

Contentment's Secret: Part 2

Philippians 4:13-19

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"

Introduction: Contentment, or being truly satisfied, is a fleeting and frustrating pursuit. We can easily be convinced that if we had what we truly wanted, be it success, accomplishment, spouse, house, dream job, or recognition, then we'd finally reach some pinnacle of rest and fullness. In an interview, Oscar winner Matt Damon recalled the night that he won an Oscar for his work on *Good Will Hunting*, placing him among the Hollywood elite. This accomplishment is the life's ambition of most who work in the movie industry, a mixture of recognition and advancement in the craft, the golden statue that should make one satisfied. But Damon went home after the festivities to a quiet house, everyone having gone to sleep, and he stared at that nebulous figure and thought: *"I am so glad I didn't run anyone over to get this. What an unbelievable waste."* He went on to say that he was glad he did not discover this when he was 80 or 90, chasing after something that could never fill you up.

We started the book of Philippians looking at the difference between *happiness* and *joy*, with happiness being tied to circumstances and **joy** is bullet-proof from them since *joy is firmly satisfied in Christ*, so we can respond positively to the world around us, whether we suffer or not. This joy is based on the finished work of Christ as well as the fact that He will continue the work in us, bringing it to completion (1:6). Now Paul ends the book with a look at **contentment**, which stands opposed to a restlessness of trying to gain more material or more something in order to be full and satisfied. Contentment is based on the finished work of Christ and our *sufficiency in Him*, not needing anything else to fill the void of need in our hearts. **Joy and contentment** are uniquely and intimately tied together, since they are results of the work of Christ on the cross, freeing us from our sin and the slavery of trying to find happiness and satisfaction in a broken world, ravaged with sin, that's marching toward its own restoration.

Both of these are commands for believers in Jesus Christ to live out, and both *should* grow as we mature in Christ. Neither is easy, since they are not just something *we can do, but are products of faith since they begin with what we believe*. They are choices to be made, and they are both shaped by our relationship with Christ and shape how we approach our lives each day. Both of these also signal significantly to the world around us: *there is something far greater, far better, and far more satisfying than the next and greatest, better than your dream job or a bigger house (since there is always something dreamier and bigger), and One that brings actual sufficiency and satisfaction*. The answer is in Jesus Christ alone, who brings us salvation, joy, peace, provision, and hope of the future. So we look again at where **contentment comes from, and how we can get it**.

Contentment Finds Confidence in God's Provision (10)

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

How God Provides: Providence & Miracles

Thankfulness, not Guilt

Contentment is Not Dependant on Circumstances (11-12)

*Not that I speaking of being **in need** for I have **learned** in whatever situation I am **to be content**. 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*

Separating Need from Want

The second key secret of contentment is to remember that since contentment is both supernatural and an internal frame of mind, we see the world through Biblical promises rather than cultural pressures. The foundation for contentment is straightforward:

1 Timothy 6:6-8 - *"But godliness with **contentment** is great gain, for 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 the love of money**, and **be content** with what you have for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'"*

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 - *But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I **am content with weakness**, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."*

*When all of life is about **feeding our needs**, it can only **fuel our discontent***

Perspective in Little and Much

The word Paul uses for **content** is literally to be **self-sufficient or contained**. Now in the context of this paragraph as well as the rest of Scripture we are never called to trust or bank on ourselves for anything. The idea here is not a focus on self, but rather the discovery that in Christ we have all we need (see John 15:5 - apart from me you can do nothing). It was what Agur desired as he wrote the Proverb: *"Remove far from me falsehood and lying; **give me neither poverty nor riches; fee me with the food that is needful for me**, lest I be full and deny you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of the Lord."* (Proverbs 30:8-9). The goal was dependency on the Lord first and primarily, and seeing everything else from that lens.

Contentment is NOT external, but trusting the sufficiency of Christ for all things. We get caught deceiving ourselves thinking that if we only had more, we'd be content, but Paul said that was just as dangerous a place to be in terms of contentment. *Contentment, then, **must be learned wherever we are presently** since no external change will bring it.* If I am not content in Christ as a single person, I will not be content as a married one. If I am not content in Christ with the money I have now I will not be content with more. If I am not content in my marriage now I will not be content outside of it. But what was the secret?

Contentment is a Learned Perspective (11-12)

Both difficult and possible

This is a tremendous truth. Paul said that he had to **learn contentment over time**. This should give all of us hope. **Malcolm Gladwell** popularized the notion of learning and practice in his book *"Outliers"*, where he said it took 10000 hours, or almost 10 years, of deliberate practice to become an expert in

something. Paul had already commanded that the key to stability is to **practice the truth that we put our minds on** (4:8-9), meaning that contentment is a coalescence of practicing those things we already studied in Philippians: *pressing on, forgetting what lies behind, seeking Christlikeness, standing firm, agreeing with each other, rejoicing in the Lord, being gracious, and ceasing our anxiousness through prayer with thanksgiving*. The life of a Christian is that of a **learner**, the literal word for disciple, and just like any discipline, we will never grow unless we put what we know into consistent, relentless, and continual practice.

