

Please turn with me in your Bibles to Philippians chapter 4. We will be considering verses 10 through 13 this morning. It's important to remember as we come to our passage that this comes at the end of Paul's letter to the church in Philippi. There are over three previous chapters of context and theological and doctrinal instruction that I would encourage you to go back and consider in your meditations on this sermon throughout the coming week. But the context I want to remind you of today is that this is a letter written by Paul during his time of imprisonment, and it is a letter of thanksgiving written to the saints who had cared for him throughout his ministry. The entire epistle is full of Paul's thankfulness and commendation and encouragement to those dear saints. And so it is with this mindset that we should come to our passage, understanding the heart of Paul and seeing that heart on display in these words of instruction and encouragement. So hear now the Word of God from Philippians chapter 4 beginning at verse 10.

***Read Philippians 4:10-13*
*Pray***

I want you to think for a moment of the most difficult season in life that you have gone through. Perhaps it was the death of a loved one. Perhaps the loss of a job and the uncertainty of what was to come. Perhaps you are even going through a particularly difficult season right now. For me, the most difficult season of life that I have gone through thus far came between September 3, 2017 and June 5, 2018. During those nine months I was deployed to Iraq with the Army. I was away from my pregnant wife, who also found out in December of 2017 that her mom had cancer. I was away from my local congregation and the sweet fellowship with the saints that I held so dear. There was three months in which all we had to eat were cold-cut sandwiches for three meals per day. There were periods of several weeks at a time without running water with which to bathe. I was both living and working in an underground bunker, sometimes working up to 80 hours in a week. I lost 11 friends who I worked

with closely during those nine months. It was truly what could be called a hard providence. Paul, at the time of writing this letter, is experiencing his own hard providence. In fact, his life following his sudden conversion on the road to Damascus was one marked by hard providences. In 2 Corinthians 11:24-27 he lists these hard providences, “Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.”

And the hard providence continues as he is penning this letter from a prison cell, feet in stocks, deprived of nearly all things that today would be considered basic human rights. Confined to a dark stone cell, being given the bare minimum of food and water to stay alive, removed from the saints and congregations to whom he had invested his whole soul, the Apostle Paul sat at the feet of King Jesus and learned from the Master and His ministering Spirit a vitally important lesson. It was a lesson that I had to learn through the hard providences that I went through while confined to the desert sands of Iraq. And it is a lesson that we all must learn through studying the Word and learning from the apostolic example that we are given, as well as by the instruction of the Holy Spirit which works in each of us who are in Christ. That lesson that must be learned is to be content with whatever lot the Lord, in His providence, has given you in this life. This is the heart of Christian contentment. So the overarching theme that we are going to focus on this morning is that Christian contentment is contentment in Christ. I want us to consider this theme under three headings: first, what is contentment; next, when to be content; and finally, how to be content.

So let us consider first what is contentment. The Puritan minister Jeremiah Burroughs in his book *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* writes, “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.” This is a definition that is clearly drawn from this passage. In verses 10 and 11 Paul gives us an explanation of what contentment is. See if you can hear Burroughs’ definition within the words of the Apostle, “But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at the last your care of me hath flourished again; wherein ye were also careful, but ye lacked opportunity. Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.” Paul is writing this commend the Philippian believers for their efforts in supporting him, but he makes it clear that his love for them and his rejoicing in the Lord was not because they had provided for his needs. He makes every effort to make this point clear and to avoid any misunderstanding or notion of placing blame upon these saints for being providentially hindered from showing their support for some time in the past. He says, “But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at the last your care of me hath flourished again.” The term that he uses here is a gardening term that speaks of a tree that lies dormant throughout the winter. But just as in spring-time the tree puts forth fresh shoots, thereby proving that it is alive, so also the Philippians’ interest in Paul had at last found a way to express and demonstrate itself in practical ways. And so the contentment that Paul is expressing was one that “freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition” whether it be in times of winter dormancy or times of spring flourishing.

