



Speaker:
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The Secret of Contentment

◀ Series: Philippians · 14 of 14

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Those who claim to be disciples of Jesus Christ are to experience contentment. They're to be content. Whether they have less than the people around them, or they have more, they're to be satisfied with it.

Contentment is one of those conditions which brings great blessing. Yet it's uncommon. Believers are too prone to being dissatisfied—being covetous.

Paul again sets down an example for us. He heartily encourages all of us to find contentment no matter what our circumstances might be. Using his example, I'd like for us all to consider whether *we* are content—in times of need *and* in times of plenty. And I'll endeavour to tie it all together with reference to the strengthening presence of Christ Jesus.

Paul is really happy here. The brothers and sisters of the church at Philippi have helped Paul financially. I don't know whether you remember when we were in ch2, but he told them that his friend Epaphroditus had helped him when they hadn't. I drew your attention to ch4 and v10 which clarified Paul's statement. Paul wasn't criticising them for not helping him—he was only saying that they were *unable* to at that time.

But now they have helped him, see how happy he is! He's previously encouraged believers to rejoice, but here in v10 we see how he rejoiced greatly. He was over the moon!

When some person or church takes some of their own money and gives it to me and my family, I rejoice inwardly. The effect it has is to humble me, firstly. And I do have a sense of gladness at the practical benefit of this money—I can pay some bills!

But the cause of the joy within me is really about *the act of giving itself*. Like the other Paul, I rejoice because God has stirred the heart of that person to give. It says something about the love in their hearts for the brethren. It says something about their understanding of the Biblical basis for supporting the work of the gospel in this way. And believe it or not, God treats that gift as an acceptable, sweet-smelling sacrifice to him!

When you read v11, it's a bit awkward. It sounds like he's saying to them, *Your gift was great, thanks, although I didn't need it anyway...*

Why would he say that? What does he mean when he says he wasn't in need?

We know he wasn't trying to minimise their generosity. We just saw how he rejoiced at it. Next time, we'll see from v14 onwards how he thanks them.

He wasn't being ungrateful. He wanted to make an important argument. He wanted to hammer home **the need to be content**.

We're meant to be content in many things. But we shouldn't ignore the context. When he talks about contentment here, he's talking about *material* things. He wants us to follow his example of being content when having enough *and* when having nothing. And he wants us to understand the strength to remain in this frame of mind comes—v13—from Christ Jesus.

So he can reinforce his point, Paul uses repetition. The three elements he repeats are:

1. He's learned something
2. He exercised it in every situation
3. He gives two extreme examples of those situations.

You might like to trace them with me:

v11: I have learned...to be content	v12: I have learned the secret of facing....
v11: In whatever situation I am	v12: In any and every circumstance
v12: Brought low/hunger/need	v12: Abound/plenty/abundance

None of us can misunderstand his point:

1. He has this attitude, and he wants you and me to have the same attitude.
2. We're to have this frame of mind no matter what our circumstances
3. And whether we're at one extreme or the other, or somewhere in between, **we remain content**. Satisfied with what we have.

Paul was a bit like Joseph in the Old Testament. Even though his Paul had seen dramatic changes in his circumstances, from one extreme to the other, he didn't lose his contentment.

When Paul said he "learned a secret", it would've got the attention of a certain group within his society. There were those who believed knowledge of God was gained through the discovery of secrets, passed from one person to another, one generation to another. And the thrill of that religion was in its secrecy. People love secrecy—even today.

But although Paul deliberately used their type of language, once again he wanted to take those religious beliefs and blatantly use them to promote Christian doctrine. He wasn't imparting secrets to his friends; **he was speaking truths which were out in the open**. He discussed them, preached them and put them down in writing to be read openly—like this letter.

And by the guidance of God, this particular letter became part of the inspired word of God and became available to all generations through church history to learn from.

Contentment in times of need

We've seen how Paul uses these two extremes of circumstance. We might have next to nothing, or we might have plenty.

But since we're talking about being content, it sounds like advice most suitable for those who don't have much.

Times can be hard, and we can struggle financially. I don't know that all of you here today have experienced that sort of difficulty. But I know I have, and I know for certain at least some of you have.

