

The Secret of Contentment

Philippians 4.4-13

FUPC
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INTRO:

Would you describe yourself as a “contented person”? Maybe I should define what I mean by “contented person”:

I’m thinking of a person who:

- accepts** themselves as they are... including the good and bad alike;
- is satisfied** with their place in life, their living situation, their financial resources, their relationships with friends, their relationships with family, their accomplishments
- isn’t driven** to accumulate more and more, to measure their importance or worth to distract them from something to fill a void, to make them feel alive and happy
- can be at peace** within themselves when life becomes difficult or challenging, plans don’t come off as expected, people let them down, they are not in control of the situation

To be honest, when I planned this sermon, I had no idea that last week’s election would go the way it did, and that it would result in thousands, maybe millions of people being very unhappy, dismayed, angered, and disillusioned. And I have a feeling that no matter which candidate won, the other side would not be content with the result. So to believe that its possible to find contentment in the reality of life’s losses, disappointments, and failures is a perhaps a foolish quest. But I’m going to try anyway.

When Paul says that he has learned to be “content” in any and all circumstances, how can he possibly know the pain of disappointment and despair that many people live with. We want to say, “But Paul, you don’t get it. How could you possibly understand?” Isn’t this just so much religious idealism, sounds good but “get real” Paul! Surely many of us would change things if we could. We are not content. We are not satisfied with the ugly choices life has doled out to us. We want to call back our loved ones from death. We want to protect people we love from the diseases that are ravaging their bodies. We want to insulate vulnerable hearts from hurting any more than they already have. No we are not content.

The passage before us sounds good, sounds noble, is beautifully written, and maybe it even inspires us. But when it comes right down to it... rejoicing all the time just doesn’t seem to work for us. Giving thanks in everything... and that includes the things we wish had never happened... seems so hypocritical because it’s just hard to feel thankful for the hurts of body, mind and spirit. Being content in every circumstance is beyond our grasp because we find ourselves often in places we’d rather not be.

How can Paul write these things? It always helps to get the rest of the story. About 20 years after Jesus was crucified, buried and resurrected, the Apostle Paul was beginning his second missionary journey. It would eventually take him to the country of Greece. One of the first cities he visited with his traveling companion Silas was Philippi.

Paul & the Philippian church

- His approach – attend synagogue, but there was none.
- River gathering – alternative for Jewish community with no synagogue
- First converts: Lydia, Slave girl & jail, singing & earthquake, the jailer & family

So despite the hostile welcome, a small band of converts is formed and becomes a church in the city of Philippi. This church encompasses all classes: Lydia from the upper class, the jailer from the middle class, the girl from the lower class as a slave. The church encompasses different nationalities: Jewish, Greek, Roman. Lydia would be high profile Jewish businesswoman, owner/manager of her own company. The slave girl would be a talented and perceptive spiritually alert Greek, a Gentile immigrant.

The Roman jailer would be a simple, hard working, blue collar man, assigned to military duty in this small rebellious land of Jewish people, faithful and reliable in his important job of tending to the prisoners.

This church became Paul's favorite church. He was closer to them than any other group. He shared his heart with them as he shared it with no one else. And the church felt the same way about Paul. Wherever he went, this church sent him gifts to help sustain his life and ministry. They were generous in pouring out blessing upon blessing on Paul. Word has reached this church that Paul is in prison in Rome. He has been arrested for promoting this new sect called Christianity and for preaching about Jesus. He is awaiting trial and it doesn't look good. In fact, there is little likelihood that he will be released. For a prisoner such as Paul, he may very well have been chained between two Roman soldiers.

The church members at Philippi take up a collection, knowing that Paul is in trouble and has no means of supporting himself, and they send it to Rome with a messenger named Epaphroditus. They intend this man to be a comfort and help to Paul and it's their way of reaching out to Paul with their love and concerns. Epaphroditus gets sick while in Rome, and when he recovers, Paul sends him back to the Philippian church with a letter. This is the letter we read from today.

This letter pulses with joy. Paul uses the word "joy" or "rejoice" at least 16 times! In today's reading, it's the first word: *"Rejoice in the Lord always! And again I will say, rejoice. Let your gentleness be evident to all."* Remember that Paul is writing this letter under armed guard in a Roman prison cell. He has seen his friends murdered for the faith that he brought to them in his preaching. He has witnessed the torture of Christians who refuse to deny Jesus. He has been separated from his family for more than 3 years. He doesn't expect to get out alive. In fact, he expects that death is near.