And that term ‘content’ that Paul uses is an interesting one which gives us great insight into what contentment is. While it is a term that is only used here in his writings, it is a philosophical term that would have been well-understood to his hearers. It carries with it the notion of self-sufficiency. Now you may be thinking to yourself that this isn’t correct and that man is not self-sufficient. You would be correct. The self-sufficiency, or contentment, that Paul is

speaking of here isn't the self-sufficiency or contentment of the Stoics of the time. The Stoic's self-sufficiency or contentment comes from within oneself; Paul's comes from without, from his being a man in Christ, on whom he is totally dependent and thus not independent at all in the Stoic sense. Because Paul and the Philippians are both in Christ, neither is dependent upon the other for life in the world. It is not an independency that natural man thinks he has, but instead a self-sufficiency from a reliance upon the things of the world in exchange for a reliance upon Christ. Is that not how you see discontentment arise in your own hearts, when you develop an undue reliance upon the things of this world and they either do not satisfy your desires or are stripped away from you. Think of the things that are most coveted in the world, which is the root sin of discontentment as our Larger Catechism tells us. Things like money, power, status, employment, living arrangements; these things are but things of this world that will pass away, yet so often they are the very things we find ourselves relying upon to find fulfillment. Heed the words of Christ in Matthew 6, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Paul had possession of all that man could desire: he had God as his Father, Christ as his Savior, the Holy Spirit as his Comforter, and heaven as his home. What more could he want? What could he desire, that could add to this?

If you are in Christ the same is true of you, dear brothers and sisters. I am going to assume that you are in Him and have been made a partaker of His salvation. Tell me then — knowing that you possess the present and everlasting enjoyment of all the glory of heaven — why would you place such undo reliance upon the things of this world? See the Apostle in prison, his feet fast in the stocks, and his back torn with scourges; and yet his soul so full of joy, that he is singing praises to God at midnight: and will you not be

ashamed to complain of your minor sorrows? Or rather, see the Son of God himself, impoverishing Himself to enrich you, and welcoming death itself in order to give you to everlasting life: see Him enduring to the end and sacrificing Himself for your salvation; when, if it had pleased Him, more than twelve legions of angels would have come to rescue Him from His sufferings; and will you complain of any thing which you may suffer for Him? The great Anglican minister Charles Simeon writes, “‘It has pleased the Father, that in Christ should all fullness dwell:’ and for you it is treasured there, that ‘you may received out of it’ according to your necessities. Hence then, if you have believed in Christ, you are authorized to say, ‘All things are mine, since I am Christ’s.’ And if all things are yours, whatever ‘things present, or things to come,’ what can you lack? or what grounds can you have for discontent? Only get clear views of Christ as your righteousness and strength, and you will be at no loss for the attainment which your soul desires.” Friends, this is what contentment is. And if you do not have this contentment because you are not yet in Christ, I implore you, repent and believe the Gospel. Come to the Savior who purchased redemption and find your refuge there. For it is only then that you will know what contentment truly is.

So now that we have an understanding of what contentment is, let us continue on to consider when to be content. Paul gives a clear answer to this in verse 12, “I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.” For Paul, contentment wasn’t simply a denial of his present circumstances. It wasn’t some sort of escapism or entering into some sort of meditative zen state like the New Age mystics of our day would like you to believe. No, it was a very real recognition of the present state but seeking contentment even in the midst of it. The answer to when to be content is at all times, in every circumstance, in all places, in whatever your lot. Paul was content both in the times of abasement and in the times of abounding. And to be sure there were times of abounding. He was at one point at the height of being

