

VIII. Philippians: *Rejoicing in the Advancement of the Gospel*
“Content in All Circumstances”

Philippians 4:10–20

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What area of life do you tend to struggle with contentment the most? Probably most of us have something that comes to mind very quickly. Maybe we have more than one thing, but we're going to look at Paul really telling us the secret to being content in all things. We're at the end of the book of Philippians just reminding us where and why this book was written. Paul the great Apostle and missionary traveled far and wide preaching the Gospel. He had been imprisoned by the Romans early in his missionary journeys. The church at Philippi had sent him money more than one time, but it had probably been at least ten years since they had sent him any money, but recently they have sent him another gift. Now we're not sure why there had been such a long break. Most likely it was that Paul was traveling so much they never knew exactly where he was or what he was doing. It's not like you had Venmo back then where you could just say, 'I'll send you some money' and it was sent.

One good thing about being in prison is at least you had a fixed address. They figured out he was in prison, doesn't sound like he's doing so great so they send him some money. In large part why Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians was to say thank you for the money. So let's start in Philippians 4:10-11 which says [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.*** Have you ever heard anybody else make a statement like that? I think I have at times maybe not the exact words, but a similar sentiment. I'll be honest, I don't believe them. I think they're lying or they're delusional or they must have had such a short cush life that they haven't suffered enough for that statement to really be tested.

Yet, when the Apostle Paul, with all of his myriad of suffering inspired by the Holy Spirit to write Holy Scripture, says it, we've got to pause and say, it must be true. Think about this; in some sense this is the secret to life. If you could literally, honestly, sincerely, genuinely say, believe and mean and then carry it out, I can be content no matter what happens to me then you have no more problems, no more worries, no more fears. So, I want us to think about how Paul was able to say this. How did he have this constant contentment, regardless of the circumstances and I think it's at least three things. One, it's based on what you know, two what you seek and three what you receive.

So let's start with what you know. Philippians 4:11 says [11] *Not that I am speaking of being in need, **for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.*** Now, just imagine if this Christmas, maybe you're at a big family gathering, gifts are being given and say, a grandmother or an uncle or an aunt gives a gift to one of your children, especially if you had younger children and the child opens the gift and whatever it is, a toy, a piece of clothing, they look at grandmother or aunt, uncle, and they say, “I didn't really need this.” That probably is going to be a teachable moment later in the day, is it not? That's not how you say thank you for a gift. We don't want to lie around here, but at least you fake it or something. That almost sounds at first how Paul's been – “Thanks for the gift, but I really didn't need it.” But that's not what Paul's doing. Paul is ever the teacher, and he's trying to model, and he's going to get around to saying thank you, he's not being rude. But he is letting them know that he has learned a secret

that he wants them to learn – for all Christians can learn it but it doesn't come naturally. It's a learning process – how to be content in every circumstance that you have faced and that you will face.

The word that Paul uses here for content in the Greek is a very unique word. It's not the typical word for contentment. It was a word that was the favorite of the Roman stoic philosophers and a more literal translation would be self-sufficient. There were at least three tenets of the ancient Roman stoic philosophers and it went this way; Circumstances don't touch me. I have all the resources I need within to be content. I'm self-sufficient and therefore I can be emotionless. I can be dispassionate. Good things, bad things, hard things, ugly things, scary things, confusing things – I rise above the circumstances. We have modern, stoic philosophers. They don't call themselves that, but that's essentially what they're saying.

Paul takes this particular Greek word for contentment in a sense and redeems it. He doesn't agree with everything the Stoics believed, obviously. He doesn't say I'm emotionless for in Philippians 4:10 he said, 'I rejoice greatly.' Christians are supposed to be emotional in appropriate ways. He doesn't agree with that part of it but what parts does he agree with? Philippians 4:12 says *[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.*

Here Paul says, 'it doesn't matter if I'm free to travel and preach the Gospel far and wide, if I have lots of money and therefore I can kind of buy some nice food, eat whatever I want, buy a nice coat during the winter so I don't get cold, travel with my friends, be supported, maybe have a big church where everybody likes me. I can be content when I'm high, so to speak, but if I'm brought low, in a dungeon, chained to a Roman centurion, getting limited food, water only, stale bread, I'm cold and I don't have my books to study, and humanly speaking, it's miserable but I can be just content there.'

