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Erie, PA  
November 8, 2009

## **“Contentment in Christ” Philippians 4:10-13**

### **Introduction**

Consider a few startling facts:

**Fact #1:** During the **1980’s the Irish had half the incomes and purchasing power of the West Germans.** Yet year after year [according to national polls], the Irish were happier.”

**Fact #2:** “People on the **Forbe’s wealthiest Americans reported only slightly greater happiness than other Americans;** 37% were less happy than the average American.”

**Fact #3:** “[In 1992] compared to 1957, we have twice as many cars per person, we have microwave ovens, color TV’s, VCR’s air conditioners, answering machines, and \$12 billion a year worth of brand name athletic shoes. . . .Nevertheless in 1957, 35% of Americans told the National Opinion Research Center that they were ‘very happy.’ In 1991 with doubled affluence, 31% said the same. To judge by the soaring rates of depression, the quintupling of violent crimes since 1960, the doubling of the divorce rate, the slight decline in marital happiness among marital survivors, and the tripling of the teen suicide rate, we are richer and unhappier. There is a shocking conclusion in all of this: economic prosperity gives little if any boost to contentment. Having doesn’t make you happy! Or as the Bible says, “Man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15).

One man tells the story of a child who could teach us a few lessons. This boy lived in Sudan where the Muslim majority want to impose Islam on Christians. Some Christian parents told their son, “We will be deported for our faith and will die of starvation if we maintain it, but do not mind. We will be crowned martyrs in heaven.” Then this child went to other children and gave them his “toys.” (He never had toys as we know them, just things like a stick with a ball of rags attached to it which he called his horse.) He told them, “I do not need these toys anymore. I will have better ones in heaven.” This boy had learned contentment in this earthly life.

John MacArthur remarks,

Contentment is a highly prized, but elusive virtue. Though it comes only from being rightly related to God and trusting His sovereign, loving, purposeful providence, people nevertheless seek it where it cannot be found—in money, possessions, power, prestige, relationships, jobs, or freedom from difficulties. But by that definition, contentment is

unattainable, for it is impossible in this fallen world to be completely free from problems. In sharp contrast to the world's understanding of contentment is this simple definition of spiritual contentment penned by the Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs: "Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition" (*The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, p. 19).

The Bible has much to say about contentment:

When soldiers asked John the Baptist what godly repentance would look like in their lives, he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." (Luke 3:14).

Paul gave this advice to Timothy: "But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content." (1 Timothy 6:8).

Likewise the author of Hebrews urged, "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."" (Hebrews 13:5).

Paul even wrote, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12:10).

How is this possible? Because Paul believed: "Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment," (1 Timothy 6:6).

Contentment is not only a **virtue** to be sought but a **command** to be obeyed.

**Yet, our society is built on discontentment.** Marketers and salesmen exist in large measure because people are discontent. The whole ad industry is built on discontentment. The ads appeal to our sense of discontentment and restlessness in the area of **relationships, possessions, feelings, and emotion.**

The **church has caught the disease.** A segment of Christendom known as "**prosperity theology**" only succeeds in the soil of dissatisfaction. Both in and out of the church, **people are pursuing what they don't have because they are not satisfied with what they do have.**

Our text is Philippians 4:10-13. It deals directly with the issue of contentment.

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. Not that I am 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. I can do all things through him who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:10-13).

Let me set the **historical context** for us before we learn how we can be content in Christ. Paul, the great apostle, had been living under house arrest for the last two years of his life. He was a prisoner who was likely suffering from ill health, had contact

with very few friends, and could not do that which he loved most—preach the gospel openly and plant churches. He faced the possibility of death very soon—death by execution. Commenting on this period in Paul’s life, F. B. Meyer wrote that he was “deprived of every comfort, and cast as a lonely man on the shores of the great strange metropolis, with every movement of his hand clanking a fetter, and nothing before him but the lion’s mouth or the sword.” Yet despite all of this he had learned to be content!

With verse 9 Paul basically wraps up the **teaching** portion of this letter and yet he still is going to teach us—only this time by his **personal example which** he has just told us to follow his carefully. The remaining portion of this letter to this church at Philippi was really one of the main reasons why he wrote the letter: to **communicate his deep gratitude** for the support gift he had received from this church which he dearly loved.

Verse 10 tells us that **when Paul received this gift** from the hands of the Philippians' representative named Epaphroditus that he “**rejoiced in the Lord greatly.**” Now you know that “joy” is a major theme in this book and now Paul exemplifies it for us. He has instructed us to rejoice in the Lord always and now he indicates that is what he was doing—greatly--that is Paul had mega joy!