a religious scholar, having been taught by the famed Gamaliel, being a Pharisee of Pharisees. But that wasn't the only time of abounding in the life of the Apostle. There were times in his missionary journey where he was greatly provided for by the congregations which he served. There were what evangelicals call 'mountaintop experiences' throughout his travels where he saw the Gospel go forth and transform lives. He saw hundreds, if not thousands, of people come to Christ, churches were established and flourished, his ministry was not in vain. But there were far more times of abasement as was seen in the 2 Corinthians passage earlier. He knew was it meant to be both full and to be hungry, to have his needs met with plenty and to have uncertainty whether they would be met at all. 'All things' in this verse refers first of all to his living in abundance or abasement, plenty or want. Paul finds Christ sufficient in times of bounty as well as in times of need. Although he appears to have had less of the plenty than the want, here is his way of handling the warning to Israel given in Deuteronomy 8 that they not forget the Lord once they have experienced plenty.

And so, brothers and sisters, you must learn just as Paul did to be content in whatever circumstance life brings you. You must learn to be content in both abounding and abasement, in both plenty and want, in both exaltation and humiliation. You must be content when you are experiencing the sweet communion of the saints with fellow believers who are edifying you as well as in the school, workplace, or community when you are looked down upon in humiliation and chastisement for your faith in Christ. You must be content when the table that is set before you is laid out with a harvest feast of every delicacy your could desire as well as when your stomach is grumbling and the hunger pains are great due to a lack of physical sustenance. You must learn to be content when your job brings joy and excitement and provides in abundance for the needs of your family as well as when it is a drag and an unpleasant experience or when it barely provides the necessary resources to pay the bills for that month. When you are in want you learn patience and trust in suffering; when you are in plenty you learn humility and

dependence in prospering. Calvin writes, “If a man knows to make use of present abundance in a sober and temperate manner, with thanksgiving, prepared to part with everything whenever it may be the good pleasure of the Lord, giving also a share to his brother, according to the measure of his ability, and is also not puffed up, that man has learned to excel, and to abound.” Do not let your present circumstances rule you. Don’t care about what others say about you but what Christ says about you. Christian contentment means that you are fully reliant upon God, that you freely submit to and delight in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition. This is how we practically live out Christ’s prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Not my will, but thine, be done.” In the midst of your own present difficulties, here is what you too should learn of life in Christ, that being “in him who enables” means to be “content” whatever your circumstances.

Friends, if you are a Christian then I can assure you that this finding contentment in all things will be difficult. The world wants you to find contentment in all sorts of things, or even to be content in discontentment because that will spur you on to pursue other covetous desires in the pursuit of the American dream. Do not fall into the trap of the devil in these things. The snare of discontentment is one that is incredibly difficult to escape. It consumes you, consumes your thoughts and actions, even destroys lives. I’m reminded of an interview given by the lead singer of a rock band in which he makes the comment to the effect, “I have fame and fortune and everything I could ask for; why do I still go to bed every night wanting to kill myself.” Brothers and sisters, discontentment and desiring the things of this world is a path that leads only to destruction, not just in this present age but in the age to come. You must learn that whatever your lot in life, whatever the present circumstance, in all things to be content. And you must guard yourself from hypocritical contentment which outwardly expresses contentment but inwardly is poisoned by covetousness. Burroughs says, “Not only must the tongue hold its peace; the soul must be silent. Many may sit silently, refraining from discontented

expressions, yet inwardly they are bursting with discontented expressions, yet inwardly they are bursting with discontent.” You must be content, truly both outwardly and inwardly content, in all things.

