), and instructed Epaphroditus, their messenger, to stay with Paul as long as he needed him.

Now as Paul wrote them this letter that he would send back by Epaphroditus, who had recovered from a nearly fatal illness while with Paul, he expressed his deep-hearted gratitude for their great-hearted generosity. But he was very careful in how he expressed it. He wanted them to understand that while he genuinely appreciated what they'd done, he was dependent not on them but on Christ. So to do this, *Paul shared with the Philippians how he had come to learn the lesson of contentment.*

Now I have to confess that this lesson of contentment is one I've struggled with throughout my Christian life, including nearly 38 years as a pastor. I've known good times and bad times, dealt with loving folks and unloving folks, found fulfillment and felt like a failure, reaped the harvest and, as Spurgeon would put it, “plowed the rock.”

But beside the Apostle Paul, I've had it made!

Think about it! In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul gives the run-down on what he had been through: multiple imprisonments, multiple floggings, exposure to death time and time again, five lashings from the Jews (39 stripes with a whip), three times being beaten with rods, one stoning, three shipwrecks, and constant persecution.

It was during one of those imprisonments that Paul was writing this letter to the Philippians. As I said last week, while he hoped to be released, the reality was that any day, a soldier could walk in and say to Paul, "It's time," and lead him out to be beheaded—the preferred method of executing convicted Roman citizens.

Yet Paul could say, "**for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.**" But how? Did he just resign himself to his fate and decide to make the best of a bad situation? Or was he talking about something else, something deeper, something much more real?

What kind of contentment?

Maybe it would help if we got a better handle on exactly what Paul means when he uses the word most translations render as "content."

We usually think of contentment as satisfaction, roughly equal to happiness. That's a legitimate meaning of the word.

One of the problems translators often face is that a word in the original language has no exact equivalent in the target language. That's the case with this word, *autárkēs*.

It was actually a term that the Stoic philosophers of Paul's day used in their ethical discussions. We get our English word "autocratic" from it, meaning *self-governing*.

What the Stoics used the word to describe was something much deeper than our usual connotation of "contentment." It meant being *self-sufficient* in the positive sense. For the Stoics, what was all important was being unmoved, being able to stand strong, to keep a stiff upper lip, no matter what they were facing. They relied on their own inner strength and moral reserves to face the challenges of life. They were truly seeking to be *self-sufficient*. Their aim was to be able to get along, to move forward through whatever they might face.

Paul uses the word here in a similar sense. He's saying to the Philippian church, "I have learned how to get along, no matter what the situation." And boy, had he been in some different situations!

Paul describes those varying situations with three contrasts that all have to do with the circumstances of life. He says he knows how to be **abased** (RSV) or **brought low**, and **how to abound** or prosper. He knows how to face **plenty and hunger**. He knows how to get along with **abundance and need**. He covers the gamut! "Whatever the situation," Paul says, "I have learned how to get along, how to be content."

Now most of us will probably never face the kinds of situations and extremities that Paul faced in his life and ministry. But John Eddins was right when he said, "None of us ever lives under completely ideal circumstances." We'll all eventually have some kind of difficulty to deal with. And most of us will likely have some good circumstances we'll have to deal with as well.

Does it strike you that Paul puts both extremes in the same category when he talks about being content?

Sometimes prosperity can be harder to handle than adversity. When things are going well, it's easy to get lazy and careless about my relationship with God. I have usually been the most dependent on the Lord and more intentional in my prayer life when things were toughest.

The fact is that we need to know how to deal with the good and the bad, adversity and

prosperity. We need to know how to avoid despair in adversity, and how to be faithful and use our opportunities wisely in prosperity. We need to know not so much *how to be satisfied* as *how to get along* in any and every situation we face!

But here's the question. *How do we do it?*

Learning the lesson

Wouldn't it be wonderful if when we first trusted Christ, God would simply put into our heads and hearts everything we need to know to live for him as we should? We'd be instantly mature, knowing what to do and how to respond to every circumstance.

But God hasn't chosen to do things that way, has he? The Christian life is a lot like life in general at this point.

When a baby is born, we don't expect that infant to be able to do everything an adult can, or even everything a ten-year-old can. We know that a child has to grow and learn how to do things.