Putting this into practice is **difficult**. If you have ever learned an instrument, memorized lines for a dramatic production, or tried to hit a 9 iron well, you know how inconsistent we can feel. But we also begin to see progress as we practice more and more. The hope we have is that **learning contentment** is possible for every believer, so you do NOT HAVE TO CONTINUE LIVING ON THE HAMSTER WHEEL. A **mark of maturity** is that that we actually begin to **see the reality** of material gain and clamor for it less. Its part of growing up for an elementary student to look around and want the newest, expensive, and needless toy: "*why do you need this?*" "*Because everyone else has it!*" Learning contentment means we should be **less and less** dependent on the things of this world, clinging closer and closer to Christ in all things.

A Secret Out in the Open

Most times we think secret things are supposed to remain hidden. However, the reason Paul was ending this letter this way was that the church at Philippi and we would know the key to unlock the secret of contentment. The answer is the same answer to everything else: **Christ**. He is the answer to the longing of our heart, He is our greatest satisfaction, and our greatest gift. He will not leave us, He strengthens us, and supplies our every need. When we reach an end of our searching, our self-sufficiency, and our acceptable level of misery we are left with only on thing: **repentance**. We repent and surrender our life as we've tried to carve it to yield it to God in Christ, turning from our sin, asking for forgiveness, and following Jesus obediently with the entirety of our life. When we turn from our discontented churning, we find the peace that Jesus made on the cross, offering us something far greater than any material gain we could have. In Him, we can live distinctly from the world, ceasing our **complaining and worry**, and resting in Christ alone.

Contentment is Satisfied in Christ (13)

I can do all things through Him who strengthens me

A Great Misunderstanding

There is a high likelihood that everyone in this room, whether you have grown up in church, read the Bible, or have never done any of those things have heard some variation of this verse. A 2015 study on what was posted on Twitter showed that this verse was quoted over 600,000 times, doubling the next most popular verse. It has become a favorite of athletes and goal setters, from basketball and football players to boxers, and marathoners. Its not hard to see why. Taken as a 10 word phrase alone it carries a powerful message: If Christ is with me, I can accomplish anything. I can win the championship, finish the race, and reach every goal. Who can stop me if I have Christ's strengthening, so let's make big goals, dream huge dreams, and shoot for the stars! Who's with me!

The answer to this? A big thumbs down! There are several huge problems with using these 10 words as a life verse or for your teams theme.

1. **Context is everything** - Bible verses often make terrible meme's since they can be used to say something that was never intended. When we strip one verse out of the entirety of its context, we use it to say anything. There is a distinct difference between *meaning* and *application*. Each verse has a distinct meaning with multiple applications and implications. Our job is always to understand what it MEANS first, then apply it to life. Words like "I think this passage says" should only be reserved for the application of the text, not determining its meaning. In its context, Paul clearly meant that in whatever circumstances he found himself, whether in prison or free, whether feeling hunger or having enough to share, he could be content since he could do anything through Christ. This was not an expression of personal glory or accomplishment but rather a trust in God's provision.

2. **Self-Focus rather than pointing to Christ** - When we take this verse out of context (#Straightouttacontext), the focus is placed on **us**, what we can do and accomplish. That is NOT the point of the verse, since it is Paul's recognition that he could do nothing apart from Christ's strengthening, not taking any credit but pointing to Christ alone. The Bible is not adverse to disciplining ourselves physically (see 1 Tim. 4:7-8; 1 Cor. 9:27;) and working out our salvation (Phil. 2:12), but each of these, in their context, point to our physical exertion points to a spiritual reality and goal. Taking verses out of context is the quickest line to false gospel, teaching, and misery.

A Glorious Strengthening

So what was Paul talking about in this verse? That through the strengthening of Christ He could joyfully, sufficiently, and contentedly face any type of circumstance. This was strength that came to the inner man rather than changing circumstances or providing more externally. Paul believed:

His life was not his own, so he was content with whatever God provided - *"I have been crucified with Christ. It is not longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."* **Gal. 2:20** - To be discontent means we do not believe that God has given His best, and somehow that our life is still our own and we are living for ourselves.

This strengthening caused thanksgiving and was for service - *"I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service."* **1 Tim. 1:12**

Strengthening was for the INNER MAN, not outer strength - *For this reason I bow my knees before the Father...that according to the riches of His glory he may grant you **to be strengthened** with power through his Spirit **in your inner being.**"* **Eph. 3:14,16** - Notice that Paul prayed NOT that God would bring better circumstances or external help, but that God would continue to do the work on the INSIDE of the Ephesian church. Our faith is more precious than silver or gold (1 Pet. 1:7), and God refines us to prepare us for the revelation of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Who we ARE is vastly more important than what we have, and God is working to shape our heart and mind to be more and more like Christ.** So in any and every circumstance we know that God is DOING something, refining us, changing us, making us more like Christ. So we can be content, knowing He is strengthening us in and through it.