And now, lest us consider our final heading of how to be content. This has been alluded to both throughout the verses we have just considered as well as throughout the sermon thus far, but Paul makes it plain in verse 13, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.” Here we see the defining characteristic of what makes Paul’s self-sufficiency or contentment in verse 11 different from that of the Stoics. Here we see that the source or fountain of Christian contentment is not found within one’s self, but instead in the person and work of Christ Jesus who works effectually in the lives of believers through the power of His Spirit. And where the fountain of contentment for the Stoic will eventually run dry finding no more strength to persevere in it within the self, this fountain of Christian contentment will never run dry no matter what the circumstances may be, for it is the well-spring of life that flows from Christ Himself. “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.” I’m not one to typically make corrections to the translation, but here I think it’s important to make one. The Greek text of this passage does not read ‘through Christ’ but instead ‘in Christ.’ Now this is not a difference in translation that affects how we understand this passage, but it is one that, if translated ‘in Christ,’ would highlight an important aspect of what Paul is saying here. The phrase ‘in Christ’ is one that Paul uses extensively in his writings both in this letter and in his other epistles. It hits on the notion of union with Christ, that mystical bond that believers have with their risen Savior. If you are in Christ then you have been united with Christ in all ways. If you are in Christ then you have been united with Him in His death, burial, and resurrection. If you are in Christ then you have been raised with Him and are seated with Him in the heavenlies. If you are in Christ then by virtue of your union with Him you have been adopted as sons of the Most High and made co-heirs with Christ over all things. If you are in

Christ then you possess every spiritual blessing and have been gifted the Holy Spirit as your own personal Comforter to come alongside you in all circumstances. Do you see why I say this is an important aspect to note?

And if you are in Christ then you can do all things because He is the one who strengthens you. This is perhaps the most recognized verse in this letter, but it is also unfortunately one of the most misused and abused verses in Scripture. This isn't a verse you can just write on your eye-black when you're on the football field and expect to win the game because it can do all things. Paul doesn't say, "I can have any job through Christ who strengthens me; I can win any game through Christ who strengthens me; I can be the best homeschooling mom through Christ who strengthens me; I can have wealth through Christ who strengthens me." This verse isn't permission to pursue the worldly desires that we are prone to unduly rely upon. This verse must be understood in its proper context of being strengthened to persevere in contentment through any circumstance that comes your way. Paul is saying, "I can face suffering in chains because Christ strengthens me. I can be in prison because Christ strengthens me. I can face hunger because Christ strengthens me." I'm reminded of a story that I heard from Pastor Nathan Eshelman of the Scots-Irish farmers in western Pennsylvania during the early years of America. They crossed over the Allegheny mountains, a trek that took three days in itself to do, and the settled in the land and established a church and set up farms. If you've ever been to western Pennsylvania during the winter you will know that it can be very harsh. There are accounts written of particularly harsh winters, of crops failing, and in the letters and journals of these men they kept coming back to this verse, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." There's one account of a father corresponding with someone on the other side of the mountains and they ask him what will happen if his family goes hungry. His response was beautiful, "We will live off of the Shorter Catechism."

This is what this verse means. We must live with an understanding that even in the toughest times, even in our darkest days, even when we go hungry or have no place to lay our heads, it is Jesus Christ who strengthens us. And that, my friends, is how to be content. When your fridge is empty and the pain of hunger is abounding, feast upon the Word of God and trust in Him to provide you with your daily bread. When you are lonesome and have no one around you with which to enjoy fellowship or conversation, commune with your Lord through times of prayer and meditation upon His great works. When you are cold and weary and have no place to lay your head, find your rest in the arms of your Savior who can sympathize with you in every way. When your bank account is empty and you wonder whether or not the bills will be paid this month, take hold of the treasure that is stored up for you in heaven which is yours by virtue of your union with Christ. Do not find your contentment within yourself or within the things of this world, but instead find your contentment in Christ for He is the one who strengthens you.

Brothers and sisters, our culture around us is a culture of discontentment. Our culture around us is one which calls us to seek our joy, our satisfaction, our fulfillment in the things of this world, things with moth and rust will destroy. But we are called to not pursue the things of this world. We are called to be in the world but not of it. In Romans 12:2 Paul tells us, “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” That is what we are called to do. That is what will cause you to learn to be content with whatever lot the Lord, in His providence, have given you in this life. That is how you will learn to have “that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.” Because Christian contentment is contentment in Christ.