He goes on, *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*

He concludes the section by talking about his own attitude toward the tests and traumas of life: *"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength."*

So tell us Paul... we all ears, What's your secret? You mentioned a secret to being content. What is it? As I listened to this passage speaking to me, let me tell you what I heard as the "secret" Paul had found:

1. Live with a spirit of joy. Joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness is dependent on circumstances. Happiness is what happens to us when life is working right and things are going our way. Happiness is propped up on getting what we want. Happiness comes and goes with our prosperity, our health, our security, our bank account, our social acceptance, and achieving our goals. Happiness is like the weather, sometimes it's sunny and warm, sometimes it's windy and rainy; it comes and goes with our moods.

Joy is different because it's not dependent on any of these things. Joy is more like a gift that grows from the inside out rather than the outside in. Joy is a gift of God and a fruit of the Holy Spirit. Joy is a condition of the soul that can't be diminished by loss of health, security, or personal failure. Joy can't be taken away from us by anyone else or anything else.

Joy is the realization that in the deepest part of your being, you are worth more than you could ever imagine. It is the bone-deep feeling of belonging in the universe. It is the profound knowledge that you are loved just as you are for who you are and nothing can ever change that. It is the unshakable trust

that life is good and no amount of violence, sickness or disappointment or failure can make it not worth living. If we can live in our Joy rather than in our Happiness, we can find contentment in our lives, no matter what the circumstance.

2. Turn anxiety into prayer. Let prayer lead you to thanksgiving. Allow our thanksgiving to lead us into a place of peace. It is only human nature to be anxious. Don't beat up on yourself for being anxious. It's God's gracious gift to us to save us from hurting ourselves or living recklessly. But don't let your fears run your life. Because when our fears call the shots, we end up as neurotic, addicted, weak-spirited, vulnerable people. What we fear controls us.

Paul says that he found contentment when he allowed God's peace to control him rather than his fears. He surely had plenty to be afraid about. His life was on the line. He was expecting to die any day. But he lived in a peace that passes understanding... beyond comprehension. Somehow, Jesus Christ held Paul's fears. Paul had discovered that Jesus, by His Spirit, was with him in every anxious moment, surrounding him and holding him securely.

It was related to his choice to give his fears to God. What's the worst thing that could happen to you in your life right now? What do you fear the most? That's what you need to give to God. In giving it to God, offer a prayer of thanksgiving... not for the problem you're facing, but that in the midst of the problem, you are learning something about yourself, about God, about other people. Be thankful that God will never abandon you. Be thankful that out of the pain, God can grow something lastingly beautiful and worthwhile. God never wastes our pain. It's too precious.

3. Contentment is a matter of possessing ourselves completely. That's literally the meaning of the word "content"... to possess oneself, to be self-sufficient, to be satisfied, to be at peace within one's own world, to be fully integrated on the inside.

Paul traces his contentment to Jesus Christ who gives him the strength to bear up under poverty and plenty, joy and sorrow, imprisonment and freedom, success or failure. His secret had to do with Jesus and how that relationship smoothed out the hills and valleys and filled in the potholes, and hedged in the dangerous passages. Daily strength from a daily love. Moment by moment energy from beyond ourselves. The irony is that we find self-possession in allowing ourselves to be possessed by God.

Paul was in prison, and he had a choice to make. He could have chosen to be bitter, focusing on the negative, all that was wrong with his life, all he had lost, but instead he chose to focus on the positive, on all that was right, on all he still had. Being in prison, he had every reason to be depressed, but instead he wrote: "Rejoice in the Lord Always." He had every reason to complain and plead with God about his dire circumstances, but instead he wrote: "...with THANKSGIVING let your requests be known to God." He had every reason to look on the dark side of his circumstance, but instead he wrote: "...whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable... if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." He had every reason to give up, but instead he wrote: "I press on... I can do all things through him who strengthens me." Yes, he was writing to himself as much as he was to others.

You see, we are not always free to determine WHAT happens to us, but we are relatively free to choose HOW WE WILL RESPOND to whatever happens. Change is inevitable. Being content is a choice.