

“Content in Christ”
Philippians 4:10–13
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I would like to start off with a very familiar text for this study. Paul says in Philippians 4:10–13, *[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. [11] Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. [12] 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. [13] I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*

Prayer:

Father, we thank You for Your truth and Your Word. We thank You that You have promised that when two or more are gathered in Your Name for Your purposes there Your Spirit dwells. I pray that as we search Your Word in this study and trust Your Spirit that You would move in a mighty way and remove any obstacle that may stand in the way of clearly hearing Your Word. Father, use me, Your broken vessel, to deliver Your truth and I ask these things in Christ’s Name, Amen.

I want to begin by asking some questions, a question that is in two parts. I want you to think about this question as we go through this study and we’ll revisit it at the end of the study. The question is, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with life? Think about how you would answer this question. Now here is the second part, what is it that makes you satisfied or dissatisfied? So whether you are satisfied or dissatisfied now think about what makes you that way. The reason why I ask these two questions is because this is what this Philippians passage is about. This text is talking about being satisfied.

Perhaps you are now thinking the title says we’re going to look at contentment and now we’re talking about satisfaction. So how do I make the leap from contentment to satisfaction? When you look at the Greek word for content in the Philippians passage it can also be translated as meaning ‘fully or completely satisfied.’ Paul is telling us he understands what it means to be content in any or all circumstances. How can Paul say that?

To create the backdrop here and to understand the significance of Paul’s statement I want to make note of a few things and some will be familiar. For instance, the book of Philippians is one of the prison epistles which simply means Paul wrote this letter while in prison in Rome and that is significant here. He also writes this letter to the church of Philippi. This is a church that he dearly loves. It is the first church he plants in Europe. He has a warm, loving relationship with them. This church has supported him in proclaiming the Gospel. They have supported him financially and in prayer. He has a deep, rich joy for these people. These are things we are familiar with in and about this book.

Perhaps there are a couple of things we may have missed that I think are very important. First of all in this testimony of contentment we have to see what Paul is dealing with. Paul is in prison but Paul has enemies. He has illnesses. He speaks of having thorns of the flesh which we don’t know exactly what they are but they are present with Paul. He is also facing death. Paul has been beaten, persecuted and run out of town. During this time, Paul is under stifling circumstances but yet he is able to say that he is content. We don’t sense anything negative here. We don’t sense it in his tone, his delivery or in his words or even this false pretense of saying

that he is good when he really isn't good or saying he is okay when he really isn't okay. He sincerely says he understands what it means to be fully satisfied, content in any and all circumstances.

This is what we want to be able to do, right? Paul refers to this as a secret we all want to have. We all want to know the secret to being content in any and all circumstances. Perhaps there are some of you who already know the secret to experiencing this kind of satisfaction or contentment in any and all circumstances but I would say that most of us wrestle with identifying how to be fully satisfied every day and this isn't some static event where we reach a spiritual apex and think we're here now and we're good. This is something that happens dynamically and that we continue to work on progressively in this process of sanctification as God does His work in our lives.

For us, we have to understand what Paul is saying here about this idea of contentment. I think there are potential obstacles for us to understanding of what Paul is saying when he refers to this level of contentment. It is this level of contentment where circumstances are not the measuring stick of his level of contentment. There are three things that I think capture the vast majority of the temptations or forces against us when we try to experience this type of contentment.

The first one is our definition in the West of contentment because we have a very shallow definition of contentment that is based or hinges on circumstances. If I were to ask you for synonyms to the word content what words would you think of? I probably would hear words like happy, good, pleased, gratified, blissful or maybe even appeased, a consolation. All of these are sensory in their definition. They all can hinge on our circumstances. Contentment is much deeper than that when we refer to what Paul is talking about here, Biblical contentment. So this shallow idea of contentment can typically hinge on what we do or don't have, how we're treated or mistreated, whether we're respected or not, or whether we're valued or not. I would dare say that in the last 48 hours the circumstances you have experienced greatly impacted or dictated how you answered that question I asked at the beginning of this study. If that is the case then you probably have a shallow definition of contentment.

The second challenge to understanding Paul's level of contentment is our Western, secular world and life view. The Western, secular world and life view continues to perpetuate a level of discontentment. What do I mean by this? Let's take marketing in our society. If I want you to buy my product then I have to convince you that you need it, right? I have to convince you that you are discontent without it. In relationships, if I want you to move forward and do something else or different or manipulate what you do or don't do, then I have to convince you that you are missing out on something. We see this in product, social and entertainment advertising in our culture. There has been an argument that without this sense of discontentment there is no progression. This is not Biblical contentment. Biblical contentment is not complacency. Biblical contentment leads to volitional action.