**What caused Paul joy? The immediate cause was the gift** that he had received from this dear people—a gift that was greatly needed for prisoners in the Roman system did not receive much at all. They weren't given clothes or enough food to hardly keep them alive. No, prisoners in ancient times were wholly dependent on visitors who brought them the necessities of life. And so this gift met a genuine need. Paul had few friends to help him out at this time.

The Philippians had, no doubt, wanted to help for some time, but for some reason **they lacked the opportunity**. We are not told specifically about this. Perhaps it was because they weren't quite sure where Paul was, no one was able to take the time or risk to take a gift to him in Rome—which was hundreds of miles away, or maybe they just didn't have the resources to take up an offering. But no matter, now they were able and glad to “revive their concern” for Paul.

But although Paul was joyful because of the gift, **the ultimate cause of his joy was “in the Lord.”** He was truly grateful for the gift, but he was ultimately joyful in the Lord! His joy didn't depend on circumstances, but in his relationship with Christ! Paul was content because he believed in the sovereignty and the providence of God who “who works all things according to the counsel of his will,” (Ephesians 1:11) and so he knew “that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28).”

Sadly, though most Christians know we should be joyful and content, we often live otherwise. We live too much like the world which reflects the title of a popular song years ago, “**I Can't Get No Satisfaction.**” We think that if circumstances would change, we would be happy. But this text teaches us how to be content in Christ with a little or a lot.

You heard about the joke of the man who said to his wife, "Honey, you don't only want to keep up with the Joneses, **you want to be the Joneses** who everybody keeps up with!" Or the other one about two wealthy man who overheard another person in a crowd say, "**I'd really be content, if only I had \$1,000 more.**" One wealthy man said to the other, "I love to see people happy" and he went over and gave the man "\$1000." As he walked away however he heard the other man say to his friends, "Why didn't I say, '\$2000.'"

Philippians 4:10-13 gives us three simple truths about contentment that I want us to apply to our lives this week. Let's consider them soberly, yet joyfully!

## **I. You Can Be Content**

Paul says twice in this passage, "I have learned to be content!" His purpose is saying this was **not to brag** but rather to **give us an example** of how to follow Christ. Contentment can be learned and must be learned by believers.

**But what does it mean to be content?** Let me begin by telling you what it doesn't mean. Contentment doesn't mean that if you **don't have a job**, you don't seek a job. The Bible is clear that if a man doesn't work and can then he should not eat! To be content does not meant that **if you have a job** that you don't seek a more challenging or that you don't seek to better yourself in your job.

To be content does not mean that you **are not seeking to better your condition in this world, in your family, at your school or in your church**. Being content does not mean that if you have a **physical problem** you don't go to the doctor. It doesn't mean that if you are lacking some character trait that you simply say, "I am content!"

Don't confuse contentment with **laziness or complacency**, with a **lack of fulfilling your responsibilities or a lack of ambition**.

So what is contentment. Contentment means, "**I seek to fulfill all my responsibilities biblically and I then leave the results to God!**" Contentment is being able to say, "**I have enough! God is enough! I am totally satisfied!**"

Contentment is **going to work and working the hardest** that you possibly can and trusting God to provide your needs as you are faithful. Contentment is **studying as hard** as you can for that test at school and doing the best possible job you can and being satisfied with the grade. Contentment is **developing the best Christian character** you can and looking for the best spouse you possibly can and being satisfied if God leads you into marriage or doesn't. Contentment is **taking care of your physical body** and exercising and eating properly and getting enough rest and being satisfied with whatever diseases or disabilities God gives you! Contentment is **doing your very best in practice on your musical instrument** or on **the basketball court** and then being satisfied with whatever chair you get in the band or whether you start on the team.

So in a nutshell, **Contentment is doing what God wants you to do** and then saying, **“I am totally satisfied with whatever God gives me!** God is enough! I don’t need anything more! I don’t want anything more!” Again as Jeremiah Burroughs has said, “Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition”

Contentment is a **beautiful, comforting, wonderful, encouraging, happy, rich, and yet uncommon word.** Rarely do you hear someone say, “I am totally content. I don’t need anything more! I don’t want anything more. I am totally happy with what God has given to me!”

Contentment is saying, “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. Contentment is saying, “How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights.” Contentment says, “Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands. My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips.” Contentment announces, “He satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry soul he fills with good things.” (Psalm 23:1; 36:7,8; 63:3-5; 107:9).