Well, when we enter the kingdom of God, we do so as spiritual infants. Born from above through the Spirit of God, we begin our Christian lives as babes in Christ. And like little babies, we have to grow and learn. Some of the lessons are simple, some are not. Some we learn by being taught, some we learn only by experience. Some we learn with our head, some with our heart, and some with both head and heart.

Now this kind of contentment Paul is talking about here doesn't come naturally, does it? It doesn't come automatically or by instinct. It's something we learn as we grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Is it something we can learn with our heads through study—you know, learn the right formula, and we'll be content? Is it something we have to learn with our hearts through experience? Or is it maybe some of both?

Sometimes, especially with small children, we try to teach them information that will enable them to do something or will keep them safe. We tell them and teach them, but sometimes to understand it, *really* understand it, they have to *experience* it—like a child and a hot stove. Mama points to the stove and says to little Johnny, “Don't touch it, it's *hot!*” Johnny might even repeat it, “Hot!” Mama reminds him, “Now don't touch it, it's *hot!*” She turns her back, and what does little Johnny do? “Waaa!!! *Hot!!!*” And from then on, he never forgets it!

Well, like so many other lessons of the Christian life, this lesson of contentment is one that we learn most fully through experience. That's how Paul says he had learned it. He had been abased and had abounded, famished and full, poor and prosperous. He had known all these things firsthand, and had learned by heart that what he knew in his head about Christ was true.

Okay, it's a lesson you learn with both head and heart. But exactly what is this lesson of contentment? How can I get along in whatever circumstances I'm facing without being a miserable, complaining soul?

Well, Paul says it's a matter of learning a secret. He borrows another word here (*memúēmai*), this time from the ancient mystery religions that were so prevalent in the Greco-Roman world of his day. When people were initiated into the mystery religions, certain mysteries or secrets were disclosed to them. That implies a revelation, and the construction of the word as Paul uses it here (perfect tense) indicates that it's something that happened in the past but affects the present and future. Paul had learned this secret in his daily walk with Christ through the various situations of his life and ministry. What he knew about Christ in his head had been made real to his heart. Learning this secret had been a life-changing experience for Paul!

But what was the secret? Simply this: **“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”**

That’s it! Paul’s sufficiency was *within* him, but *not from* himself. It was from Christ dwelling in him, just as he dwells through his Spirit in all who trust in him.

So the secret holds true for us as well. Through Christ’s empowering us, we’re able to face everything in life, good or bad! *We can get along in any situation we face through Christ who strengthens us.*

Mrs. Nora could. She was a little elderly lady in our first church in Bladen County. A stroke left her husband an invalid for several years. They lived near the church. One Sunday evening she left her grandson with her husband so she could go to church. The house caught on fire, the grandson couldn’t get his grandfather out, and by the time he ran to the church to get help, it was too late. Some of you may remember the terrible explosion at Riegelwood in the 1970s. One of her sons was severely injured in that blast, and later died. While I was her pastor, she almost died when her gall bladder became infected and gangrene set in. Her son-in-law committed suicide, and there were other problems and tragedies within her family. Yet she was always pleasant and cheerful. She readily admitted that she didn’t understand why so much trouble had come her way. But she’d just as quickly confess that God had helped her through it all, and that there was nothing that with his help she couldn’t handle.

She had learned the lesson of contentment.

Years ago—maybe while I was Mrs. Nora’s pastor or shortly thereafter—I ran across this anonymous poem that says it so well.

In the heart of London city,
Mid the dwellings of the poor,
These bright golden words were uttered,
“I have Christ, what want I more?”

Spoken by a lonely woman,
Dying on a garrett floor,
Having not one earthly treasure,
“I have Christ, what want I more?”

He who heard them ran to fetch her
Something from this world’s great store;
It was needless – died she saying,
“I have Christ, what want I more?”

But her words will live forever,
I repeat them o’er and o’er;
God delights to hear me saying,
“I have Christ, what want I more?”

Look away from earth’s attractions,
Friend, those joys will soon be o’er.
Rest not, till thy heart exclaimeth,
“I have Christ, what want I more?”

“For I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.”

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®.