Again, if anybody else said this, I would be a little suspect but the Apostle Paul says it in Scripture. It's real. There's nothing wrong with freedom. There's nothing wrong with food, with friends, with a fruitful ministry, with blankets and clothes, for all those things are good. But here's the danger that we all have to be aware of; If we take any good thing, any good gift of God and make it the foundation of our contentment, we're in trouble for lots of reasons. Number one, do you realize how fragile instantaneously your contentment becomes when it's rooted in created things? Because those created things can be taken away. All it takes is a thief or a storm, or a disease or a friend decides they don't like you anymore and your contentment is ruined. So pick your poison. It doesn't matter. This applies to any good thing.

We're ordaining a couple of guys to ministry here shortly and one thing that's very easy for ministers to do is for them to have their contentment in a very fruitful ministry. But what if God decides to give you a ministry like Isaiah or Jeremiah that has some dry seasons? Even in good things like that we can't make that the foundation of our contentment because even when you have it, there will be this sense of fear and trepidation that you have to micromanage it, get control of it and make sure it doesn't slip away. In this way, you won't really be content. You won't really be able to enjoy it.

Paul says in Philippians 4:12 that 'I learned the secret.' How did he learn the secret of being content in all circumstances? I had a meeting recently with several other people and before the meeting we ate lunch. After lunch, we were going to drive to the meeting and I said to a friend of mine, "Hey, I'll ride with you" because I wanted to talk to him about something. He said, 'You really don't want to ride with me.' I knew what that meant because his car was dirty or something. He said, 'I've been praying that the Lord would teach me patience lately and ever

since I started praying that I have caught every red light. I have gotten behind every slow driver, every driver's ed person. So, don't ride with me.' He was half joking and half serious but I think we were the last ones to get to the meeting. Here's the point. If you are struggling with something like patience and you want to grow in patience, it makes sense. God is going to have to put you in situations where your patience is tried so you can learn to be content even in those situations. Being in God's gymnasium, is always good. It's always stretching. It's always productive if we respond the right way, but it's rarely fun.

There was a woman that was on our staff team. This was many years ago and she is not on our staff team anymore. She was one of our most senior single staff women. She and I were having a conversation about her struggle with her singleness. Now this was not the sweet 23 year old that was one year out of college and all of her buddies had gotten married, ring in the spring for they graduated and she was just sad. This was a decade plus or more and what I mean by that is she had had more than one conversation about the hardship of singleness. In fact, she had given some of the "be content" in your singleness talks, but she's still having a hard time. This was a 201 contentment in singleness talk, because here's the way that she started. She said, "I know that getting married is not going to fix all my problems. I realize that there are unique problems that come in singleness and there will be unique problems in marriage. But I feel like I've learned all the lessons of singleness, and I'm ready to start learning some of the lessons of marriage." I really appreciated her honesty, and I had a good relationship with this woman and I was able to listen and I think the Holy Spirit kind of gave me a little bit insight. I said to her in a gentle way "How do you know for sure?"

See, knowing being in God's gymnasium and having to learn, part of it is a gigantic step of faith. You may be in some type of suffering, some sense of low circumstance, hardship, and you may feel like, 'Hey, God, I feel like I've learned everything' but if you're still there, then you must not. You have to trust the goodness and the wisdom of God that He doesn't make His people suffer arbitrarily. There's always a reason. John Piper says "in God's providence, we might know two or three things that He's doing, but He's literally doing 10,000 things." Usually at least one of the things you can bet on is He's doing something in your heart to make you more like Christ.

Now, if we stopped right here, it would seem like the Christian life is kind of passive, like I'm supposed to just sit back and wait for hardship to come and then grin and bear it and try to learn my lesson. And there's a part of that in the Christian life. But that's not all. We are also supposed to be active, so the second point would be what do you seek? Philippians 4:14-17 says *[14] Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. [15] 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. [16] Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. [17] Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.*

Here Paul gets back around to saying 'thank you for the gift. I really do appreciate it. I wasn't being rude earlier. I like the gift' but in verse 17 he says he seeks the profit/credit for them. He seeks the benefit for them. The main reason he is excited about the gift is not because he has more money to buy food and clothes and whatever. The main reason is he is excited about their gift is what it says about their spiritual maturity and God's going to bless them for being generous to him. Now, if you get an end of the year support letter from some overseas missionary or maybe a campus outreach staff person and they say, "I would like you to send me some money, but I don't really need the money. I just want you to send me the money so that you

can get blessed.” I would have a little bit of doubt if that was 100% honest. That sounds a little bit like the prosperity gospel, right? Send me the gift of \$19.95 and you'll be blessed.