The Greek word here for contentment is “autarkeia” which literally means “**self-sufficient.**” It was employed by the **Stoics** who sought to teach that man should live totally dependent on himself—no one else. But obviously in the context here, Paul is not saying that he is totally “self-sufficient” but rather he is totally “God-sufficient.” His joy in life was not dependent on external criteria. He teaches us that our joy should not rise or ebb based on our circumstances, our position in life, our surroundings, our status, our job, our health, our family situation or anything else or anyone else. Our joy is Christ—who He is and what He has done. Nothing else should sway our joy.

## **II. This text tells us as well that you can be content regardless of the circumstances**

Paul mentions two ways that we are tempted toward discontentment. **First, when we are in need.** This means when we **fail a course**, when we **don’t get the job** we wanted, when we are **sick**, when our **house burns** down, when our **car doesn’t work**, when our **children are rebelling**, when a **loved one dies**, when the **money runs low.**

Paul knew what it means to be in need—just read the book of Acts or 2 Corinthians.

“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.” (2 Corinthians 4:8-10).

“Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death.

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands." (2 Corinthians 11:23-33).

Contentment is not saying, "**I will be happy with more things, if things were different, if I had a better environment, if I had another mate, if I had more freedom from problems.**" Contentment ought to be our possession when we don't have something we want: whether that be a real or perceived emotional, physical or material need. Yet, sadly, we have turned nearly every "want" into a "need" in our thinking so that "need" has become the #1 value in our culture.

But as Christians we are to biblical and godly, not conforming to our culture, right? But let me ask you (and believe me I have struggled with these questions too): **are you content? Where do you struggle with discontentment? Why are you discontent?**

Are you content with the **handicaps, the disabilities or other physical characteristics** the Lord has given you?

Are you content with your **financial** position in life right now? If God takes certain things away from you or if He doesn't give you what you want soon, will you still worship Him?

Are you content with the **ministries** and the ministry giftedness that God has endowed you with?

Are you content with the vocation He is asking you to fulfill?

Are you content with whatever God does in the **future**? Or are you stressed out about what may happen in our country right now? The economy? Your retirement plans? What will happen when your kids grow up?

But there is another garden that contentment can flower in. **You can be content when you abound or when you have affluence.** This means you can be content when you do get the **job promotion** or the **new car** or the **raise** or **more insurance** or when you get something that you wanted!

Now you may think, "**It's easy to be content when you are abounding!**" Is that so? Paul's life wasn't always being in need. **He knew what it was to abound.** But how did he handle that? One time he was welcomed on an island because they thought he was

a god. Everybody came to him and wanted to be healed and he could do it. On another occasion the people thought he and Barnabas were just about the greatest speakers they had ever heard and speaking was his trade. How did he react? He gave glory to God!

**Do you know how to be content when you succeeding?** Many times for every 100 men that handle adversity, only one can handle prosperity. As I mentioned earlier the richest people in America aren't any more content than the middle class American. Why? Because of our **insatiable greed**. The more you have, the more you will want. We are faring far better than the average first century Christian to whom Paul was writing these words. And yet we still look around at things we do not have and wish we had them. Even Adam and Eve in the middle of the garden with everything anyone could ever want wanted more. We can always look around and find someone else who has something that we want. Our human sinful nature cries out "More!"

**Ahab** had everything he could have ever wanted and more. He owned palaces and vineyards galore. But he saw one man's business success and wanted it so he killed Naboth to get it. **King Saul** ruled the roost in Israel, but he grew very dissatisfied at the threat of a little shepherd boy when the crowds found more praise in David than in him. **Diotrephes** in the book of 3 John is mentioned as a discontented man. He was satisfied with being a church leader in a church, he wanted to be the church leader. He was satisfied with being the church leader in a church, he wanted to be the church leader in the church. Oh, the great devastation that discontentment causes personally, economically, maritally, and in the church.

I knew a boy dissatisfied  
He craved what others owned  
He thought they would bring happiness  
if only he had known.  
"I need a brand new riding bike like neighbor Don," thought he,  
"Then I would surely be content and happy as can be."  
Though Don, he owned that brand new bike  
His joy was incomplete  
"A motor scooter's what I need,"  
Said Don to neighbor Pete.  
But Pete with his new motor bike  
He often would complain  
"I cannot ride when winter comes  
Or when it starts to rain."