One other quick note. This verse is all about conducting ourselves in the will and seeking to glorify Him, not a "get out of sin" free card. Its the hope that when we get to the end of our rope, when we've exhausted our strength, physically and emotionally, Christ's strength will carry us through. However, if you've been there and still find no solace, there is perhaps sin that needs to be repented of, or a refusal to trust Him, or still a clinging to your own self to try to fix the situation. Contentment blossoms when we yield ourselves completely to Christ Jesus our LORD, who sustains all things to His glory.

Contentment Views Others More Important (14-19)

*Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, **no church entered into partnership with me** in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. Not that I **seek the gift**, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus*

Focusing on the Better Gifts

In this final focus on contentment, Paul comes back to the reason for this letter in the first place. He wanted the people in Philippi to know that he was thankful for their gift, for their remembrance of him, even though he did not have a NEED for them. This is a seemingly tricky explanation, but if we understand how Paul valued relationships and the Philippian's history of giving, it becomes a clearer picture. The point he is making is this: **Contentment comes when our focus is on the well-being of others, rather than ourselves.** When we understand this principle, it unlocks our joy in serving others and giving ourselves, time, and money away to others, which is **counter-intuitive to our normal way of thinking.**

When Paul began to think about accomplishments in ministry, he did not point to diplomas or trophies, but to people: **You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all** (2 Cor. 3:2). His greatest joy was not only in Christ, but that others would find their greatest joy in Christ (2 Cor. 1:24). When he had to leave the Thessalonian church so abruptly, he was in angst over how they were doing in their faith, "*For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at His coming? **Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.***" (1 Thess. 2:19-20). Paul was not driven by external accomplishment, material gain, or even the size of the churches he planted. He poured out his life for the good of others, specifically that they would know the Lord Jesus and find their joy in Him. This became the basis of contentment with tough circumstances.

Now, we looked last week at the fact that the church at Philippi supported Paul as he travelled to Thessalonica and Berea (4:15-16). They shared in gospel ministry, freeing Paul up from having to work to focus on preaching and proclaiming. But here is what we have to remember: **the churches in Macedonia were dirt poor.** This church helped Paul not out of riches but out of poverty:

*"We want you to know brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia (where Philippi was located) for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints ---and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the LORD and then by the will of God to us." **2 Cor. 8:1-5***

He was thankful not that this church **met his needs but joined him on his mission.** They realized that life was not about holding onto what you have but giving yourselves away for others. That is what made this church distinctive. When other churches with greater means neglected Paul, when other churches had opportunity greater than Philippi, this church alone supported Paul. This was Paul's prayer for the church in **chapter 1** (1:9-10), what he commanded in **chapter 2** (2:3-4), what was illustrated by Christ Himself in **chapter 2** (2:5-11), and now that Paul demonstrated through them.

Without a selfless, sacrificial view of others, contentment will be elusive. When we focus on the joy and growth of our spouse, we no longer are discontent when they don't live up to our expectations. When our greatest joy is focusing on helping others find their joy in Christ, our experience in God's church moves from bored and indifferent to passionate. When we view our money and possessions as instruments in our Lord's hands to help others we no longer believe they will bring lasting contentment but are merely tools to serve others.

True Goal of Giving Gifts (17-19)

Finally, Paul demonstrates why he was thankful for their gift: it was going to increase their account. (17). Again, Paul was fully aware and trusting of God's provision, so as much as he was thankful for the care package and camaraderie of Epaphroditus, he was especially thankful that they chose to lay up treasures in heaven rather than earth. (Matt. 6:19). He viewed their gift as an act of worship (18) a sacrificial act that was a fragrant offering to the Lord first and foremost and a help to him secondly. He was confident that God would supply all their needs, even in their poverty, because of their giving spirit and the riches of His glory (19).

What do we learn about contentment here in terms of our money? Remember, when we have food and drink, we can be content, and no amount of money will ever bring contentment. We also want enough so as not to steal and dishonor God, and not so much that we forget about Him. What is the promise of "the fruit that increases to our credit?"

Proverbs 11:24-25 - *"One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want. Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered."*

Proverbs 19:17 - *"Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed"*

2 Cor. 9:6, 10 - *"The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully...He who supplies 'seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness."*

What does all of this mean? When we are content in Christ alone, when we view life through a lens of helping and caring for the well being of others, we no longer look at money or material as a means to gain contentment but to be leveraged to help. We understand that God cares for us out of the riches of His glory, so we can give of our time and resources generously, and He will continue to give to us. What is the difference between this and the prosperity gospel? The point of giving is NOT to gain materially, but spiritually. The more we are given, the more we can give away, increasing the harvest. We have a mature view of material care like Paul did: we are not needing or thankful for the actual gift, but what is behind it. We know God may or may not give us much in this world, but we are more interested in laying up treasure in the next. So we now are content with whatever we have, knowing that whatever we have is from Him, used for His glory and the good of others.

So we fight to be content through a **faith in the provision of God**, no longer dependant on circumstances, **continuing a maturity process of growth**, trusting the strength of Christ, and **viewing people as our joy and crown**. This is a call of obedience, which means it is a better, more joyful way to live.