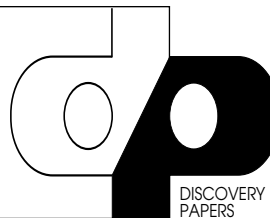


ENJOYING CONTENTMENT IN THE LORD

SERIES: JESUS, OUR JOY



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If you are a parent, perhaps you can identify with these words by Charles Swindoll in *Come Before Winter* :

Someday when the kids are grown, things are going to be a lot different. The garage won't be full of bikes, electric train tracks on plywood, sawhorses surrounded by chunks of two-by-fours, nails, a hammer and saw, and unfinished "experimental projects,"...I'll be able to park both cars neatly in just the right places, and never again stumble over skateboards, piles of papers (saved for the school fund drive)...

Someday when the kids are grown, the kitchen will be incredibly neat. The sink will be free of sticky dishes, the garbage disposal won't get choked on rubber bands or paper cups, the refrigerator won't be clogged with nine bottles of milk, and we won't lose the tops to jelly jars, ketchup bottles...or the mustard...

Someday when the kids are grown, my lovely wife will actually have the time to get dressed leisurely. A long, hot bath (without three panicked interruptions), time to do her nails (even toe nails if she pleases!) without answering a dozen questions and reviewing spelling words...

Someday when the kids are grown, the instrument called a "telephone" will actually be available. It won't look like it's growing from a teenager's ear. It will simply hang there...silently and amazingly available! And it will be free of lipstick, human saliva, mayonnaise, corn chip crumbs...

Someday when the kids are grown, I'll be able to see through the car windows. Fingerprints, tongue licks, sneaker footprints, dog tracks...will be conspicuous by their absence. The back seat won't be a disaster area, we won't sit on jacks or crayons anymore, the tank will not always be somewhere between empty and fumes, and (glory to God!) I won't have to clean up dog messes another time.

Webster's Dictionary defines the word *content* as "happy enough with what one has or is; not desiring something more or different; satisfied." I must confess to you that God has been working in my life in the area of contentment. I am sure it was his plan that I did not preach this sermon back in February to finish off my series in the book of Philippians. I have had to live with Philippians 4 for over four months. As a result, God has been able to do open heart surgery in my life, pointing out many areas of discontentedness over and over. In fact, I could share many personal examples with you, but I will just share one poignant memory.

About nine years ago, shortly after I came on staff at Peninsula Bible Church, my wife and I almost bought a house in Palo Alto next door to Steve Zeisler, another pastor, and his family. We dreamed of having a strong *koinonia* relationship involving shared lawn-mowers and meals. I actually talked the owner, who was using the house as a rental, into selling it and offered him \$89,000. When he put his house up for sale, he received another offer for \$90,000. He came back to me to see if I would raise my offer, but I decided not to buy the house. I took my original figure as a fleece from the Lord and thought we could not afford the extra \$1,000. That decision has gnawed at me for nine years!

God brought this memory to my attention during these past four months, showing me that I have never given it up. In fact, my wife is tired of hearing about it! As I was wrestling with this and thanking God for what he has been teaching me, Steve Zeisler came into my office and said, "Guess what! The house just sold again for \$319,000!" I broke out laughing and said, "Lord, you are funny!"

While working on my life, God has uncovered an irritability which is based upon discontentedness. My guess is that I am not alone in this. I am sure many of you are wrestling with the same seeds of discontentedness planted in the soil of your hearts. Maybe I am speaking to some who have worshipped at the shrine of *promotion* for too long. To you, contentment is a foreign word meaning loss of prestige or laziness. You see it as something to be experienced between birth and kindergarten and between retirement and the grave by those who have no ambition. Perhaps I am speaking to some couples who are discontented because they want a bigger house or a better location. Maybe I am speaking to some students who are flirting with dissatisfaction regarding their lack of transportation or their family situation.

The seed of discontent is planted early in our lives and grows in our brains with every new situation. I found this out when I took my eight-year-old son shopping for clothes. He was not satisfied with just any pair of jeans and shirt. He wanted the "Morey Boogey" brand. He could not be content with anything less.

Contentment is one of the true marks of maturity

I am convinced that one of the critical needs in the body of Christ is contentment. We live in neighborhoods filled with people who are looking for some source of contentment. We are working with people who in their eager pursuit of ambition have grown tired and discontented. We are rapidly becoming a nation of discontented marionettes, dangling from the strings of the dictatorial puppeteer Covetousness.

Paul told us in 1 Timothy that godliness is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. One of the amazing statements Paul makes in this passage is, "I am content." My desire for you is to help you see the importance of being contented with what you have rather than being perpetually dissatisfied and always striving for more.