Oh, discontentment is a constant enemy of the soul, even when we abound and brothers, in comparison to the rest of the world, we all abound. One of the reasons it is difficult to be content when you are abounding is that **you are afraid you will lose it somehow**. "He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity. When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes? Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep. There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept

by their owner to his hurt, and those riches were lost in a bad venture. And he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand." (Ecclesiastes 5:10-14).

One of the ways that we demonstrate discontentment is by **worrying constantly**. "What if my pension fund goes bad? What if I get laid off? What if there isn't SS when I am 65? What if the stock market crashes?"

That is why a few verses earlier Paul tells us not to worry! **Anxiety is the gasoline poured on the fire of discontent.**

You see, contentment has **nothing to do with what you possess**, your health, your marital status. It has **everything to do with your satisfaction with God!** You can be content. You can be content regardless of the circumstances. And finally, let's learn. . .

### **III. You can be content regardless of the circumstances by the enabling power of God!**

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!" That verse has many applications but the immediate context is "**contentment.**" What he is saying is, "I can handle persecution, ill health, discouragement, success, a less than ideal marriage, a job loss, a death through Christ who strengthens me!"

Paul was **not content because of anything innate in him**. Contentment doesn't come from some gene make-up. He **wasn't born this way** and either are we. He wasn't content because he had **will power** to be content. He wasn't content because he had a **phlegmatic personality**. He wasn't content because he **denied reality**. He faced reality. He said, "I am perplexed and persecuted!" But "I am content also!" He learned it!

He learned it like we do. He learned it through **severe trial**. He learned it by **biblical thinking** and **focusing on biblical reality**. "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

You see, true contentment is not denying reality. It is looking at reality in the face of all these problems and acknowledging that there is adversity, but then saying, "In spite of all these problems and circumstances, **Jesus Christ is infusing me with his grace** so that I am ready for anything and everything that God chooses to allow in my life!" As Jerry Bridges has said, "This is the secret of being content: To learn and accept that we live daily by God's unmerited favor given through Christ, and that we can respond to any and every situation by His divine enablement through the Holy Spirit."

Now this verse has been applied wrongly. It has been taped on the ceiling in weight rooms, etched in that stuff athletes put under their eyes, affixed to bathroom mirrors, used as misapplied motivation for Christian ministry or fundraising techniques. When Paul writes, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" he is saying, "I can do everything that God wants me to do as I abide in Christ who continually infuses me with his power." I can be content in affluence and in poverty.

Contentment is a **heart attitude that accepts what God has given us in his grace!!!!** It is **accepting less than we think that we are due!** If you keep demanding things from God, you are not content.

Look at this way: **If you have everything but you don't have Jesus Christ** as your Savior and everything is taken away from you someday, you will end up with nothing. On the other hand **if you have little or nothing but you know that Jesus Christ** has forgiven all your sin and given you the gift of eternal life in heaven when you die you will have everything. All that you need is faith in Christ!

**If you have Christ you have all you need!** Many times our discontentment arises out of a perception that the situation that we face is **out of our control!** If it is out of our control, we are hopeless. And you are! **If you think about yourself, your problems, you lack, your mistreatment by others, the abuse you have gone through, your kids, the raw deals in life, you will be discouraged and depressed.** Discontentment feeds on negative thinking. But what you need to remember is that the situation is in God's control! He will do what is best for you!

Maybe you are discontent because of a **lack of acceptance.** Of course, we want others to accept us. We want our wives, our husbands, our parents, our coworkers, our peers, to accept us but if they don't accept us, we need to remember that we are already accepted in Christ! Jesus Christ can give you all the significance that you will ever need. He has **redeemed us, justified us, adopted us, sealed us and given us the Spirit of God.**

Maybe you are discontent because of a **feeling of insignificance or insufficiency!** Let me tell you, **money doesn't give significance, education, power** don't ultimately give it either. You don't need to feel insignificant if you are in Christ. You don't need to fear men. Because if you know Christ you are **complete in him** (Colossians 2:9)

You can be content if you **follow the principles** of God's Word and **the pattern of godly men** like Paul in this text! If you apply these truths you will say, "God is the source of everything! I don't care about this world. I just take what God graciously gives me whether that increases or decreases! God is enough! My lot has fallen to me in pleasant places! I am satisfied with God! No more and no less!"

Please understand there is **no shortcut to or quick fix for contentment.** It comes by learning it by getting strength from Christ, not from counselors, therapists, self-help formulas, improved cash flow, being able to have certain things, better health, or more friends. Contentment comes from **abiding in Christ.** Abiding in Christ comes from **knowing Christ more.** Knowing Christ more comes from **communing** with Him more. That is the source and the secret of true contentment.