When the Apostle Paul says it, it's real, it's trustworthy, and here's my best illustration that helps me get my mind around this. Think about children and when they're young and Christmas comes up, all they really care about is the gifts, right? And as they get older and maybe they get a little part time job, they start to make some money, they start to save and they start to buy gifts for you. A lot of times they can't afford very much but part of being an adult is if I have enough money and I really want something, I'll go buy it for myself. So your child gives you a gift and there's a sense of thank you. I do like the gift. But what I'm most excited about isn't the actual gift. It's about what this shows that is happening in your heart, that you're growing up, that you're becoming generous, that you want to spend your time, your money serving others.

That's part of what the Apostle Paul is saying here. All people seek things. The way that human beings are designed is to think, is to plan, is to seek and if you want to be content in all circumstances, what should you seek? To the best of your ability, you seek what God seeks. You try to align the desires of your heart, the plans of your heart with the plans of God's heart. God always get what He wants, right? If God seeks something, He's going to get it. So, if I can learn to align my seeking with God's seeking, I'm going to win. I'm going to get what I want. Psalm 37:4 says *[4] Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.* It really does have a double meaning. If I will intentionally fall more in love with Christ, eventually I get transformed so that I'm more like Him. Part of that means is I start to desire the same things that He desires. My old sinful desires get stripped away and I get new transform, redeemed desires. Here's the good news. To the degree that my desires get aligned with the desires of Christ, I literally will get the things that I desire. So, be proactive in trying to align whatever you seek to be what God is seeking and most of the time, what is it that God seeking? He's seeking to bless people, to see people grow up in Christ like this.

The third point is, what do you receive? Philippians 4:18-20 says *[18] 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. [19] And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. [20] To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.* This is the point that ultimately separates Paul and hopefully us from the Stoics.

Paul doesn't say, 'How can I be so content because I'm a real man, because I'm tough, I don't worry about the little stuff, I'm so strong, I'm so self-sufficient.' No he says the reason he is content is because he is constantly receiving from God. God supplies all of my true needs, not all my desires, not all my whims, not all my wants, not all my fantasies, but God richly supplies the needs of all His people. Oftentimes, how He does it is through other Christians. The church at Philippi sent Paul money – he's receiving from God. We have to be receiving from God.

Notice again Philippians 4:19 – and my God will supply every need of yours according to His riches, not out of His riches. If you know someone that's a millionaire and they said, “I want to give you a Christmas gift” and you get really excited. Then they say, “Here's five bucks. Go have a latte at Starbucks.” It will probably have to be a small one. Thank you. That's a gift out of the riches, but not according to the riches. But if he says, “here's \$1,000,000” then maybe you could buy a Starbucks location with that? I don't know. That's more according to the riches and that's the way that Father God likes to bless His people, not just merely a few pennies out of His riches, but He likes to bless. He likes to give in ways that point to His riches – according to His riches for they remind us of his riches.

Now I want to look at Philippians 4:13 which says *[13] I can do all things through him who strengthens me*. I skipped this one intentionally. This is a very famous verse that's probably been taken out of context by so many Christian athletes over the years. We put this on Christian T-shirts with somebody getting the Heisman and it's like if I just pray hard enough, I'm going to win the Super Bowl. That's not what it means. It literally means whatever it is God calls me to do, no matter how hard I will be able to do that thing, because He will put power in me. He will infuse spiritual power in me. Remember, Paul is writing this from prison. I have a friend in prison right now that I talked to a little bit, probably not as much as I should. I'll just be honest, when I talk to this friend, the encouragement is pretty one way. It's me trying to encourage him, which is as it should be for it makes sense. When you read this letter to the Philippians, Paul's the guy in prison and he's overflowing with joy, encouraging others. This was real and some of you may be thinking "If I literally had to go to prison, I don't think I could do it" and right now maybe you wouldn't be able to.