Philippians 4:10-23 will help us discover the same secret of contentment Paul learned. I want to take you into the operating room where God has been doing his work on my heart. I assume that he wants to perform surgery on your life as well. My prayer is that for the next few moments you will restrict your thoughts to one person, yourself. We can all think of someone else who needs this passage, maybe a co-worker or a spouse, but we must concentrate on ourselves. God wants to teach all of us something in the area of contentment.

Paul has graciously shared his experience with us in this passage. Interwoven in these verses are three secrets that will

help us to experience the same contentment Paul enjoyed. Along with each secret, I have included an exhortation that will help us apply the truth.

Let us look at the first secret in verses 10 and 14 through 18.

I. The Secret of Christian Generosity: Learn to

Share Your Resources

But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity...Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction. And you yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs. Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account. But I have received everything in full, and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God.

The principle Paul reveals is simple: one Christian has enough because another Christian is generous. Paul had enough because other Christians contributed to meet his needs. He had a family who cared about him. No matter how distant or isolated he might be geographically, he knew there were people who were willing to give of their means for his needs. What a great source of encouragement this must have been to him!

The Philippians felt a strong attachment to the apostle because God called these believers to faith in Jesus Christ through him. God had brought great blessing to their lives through Paul. As a result, they loved him and wanted to help him.

For a short time after he left Philippi, Paul worked in Thessalonica. Being located near this city, the Philippians sent messengers to find out how Paul was doing. When they heard he was in financial need, they took up a collection for him. Later they sent another gift. Paul refers to this in verse 16 where he says, "For even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs." After a riot drove Paul out of Thessalonica, he went south to Berea and then to Athens. For a while, the Philippians must have lost track of Paul and wondered where he was and how he was doing. Questions flooded their minds: "Does he have a place to stay? Is he without money? Is he forced to take care of himself by tentmaking?" When the news finally arrived that he was in need, the Philippians sent money again, as 2 Corinthians tells us.

Eventually the believers at Philippi lost touch with Paul entirely, for he was constantly on the move and communications were slow. After he left Greece and returned to Judea, he began his third missionary journey. Although many years had passed since Paul first set foot in Philippi, their love for him was still strong. Having heard of his need in prison, they immediately sent a gift in the care of Epaphroditus.

The Philippian's generosity was an *ever-present sentiment*. Notice verse 10 says, "You were indeed concerned for me but you lacked opportunity." It had not been easy to maintain communication with Paul, but their love was always there. As

soon as an opportunity arose, they were eager to take it.

Paul was not too proud to admit that he needed the help of other believers. There are two extremes we can take in the body of Christ. One extreme is total independence. This is the attitude that says, "I don't need anyone else! I am sufficient in myself." The opposite extreme is total dependence upon the support and encouragement of others. Both of these are wrong. The correct attitude is one of *interdependence*, being willing to give and to receive. This is the attitude Paul expresses here.

Generosity is essential in Christian relationships. Other people's needs ought to affect us. The Philippian church was not a rich church, comprised of prominent and wealthy people. In fact, in 2 Corinthians 8:1-2, Paul says, "Let me tell you what God in his grace has done for the churches in Macedonia. Though they have been going through much trouble and hard times, they have mixed their wonderful joy with their deep poverty, and the result has been an overflow of giving to others." (TLB) The Philippian church was poor but generous.

Paul says to the Philippians, "It was kind of you to share in my trouble." His need was not remote to them; they felt it. Paul commends their actions as an admirable thing to do. Be generous with the resources God has given you. In talking about money, William Barclay puts this in perspective:

Money in itself is neither good nor bad; it is simply dangerous in that the love of it may become bad. With money a man can do much good; and with money a man can do much evil. With money a man can selfishly serve his own desires; and with money he can generously answer to the cry of his neighbor's need. With money a man can buy his way to the forbidden things and facilitate the path of wrongdoing; and with money he can make it easier for someone else to live as God meant him to live. Money brings power, and power is always a double edged thing, for it is powerful to good and powerful to evil.

Dr. Karl Menninger once asked a wealthy patient, "What on earth are you going to do with all your money?" The patient replied, "Just worry about it, I suppose." Dr. Menninger then asked him if he derived much pleasure from his worrying. "No," responded the patient, "but I get such terror when I think of giving it to anyone else."

In commending the generosity of the Philippians, Paul makes two important statements about this attribute.