Having said that, there's not many people—in this country anyway—who've genuinely starved for days at a time like Paul. He covers some of this in his letter to the Corinthian church:

2 Corinthians 11:27—in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

So there were times when he was homeless and hungry. He had nothing except the clothes on his back.

We all know what it's like to be hungry though. For some people, they start getting agitated if their dinner's an hour late!

It's uncomfortable to be hungry, and that's the way God designed us. That discomfort leads us to go and find food, and that's how we stay alive. So the discomfort is normal.

Contentment isn't about trying to pretend this discomfort isn't real. And when Paul was hungry, it was uncomfortable. It was just as uncomfortable for him as it is for you and me. When he got hungry, he tried to find food. If he had money, he'd go into a local café or pub and have a bite to eat. If he was someone's guest, he knew they'd feed him each day.

So Paul's point isn't about pretending the discomfort of hunger and thirst didn't exist, and neither is his point that we should ignore those alarm signals in our body. His point about contentment is this: **when he was in those needful circumstances, he refused to allow those natural desires to turn into covetousness.**

When we find ourselves in need of food or drink, or we have financial hardships, we need to get a hold of ourselves and make sure we don't *covet* the food, the drink, or the money.

That's not an easy principle to grasp, I find. But there's a difference between wanting something and coveting it. When Paul was thirsty, he wanted water. Yet he wants us to understand it would never become covetousness.

We could think of covetousness as the opposite of contentment. I suspect covetousness is simply an extreme form of desire. It's not bad to want things. But in the extreme, it dominates your thoughts. Your heart is really in this desire, this craving, for something. And if something other than God has your affections, you're in a danger zone.

Paul wants us to know he was so content with what he had that he genuinely didn't covet the gifts from the Philippian church, even though their gifts helped him.

A couple of weeks ago, we spoke about anxiety and how we can be inoculated against it. And Paul seems to have done this and freed himself from anxiety even when he was in real need.

Some of you will be familiar with the Puritan, Jeremiah Burrows. He wrote a number of books, one of the most well-known being, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. The title gives a lot away. You see? It's not only my opinion; our brother Jeremiah seems to think contentment in believers is so uncommon he calls it a "rare jewel!"

Puritan books tend to have good content but be so detailed as to make them hard work for many people. If you're up for it, I can recommend this book anyway. Here's an extract from it:

"It may be you have not such great blessings in earthly places as some others have, but if the Lord has blessed you in heavenly places, that should content you. There are blessings in heaven, and he has set you here for the present, as it were in heaven, in a heavenly place. The consideration of the greatness of the mercies that we have, and the littleness of the things that God has denied us, is a very powerful consideration to work this grace of contentment."

Revisiting this portion of Scripture has presented a big challenge to me. I can stand here today and tell you what contentment means for the Christian. I can impress upon you the importance of being content—that to be *discontent* is to sin against God.

But preaching it is the easy part. Trying to apply it to every aspect of my life is difficult. I need to get to that place that Paul reached, and I need to encourage my family and my church friends to do the same.

Our Puritan friend says we shouldn't look around us and make comparisons and declare we should have this-or-that "because everybody else does".

WE DESERVE NOTHING. WE HAVE A RIGHT TO NOTHING. Some of the worst vengeance carried out by God against the people of this world was against HIS OWN PEOPLE when they murmured. When they said, *It's not fair. We want this, we want that.*

If we want something, and it's a legitimate desire, we pray to God to supply our need. Then we can go and carry out those practical actions necessary to get what we need. But throughout it all, we're free of anxiety, free of covetousness, and free of ingratitude.

Psalm 90:14—Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

If each day we can satisfy ourselves with the love of God, and treat everything else as secondary, we just might crack it. We just might become one of those rare jewels of contentment!

Contentment then is a sign of Christian maturity. For those who are in a position of having little or nothing, they're to rest in the relationship with Christ who himself was no stranger to hunger and homelessness.

Contentment in times of plenty

Of the two extremes Paul presents to us, this one is the less easy to understand. You might think if someone has enough money, food and drink, clothes, shelter, and so on, contentment would arise naturally.