Here's the point. If God calls you to do something like that in that moment, He will give you the strength and He will give you the power and ability. Supposedly, Oliver Cromwell lost a son in an untimely way, and Philippians 4:13 was the verse that gave him strength to get through that suffering. John Calvin said "the things which belong to His calling, if God calls you to suffer in some way, God promises to give you the strength to get through that hardship." There is a very similar idea of this in II Corinthians 9:8 which says *[8] And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work*. So, it's not just I can do whatever I want to through Christ who strengthens me. No, it's I can do the good works prepared in advance for me through Christ who strengthens me.

Now I want you to think about applying this text to your life. Where in your life do you need to grow more in contentment? I would say, pray, 'God help me grow more in contentment in this area' but be careful what you pray for you might start getting stuck in a lot of traffic jams or it might be something a lot worse. Honestly, at some level, God is such a good, loving Father that even if you don't pray for it, He's going to give it to you anyway. He's like the best coach. But if you're like "Coach, I don't think I can grow any more. I don't think I can get any better." He's like, 'yes, you can, and I'm going to stretch you. I'm going to help you get there.' He's more committed to our growth than we are. Now, that can sound threatening, but it's really a blessing. It's really an invitation.

So much of what we need to learn to do as mature Christians is to learn to find the advantage in the adversity – whatever hardship you're going through. If it's something as small as being stuck in traffic, trying to get past shopping malls during the holiday season, or if it is something much more monumental, painful and hurtful in relationships, the better part of wisdom is prayerfully to say, "God, what is it you're trying to teach me? And Father, I do want to stay in your school as long as I have to, but Lord if there's something I can do to speed up the learning process, I would like to learn the lessons more quickly so I don't have to stay here." That's a good prayer to pray. It's a wise prayer to pray.

Maybe you're going through some hardship where you feel like somebody is maligning you, somebody is attacking you, somebody is lying about you. Maybe God is trying to wean you off of caring too much about the approval of other human beings. Maybe you're not really suffering. Perhaps you had the best year financially that you've ever had. I hope you realize this, that prosperity sometimes can be a more severe test than adversity. Maybe God's testing you. What are you going to do with all that money? Spend it all in yourself, save it all, hoard it all or are you going to be generous? What is it that God is trying to teach you in your present

circumstances? Hendrickson said, “The goal is to become calm in adversity and humble in prosperity.” That's what it really means to be content in all things. Another commentator said ‘All sincere Christian service with sacrifice and self-denial pleases God.’

The end of Philippians 4:18 says ‘the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.’ Paul is using this Old Testament language to say, when we live our lives in a way to say, ‘God, I love You, I want to honor You, I want to serve Your people, and I'm willing to sacrifice, I'm willing to die myself to honor You, to serve others’ that makes the heart of Father God happy. He smiles. It's sweet and that ought to be the greatest ambition of all of our hearts. That ought to be the thing that we seek above and beyond all things – to honor and please Him.

I have one last thought to share. I want to look at Ephesians 5. If you try to just make application from this text with the heart and the mind of a stoic philosopher, you're going to get exposed. You might be able to grin and bear it for a while. You might be able to white knuckle and persevere for a while, but at some point you'll break down because our hearts were made for joy. Our hearts were made to be loved so the real engine that can drive this kind of service, this kind of seeking, this kind of trusting, even in suffering and being content, is that the God of the universe, the all wise, all powerful God, is really concerned for you and for me. Otherwise, if that's not true, this whole thing's a fairy tale. But it's possible because he gives us the power and everything that has been said in this text God has done. He has given His life for us as the greatest gift there is. Giving to us according to His riches, He gave Himself, His Son who gave His lifeblood.

Ephesians 5:2 says *[2] And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.* Here is another place that has very similar language to what we have seen in Philippians. The Lord Jesus Christ lived this here on earth and we suffer in minor ways. He suffered in the major way. There's a sense in which you could say, Christ was willing to be content in hell for His people so that we could be free from ever worrying about that and that ought to be the Source and Foundation of our confidence that He loves us and whatever He is putting us through, is for our good. So, yes, I can genuinely be content in whatever He calls me to go through in this life. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, thank You for these truths. I pray for myself. I pray for everyone reading this that these truths would not be mere academic propositions. They wouldn't be even just theological, abstract truths that we check a box in our mind and say, ‘we believe that.’ I pray more and more for myself and everyone reading this, that these would be realities that we would taste and see Your goodness, that more and more we would be genuinely becoming content in whatever circumstance we're in, because we are experiencing the power of Christ working within us. We pray all this in Christ's Name, Amen.