A. Generosity Is Given to God

Generosity is primarily a vertical transaction, not just a horizontal one. Paul calls their a gift a "fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice." This takes us to the Old Testament and the picture of the burnt offering. In Genesis 8, we find the first account of a burnt offering. After the flood when Noah offered a burnt offering to God, the Scripture tells us, "When the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of man...'" Paul is telling us that when we generously sacrifice to meet the needs of others, we are ultimately expressing our own obedient consecration to God. We are offering a sacrifice to God which is a pleasing aroma he delightfully accepts.

B. Generosity Will Be Rewarded by God

Paul was always sensitive about receiving monetary help from churches because there were always those who questioned his motives. He even risks appearing cold in this passage to emphasize the real value of the gift. His words in verse 17 seem

to be a disclaimer: “Not that I seek the gift.” This is not Paul’s intention at all. He is genuinely content to accept whatever circumstances God provides.

Thus, he says that he does not covet the Philippians’ money, but the “profit which increases to your account.” These Greek words are the kind of financial terms we would expect to hear in a banking institution to indicate that a new partnership has been formed. They involve credit and compounded interest. Paul is saying that when we share what God has entrusted to us, whether it be our love or possessions, we are actually entering into a partnership not only with those with whom we share but also with God himself. Paul says God pays interest compounded daily for our investment!

In his statement, he is suggesting that this is a proper motive for Christians to cultivate. This is similar to Jesus’ words in Luke 12 where we are told to seek opportunities to be generous to the needy for in so doing we are making for ourselves purses which do not grow old and a treasure in heaven that will not fail. Cultivate a generous heart by learning to share your resources. This is the secret of generosity.

Paul’s second secret is revealed in verses 11 and 12.

II. The Secret of Christian Discipline: Learn to Discipline Your Desires

Not that I speak from want; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need.

These verses give us another vital principle. The first factor which allows us to be content is the generosity of others. The Lord uses the resources of one to meet the needs of another. The second factor involves a Christian’s attitude toward his own circumstances. It is easy to complain when times are difficult. One of the secrets of contentment is being able to see our needs as being met by that which we presently have. What we learn from Paul’s personal testimony is that “enough” and “contentment” are relative terms based upon what we think our needs are.

We must cultivate the discipline of learning that we do not need more than we have. We have already mentioned how careful Paul was in detaching the financial gifts of the Philippian church from any personal desires. He was so careful that his statements can be misinterpreted as ungratefulness: “Not that I speak from want...Not that I seek the gift.” Paul is not giving backhanded thanks here but guarding himself from being covetous.

Coveting has many nasty synonyms: envy, jealousy, lust, and greed. It starts in our heart as a seed, but it gets watered by the inevitable pressures of our pride. Your friend gets a promotion with a significant pay raise—the seed germinates. The new model cars roll out on the showroom floor—the seed sprouts roots. You go shopping with a friend who fits into dresses that are the same size she wore 15 years ago—the seed becomes a budding plant. Coveting is material inebriation, an addiction to things that do not last and a craving for things that do not really matter. It forces us to depend on tomorrow to bring us the contentment that today could not supply.

In this passage, Paul uses two well known idioms from his

day. The term translated “content” is taken out of the Greek Stoic philosophy which used it to describe a “self-sufficient” person with no needs or weaknesses, someone who had found a completely self-satisfying world. The Stoics aspired to being so self-sufficient that they were untouched by anything. This is a strange word for Paul to use, but he borrows the term to describe the “restful contentment” of a Christian who has freed himself from the constant cravings of a covetous spirit.

The second word helps us to understand that this contentment is something learned. Paul says, “I have *learned* the secret.” This verb was used in the Greek mystery religions to describe the person who had worked through the various lower degrees of knowledge until he reached the full possession of the “mystery” itself. Paul is saying, “I have made my way through the progressive detachment from the things of the world, both its comforts and discomforts, and I have gained freedom from those things. Circumstances no longer master me.” From this passage, we can learn a wonderful principle: contentment is one of the true marks of maturity.

Coveting is material inebriation

It is interesting to compare Paul’s attitude with that of the children of Israel during their journey from Egypt. In Exodus 17, the children of Israel grumbled and quarreled with Moses and with one another because there was no water for them to drink. Verse 7 tells us Moses “named the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the Lord, saying, ‘Is the Lord among us, or not?’” But the Psalmist tells us in Psalm 81 that God had not abandoned them. Their thirst was not an accident but a purposeful test designed to examine their devotion to God. They failed the test because they tried to force God’s hand, reasoning, “If God were really with us, this would have never happened. Let him deliver us and then we will trust Him.”