The third challenge and the most consistent opponent to us engaging and embracing Paul's concept of contentment, is in our old man, the flesh. Proverbs 27:20b says [20b]... *never satisfied are the eyes of man*. Another translation says 'human desire is never filled.' Our old man is always greedy, always wants more. There is this natural by default tendency to be discontent. We see it in our world and sometimes in ourselves. It is this push against being able to be content.

The great thing is that no matter what kind of forces/temptations we face or what the obstacles are we still have this great promise here in Scripture that Paul calls us to. We also have

this in other places in Scripture as well. We have this great promise that Christ calls us to and that is that we can experience this level of contentment. I would like to give you four principles and practices that I think are important to understanding the secret to this type of contentment, this rich, deep, Biblical contentment that transcends our circumstances and our situations.

Before I give you these four principles I want to make a statement that is abundantly clear. This is not a quick-fix, solution based, man-centered approach to identifying and capturing contentment. We cannot do this without the power of the Holy Spirit. There is no way we can have a Biblical happiness, a true joy without the Holy Spirit. Some of you are probably saying ‘I know that.’ But it means we really have to rely on the Spirit and make our theology our psychology. You can say that you know Biblically that is true but when it comes to fleshing it out in life and actually making it apart of life then we’ll truly know this sufficiency in Him. It is something we have to practice. So as we look at these four principles they flow into contentment, create this level of contentment and they flow out of contentment. So they are an inflow and an outflow of contentment.

The first principle is that contentment begins with a God-centered, Christ-secured, Spirit-infused empowerment which leads to clarity. It is clarity that is supernatural. Paul uses the term ‘knows’ twice and the term ‘learned’ in this Philippians passage. I know what it is to be content and I have learned the secret of contentment. So Paul has learned how to be content and the secret to responding to circumstances no matter what they are. It is to experience spiritual equilibrium. Paul shares the foundation of this clarity earlier in this letter so let’s look at this in Philippians 1. Here in this chapter he is speaking encouragement to this church.

Philippians 1:9–11 says [9] *And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, [10] so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, [11] filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.* His prayer for them is that their love would abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment, with clarity. He is praying that they would see with clarity the God picture, not the man picture, to see the finger prints of God in their lives. He wants them to be able to see beyond their circumstances and rise above the forest to see the big picture. This doesn’t mean they are to remove themselves from circumstances.

Here Paul is in prison writing this and yet in the midst of being there, he still is able to rise above and see the big picture. He prays for the same thing to happen to them. He prays that their eyes would be open to see that this world is temporal and that this world is not our home. We have a new heart with new capacities and we have new clarity for we can see things differently.

Recently, I came up to the front to do announcements and I had my glasses on. I could see people all the way in the back and I’m ashamed to say at 46 years of age that I probably needed glasses back when I was 36 but I waited ten years before I got them. I walked around semi-blind for a while there and didn’t realize how bad it was until I put the glasses on. My wife has been wearing glasses most of her life and never at one time after I got mine, did she say I told you so. She did ask me why I walked around so long without getting glasses and even Pastor Reeder said to me “Ray, what was it, vanity or pride?” I guess it was pride because I don’t look good enough for it to be vanity. I think another element was that I just didn’t want to deal with the glasses but when I put them on I could really see everything. My wife and kids all wear them and as I’m saying ‘this is amazing’ they are all like ‘we know.’

When we become Christians and have the gift of the Holy Spirit, we get this incredible clarity. It's like putting the glasses on and we don't even realize blurry and dim things are until we put them on. This goes back to the point that Paul is making. When we become a Christian we know what the truth is but we still have to learn and grow in that truth. So not only is it a principle but a practice. I can have these glasses but I can also take them off and when I do that I get blurry again.

How do we maintain that clarity? What is that lens that God gives us? It is the Holy Spirit but what illuminates the Spirit is God's Word. So the practice of putting on (those lens) God's Word, those spiritual glasses, it involves us meditating on God's Word, getting in His Word and being clear. When we have this level of clarity we are able to rise above and it's a supernatural clarity. This clarity also leads to something else.

The second principle is this clarity leads to confidence in Christ. When we experience this clarity and exercise the pursuit of God through His Spirit, His Word, prayer and Godly counsel, there is a supernatural confidence. Let's look at Philippians 4 and here you'll see this supernatural confidence. It's a very familiar passage.

Philippians 4:4-7 says *[4] Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. [5] Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; [6] do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. [7] **And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*** What an incredible statement that the peace of God will guard our hearts and our minds.

This supernatural confidence transcends the simple sense of the world. It surpasses the ebb and flow of life's situations. It gives us clear objectives rather than moving targets. Life can be like that. We can get confused. We can look at challenges and not have confidence because we have a tough time seeing through to the bigger picture, but God's clarity in His Word, His promises and His truth gives us an opportunity to see through the confusion, to see that He is there. Then we can transcend to this confident level, this confidence that gives us the ability to move forward in the midst of incredibly challenging circumstances and times.