But that isn't the case. I don't need to tell you this, but people who have plenty tend to always want more. And I've had some very interesting and *difficult* conversations about this. Christians who are well off but spend their lives trying to accrue even more pose a problem. On the one hand, I have no right to comment on a Christian family's desires for a certain standard of living. On the other hand, I feel uncomfortable when wealthy Christians spend untold thousands on making their homes more magnificent while their own church might need repairs, or missionaries are struggling with the basics.

And then I have to turn the focus on myself. That's always more difficult. As a citizen of the UK, I'm in the top couple of percent in terms of wealth, globally speaking. I belong to a rich nation.

Compared to other people in the UK, I'm down at the bottom end, financially. But I've accrued so many possessions, and so much clothing, I'm struggling just to get rid of some of it. There's not a week goes by Karen isn't down at the charity shop handing over bin bags of clothes and other stuff. Sometimes you have to compete with other people to have them take your stuff. If you're not there early enough, you'll get turned back, and you have to take all the stuff home!

So relative to the rest of the people on this planet, I'm well off. When I talk about financial hardship, I'm not talking about my family starving to death. I'm talking about struggling to maintain a lifestyle which is normal for the culture I live in.

I'm saying all this to get across to you that what constitutes having enough is almost impossible to say. So I can never recommend a limit to someone's wealth. They can choose to spend their money on a bigger house and newer car if they want.

But we can say something. We *can* encourage each other to avoid the love of material gain. We *can* remind each other about the dangers of a love of money.

Ecclesiastes 5:10—He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income...

People tell themselves when they have a certain amount of wealth, they'll be happy.

Experience says otherwise. People who accrue more money tend to want more of it. An extreme example would be the billionaires who devoted their lives to increasing their vast wealth. They can already buy whatever houses and cars and boats they want, and they'll still have hundreds of millions left in the bank! But they always seem to want more.

If you don't have much money yourself, you might have little sympathy with people who do. If one of the children in the Royal family was complaining they only had two ponies, you'd say sarcastically, "poor little rich kid!"

And when you meet Christians who have plenty of money, you probably think it's easy for them to be content.

But here's the surprising thing. It may actually be *more* difficult to be content when you have plenty. You see, when you have nothing, you lean harder on God. You thank him for every tiny thing that you receive at his hand. But it's not as easy to have that attitude when you have plenty. **Christian maturity requires we depend on the Lord at all times, and in all situations, and not only those in which we believe we NEED his help.**

Some of you'll be familiar with the idea of the "pyramid of need". Imagine a diagram of a pyramid or a triangle. And at the very top point are just a few of the essentials that we need to remain alive. So we have food and water. For most people in this world, there's also a need for clothing and shelter. After that there'll be things like sanitation and medical care, and so on. And as you go down, and the pyramid gets wider, that tells you that there are more things at that level available to you, but they're less needful. And the really wide base at the bottom represents the multitude of possessions and pleasures available in this world. And not one of them is necessary. They're all luxuries.

I'll say again: in this country, and in this church, we have plenty compared to most people in this world. Karen and I have struggled financially for most of our married lives. So no one's to think I'm minimising those sorts of difficulties.

But even in a deprived part of Liverpool, people have places to live in. Their homes are so well built they shelter them from the elements. They have electricity and gas fed into their homes for lighting, heating and cooking. They have clean drinking water fed right into their house. Water which is good enough to drink is used to clean their dirty laundry and even flush their toilets.

Most of us have food in the cupboards, in the freezer, and in the fridge. Not just enough for the next meal, but enough for many days. We have a wide variety of food, enough to provide all the vitamins and minerals we need. We have exotic fruits, some of them transported from the other side of the world just for us. We can even go on our mobile phones and have someone deliver hot food to our front door within the hour. And there's that much food being consumed it's become a serious health issue in our communities, even the poorest.

We have plenty of clothes. We have clothing for all kinds of different occasions. Some have multiple *handbags* for different occasions! We have all manner of clothes to make us comfortable at different times of the year. Summer clothes. Winter clothes. And the bulging backrooms of charity shops testify to the massive amount of clothing bought and given away or sold in our society—again, even in the very poorest areas.

You may think I'm labouring this point about how well off we are. But I've only touched on *three* of the most important things we need. I'd truly be here all day if I were to list all the other things we possess and enjoy in this country.

My point is to find where we sit on that spectrum of the haves and have-nots. We're not millionaires, but the truth is **we have plenty**.