We struggle with this same truth. We often say, “If God were with me, I would not be in this circumstance! Lord, get me out of this, and then I will trust you.” John D. Rockefeller was once asked, “How much money does it take to satisfy a man?” With rare wisdom he replied, “A little bit more than he has.” This is true in so many areas of our lives. Paul had learned contentment bit by bit, through circumstance after circumstance.

How is your heart? Have you learned to discipline your desires or are you constantly wishing for more, for something better, or for something different?

The third secret may be the most important one of all. Look at verses 13, 19 and 20.

III. The Secret of Christian Trust: Learn to Live in Christ

I can do all things through Him who strengthens me...And my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Paul gives the glory to God. We can pass over this common Christian phrase without pausing to grasp its significance. What is Paul giving glory to God for? This would include the times

when the Philippian church could not help him as well as the times they could, his times of hunger and times of plenty. It would also include the churches who neglected him and those who remembered him. I am sure he thought of his chains as well as his freedom. Because he accepted all of these circumstances as being from God, he glorified God in all of them. He was contented because God was trustworthy even when it looked like he was not. Paul had learned to be content because he had learned to trust.

He expresses his contentment in two ways: as his own personal experience and as a doctrine for all. Verse 13 gives us his personal experience: "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." No circumstance could ever defeat Paul because it could never be too much for his God. He says, "I have all the power I need to handle every situation I face."

Here we find the secret of his strength. Although Paul has already revealed that he has the strength of a self-sufficient Stoic, he now reveals his source. His power for victory over the demands of life is not inherent in himself but arises from another source. Paul has this daily strength because of the one who, as we might paraphrase, "infuses me with dynamite."

The key word in this sentence is "in", translated "through" in the NASB. Jesus Christ is not a channel along which all the blessings flow, but the place in which they are deposited. He is the sum of all the blessings. The person who possesses Christ possesses all! Paul could be content because he learned how to live in Christ. Christ *in* us is our internal power. He is the one who gives mastery over the demands of life.

Lest we should feel that what Paul is expressing is unique to him, he restates the trustworthiness of God as a Christian doctrine: "My God shall supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." The apostle is not unique in gaining this strength from his God. His God will supply anyone's needs. The *all things* of Paul's personal experience is matched by *every need* which might come upon the Philippians or us. No situation is beyond the power of this God whom Paul knows well enough to call "my God." In meeting our need, his supply is not limited to the size of our need, but rather is given according to the infinite riches of heaven available to the Christian on earth.

The key to it all is "in Christ Jesus." Christ in us is the adequate resource for every circumstance. Paul had learned what it meant to be in Christ. This is what he has been talking about throughout this book. In Christ, we are secure and have everything we need. For our anxiety, he provides the peace of God patrolling and guarding our hearts. For our struggles in relationships, Christ is our model. In Christ, we become new people with new feelings. We have a new way of looking at life, seeing his sovereign hand in all our circumstances. Learn to live in Christ.

Paul began this letter by addressing the saints and commending them to the Lord Jesus. He ends in the same way, greeting the saints and commending them to the Lord's grace. Look at verses 21 through 23:

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

God's grace is enough for them because it is the remedy for every human need. Jesus' grace reveals all his glories—his power, helpfulness, and riches—and makes them available to his people. God's grace is our all-sufficient supply. The greatest power of God is not found in signs and wonders or even in the power of nature. Rather, it is found in the power of Jesus Christ living in a heart, causing that heart to rise above every circumstance to trust him in the midst of any turmoil. This is the power of God.

There is no more fitting conclusion to this book than the simplicity of this final prayer. For us, as well as for himself, Paul wants nothing more than a daily deepening experience with Jesus which he finds so satisfying and rewarding.

Horatio Spafford, an attorney who lived in Chicago at the turn of the century learned this lesson well. He was a dynamic Christian man and was influential in founding the Moody Bible Institute. During the great Chicago fire in 1871, he lost his business. While rebuilding, he sent his wife and children abroad to Europe. On the journey across the Atlantic, their ship was struck by another vessel and sank. Although his wife watched their four children drown, she was miraculously saved by falling on some floating debris. While she was recuperating in a hospital in Wales, she telegraphed her husband two words: "Saved Alone." He, of course, took the first ship to Wales. As he sailed near the spot where the ship had gone down, Dr. Spafford walked along the deck contemplating all that had happened. There he was moved to write the song we sing so often, "It Is Well With My Soul,"

When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
"It is well, it is well with my soul."

This is the message Paul wants to communicate to us. Whatever our circumstances, we can say, "It is well with my soul." This is the key to our contentment, the secret which enables us to rest. Our neighbors and associates are longing to find a life at rest and peace. May they see that contentment modeled in our lives.

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