This leads to the third principle and practice and that is courage. We receive courage from Christ. This courage is something that we all need. That great philosophical thinker, John Wayne (smile), once said 'Courage is being scared to death and still saddling up.' Courage is not the absence of fear but it's the confident action in the midst of fear. It's being able to lock in on something that is a brighter light than the dim light of fear. Fear will rob us of our contentment. We can't have a peace treaty with fear or play around with it. We have to encounter fear with the truth of God. We have to remind ourselves of those promises.

I'm not endorsing this movie, Dunkirk, but there is one particular scene in this war movie. It is based on a true story about the English. Dunkirk is a small town on the northern coast of France, across the English Channel from England. In 1940 there were 800,000 German troops making their way across Belgium through France. They had the French and the British on this beachhead. The British basically knew that in order to protect England they had to get some 400,000 troops back across the English Channel.

As they bring destroyers and other military ships over to get these troops across the Germans are just picking them off one by one. They can't get these men across and decide to approach some of the civilians to ask them to bring their boats in mass to help them cross that channel. Those civilians work together to get those soldiers across. There were 68,000 men lost

on that beach during that period of time but there were also 330,000 plus that were saved because of what the civilians did.

In this movie there is a fictional character based on a true life character that was so dynamic to me and his name was Mr. Dawson. He is a man of means, takes his yacht, his son Peter and another young man and he heads across the English Channel. Someone says to him 'don't you know you're going into war.' He said 'I know' and there is this even balanced equilibrium about him. It seems like he is completely content and resolved, incredibly courageous to go across that Channel to help save those men.

As I thought about that man in this movie, I thought that is what we're called to do at an even much higher level spiritually. It is to be able to see God's Kingdom shining so bright that anything else compared to that is dim and that includes any strategy of Satan that would make us fearful for that would be woefully dim to that goal. We need to be willing to go across into war to do whatever we need to do to be able to accomplish that and be content in that.

When God blesses us with His clarity, His confidence and His courage, He also calls us to a fourth principle and that is to make a commitment to Christ. This is not a commitment that is merit based rather it's a commitment to trust in the Lord in what He is doing in our lives. It is a commitment to partake of the means of grace and to trust in the means of grace. It's a commitment to live our lives for a purpose. The key word in Paul's writing here is secret. This contentment is not common and it requires a consistent pursuit of it. Achieving contentment is an ongoing event.

So tomorrow when you wake up and feel better about the day say 'thank You Lord that You have given me this day and I'm committing this day to You. I am asking that by Your Holy Spirit and by the strength that only You can give me that I'm able to walk through this day in contentment.' Don't say 'thank You Lord for giving me contentment, I'm good, I got it from here.' We never want to do that. It is commitment not to give up, not to give in, not to settle but to trust the Lord that He has given us everything we need to accomplish that which He calls us to do and to not find consolation in any created thing but only in the Creator.

If we have issues in this area of contentment it's because we gravitate towards creation to find our satisfaction rather than towards our Creator. It isn't a case of whether not satisfaction is bad or good. God calls us to be satisfied. He is most glorified when we are most satisfied but the important point is what we find satisfaction in. Is it in creation or the Creator? Will God give me what I want? Yes, if what I want lines up with His will.

Psalm 37:4 says [4] *Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.* Sometimes we don't want to read the next verse that follows. Psalm 37:5 says [5] *Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act.* When this happens, this satisfaction can be found Him and we can have satisfaction in the midst of very challenging circumstances. Our circumstances, relationships, successes or failures won't define us but only our relationship with God will define us.

If you answered that question in the beginning as 'unsatisfied' then good for you but if you answered that question that you are satisfied and the second part of the question had to do with the creation and not the Creator first then I would ask you to pray about it. Is it good to be satisfied in your family relationships? Yes and that's a blessing from the Lord. Is it good to be satisfied in your job? Yes and that's a blessing from the Lord. Is it good to be satisfied in all these different areas of your life? Yes for those are blessings from the Lord but that can't be the core of our satisfaction. That is a result of the Ultimate Satisfaction which is found in Christ alone. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You that You have given us an opportunity through Christ and in Christ alone to have ultimate satisfaction, to be able to see the truth, to be able to have purpose, to be able to pursue more things of value that are profitable eternally and not temporally. Lord, I pray that as we continue to move forward and walk by the Spirit that You would guide our words, thoughts and actions. Help us Lord, not be content based on our circumstances but to be able to rise above the circumstances and be content in You and in You alone. We thank You, we love You, we pray that You would go before us and guide our way and we ask this in Christ's holy and precious Name, Amen.