Having established this, I want to make the primary point: **for people like us, who enjoy a multitude of God's mercies, to murmur about our situation is a serious sin**. Let's hear from Jeremiah Burrows once more:

“For men and women to be discontented in the midst of mercies, in enjoyment of an abundance of mercies, aggravates the sin of discontent and murmuring. To be discontented in any afflicted condition is sinful and evil, but to be discontented when we are in the midst of God's mercies, when we are not able to count the mercies of God, still to be discontented because we have not got all we would have, this is a greater evil.”

You see then how we're in more danger *because we have* enough. When we covet—when we abandon contentment—that's a sin by itself. But for us to complain, we who've received plenty from God, just aggravates the sin. It makes the sin far worse.

So don't do it!

Hebrews 13:5—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."

We're to be content. And if we do have an abundance, remember this: the Lord loves to see you give it away. When you give, it blesses you, it blesses the person you give it to, and it even blesses God.

Contentment in Christ alone

If we look again at v13, it talks about the one who Paul got his strength from. It's pretty obvious who Paul's talking about. His strength comes from the Lord.

You'll see this is translated here as, "I can do all things *through* him..." It can also be translated "...*in* him" which I think is preferable. Paul often talks about being *in* Christ. And it's because of that union of him and the Lord he's able to constantly draw on this strength he talks about. As long as Paul was in close communion with God through being in Christ, no situation would ever cause Paul to descend into the sin of being discontent.

I'm aware some people misunderstand v13. This is the trouble with taking verses out of context. You could have a little sign made with this verse on it and hang it up at home. And you'd look at it each day and be caused to think *anything* is possible to you as a Christian.

That's clearly not true. God never said you'd be able to do anything if you have his help. The verse is meant to be understood in light of where it appears in the Scriptures. One Bible translation helpfully renders this verse as, "I can do *all this* through him who strengthens me"—all that Paul's been talking about. There are other places where Paul talks about God's power enabling him to do other things. But here, it applies to these different situations he finds himself in.

I also want to mention what it means for Paul to have *learned* these things. It seems very natural to assume he meant only that this attitude of contentment was learned gradually over many years.

I'm not saying that's untrue. Even though the source of all our power and energy is from God, we're still told to expend effort into thinking and acting in a righteous fashion. And if things go well, we'll see positive changes in all aspects of our Christian walk.

What's interesting here is the word Paul chose to use for "learned" in v11 suggests something slightly different. It's speaking about something that was received at Paul's conversion. But there was this ripple effect which continued throughout his life.

I know it sounds like a small difference, but we should at least try to take notice of it. **It puts the emphasis on the power of God, revealed to Paul initially on the road to Damascus and**

becoming this all-sufficient source of his continual contentment. Paul wants the careful Bible student to know he didn't arrive at this state of contentment through years of self-discipline using his own strength. It required discipline, but GOD GETS EVERY SCRAP OF GLORY for Paul's incredible ability to be content.

In another one of his letters, Paul says the strange thing. He says that when he's weak he's somehow *stronger*.

We can't go into that today, but he says something similar here. This word *content* in v11 really means "self-sufficient." But hang on: doesn't that contradict what we said a minute ago?

It's another one of those mysterious sayings of Paul. Not only is he strong in his weakness, but he's most **independent** when he's *dependent*!

That sounds a bit muddled, so let me try again. **When he describes himself as self-sufficient, he means he's detached from his circumstances.** They don't dictate what his attitude is. When the circumstances are really bad, he doesn't start complaining at God, for example.

So again: he's most **IN-dependent**—of his circumstances—when he's **DE-pendent** on Christ the Lord.

Let's hear one last time from our guest Puritan today, Jeremiah Burrows:

"That to be well skilled in the mystery of Christian contentment is the duty, glory and excellence of a Christian."

The apostle Paul, under the inspiration of God the Holy Spirit, warmly encourages us to be content with what we have. To focus on our relationship with God above all other things. To avoid **anxious** covetousness when we're in need, and to avoid *casual* covetousness when we have plenty.

1 Timothy 6:6–8—But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.

May God help all of us to have Paul's confidence in the power of the Lord to be able to give us this most blessed gift of godly contentment.

Amen.