

The Character of Christian Contentment

Philippians 4:10–13

Introduction

Turn with me in your Bibles once again to Philippians chapter 4. Last Sunday night we looked at Philippians 4, verses 8 and 9, where Paul summed up his call to spiritual stability by summoning the church both to godly thinking and to godly practice. If we are to exhibit the spiritual stability commanded of us in Philippians 4:1, we must be devoted to unity (verses 2 and 3), we must rejoice in the Lord (verse 4), we must be gentle with all (verse 5), we must banish anxiety by thankful prayer (verses 6 and 7), we must *dwell on* what is true-honorable-right and praiseworthy, verse 8, and we must *practice* the things we have been taught, verse 9. And after discussing all those means by which we are to attain to true, biblical steadfastness, Paul turns to speak about one of the marks of the steadfast Christian life. In Philippians 4, verses 10 to 13, the Apostle Paul has a word for us this evening about contentment.

And that word is necessary, because it seems like it's part of human nature to be discontent. After Alexander the Great had conquered the Persian Empire—the greatest world power of his time—and extended his reign from the tiny Peninsula of Greece through to present day Egypt, Turkey, Israel, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and India, it's written that, “When Alexander saw the breadth of his domain, he wept, for there were no more worlds to conquer.” John D. Rockefeller—the oil magnate who is said to have been the richest man in history (adjusting for inflation, he's said to have been worth 340 billion dollars)—was once asked, “Mr. Rockefeller, how much money is enough?!” And he answered transparently, “Just a little bit more.”

And that elusive nature of contentment is not isolated to these men. Our society is plagued with the disease of discontentment. Just a few years ago we saw the housing market go absolutely haywire because of how many people were not content to live within their means, but borrowed absurd amounts of money to live in a supersized dream-home that they knew they could never afford. Credit card debt is expected of consumers today, as the average credit card debt per household in the United States is in excess of \$7,000. Not having the money to actually pay for things hasn't stopped the American consumer armed with a plastic card. People are discontent with the cars they drive, so every couple years they go into debt to upgrade to the newest model. We're discontent with our cell phones and electronic gadgets, so every season we've got to upgrade from the iPad Air to the iPad Pro, from the Samsung Galaxy S6 to the Samsung Galaxy S7, from the iPhone 6 to the iPhone 6 *Plus*. In fact, the entire advertising industry is built upon the principle of sowing discontentment—on convincing people that they need something they don't have, so they go out and buy it. And we could go on. People are discontent with their singleness and so fornication is rampant. People are discontent with their spouses and so divorce

and adultery are rampant. People are discontent with their current jobs and salaries so the work-world is dominated by a cut-throat atmosphere.

And though we might not like to admit it, the church has not managed to keep discontentment from entering its four walls. There is discontentment with the preaching and teaching: “Too much application; we should just be focusing on the exposition of the Word of God!” Or “Not enough application; we need to be told what we’re supposed to do with all this truth!” There is discontentment with the shepherding: “The leadership never calls me or visits me or pays attention to my needs!” Or “The leadership is so meddlesome—always poking around in my life! Do they think they’re perfect?” There is discontentment concerning service opportunities, concerning relationships with other believers, concerning the counsel you might have been given.

But in stark contrast to this society—and even the contemporary church—that is plagued with discontentment, the Bible calls the followers of Jesus to a life of utter contentment. Paul says in 1 Timothy 6:7–8: “For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. If we have food and covering, with these we shall be *content*.” The writer of Hebrews says in chapter 13 verse 5 of his letter: “Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being *content* with what you have.” And even John the Baptist, as he came proclaiming his Gospel of repentance, when asked what the fruits of that repentance would be, said to the soldiers, among other things: “*Be content* with your wages” (Luke 3:14).

The great Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs, in his marvelous treatise entitled, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, defined Christian contentment as “that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition” (19). And I can’t imagine a description more starkly in contrast with our society than that one. And so the question that we’re confronted with is: How can we as the people of God go about pursuing that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit that Burroughs writes about—that disposition which grates against the grain of the culture that surrounds us, and against the principle of remaining sin within us?

And the answer must be to go to the Word of God. In Philippians chapter 4, Paul has a lesson about contentment that he desires to teach the people of God. And that lesson comes in the context of Paul’s closing remarks to the church in Philippi, as he thanks his dear friends for the financial gift they sent him by Epaphroditus—money for Paul to continue to rent his living quarters while under house arrest in Rome, to pay for his meals, and to facilitate other Gospel opportunities that he could undertake even while imprisoned.

As Paul writes back to the Philippians, to encourage them as to his well-being and to exhort them to conduct themselves in a manner that is worthy of the Gospel of Christ (cf. 1:27), he also wants

to express his heartfelt thanks to his dear friends for their kind gift to him. Verses 10 to 20 are basically Paul's thank-you note to the Philippians for their support of him in his trials. But in this thank-you note, Paul is concerned to communicate that his great joy at receiving their gift did not spring from discontentment. He didn't want to give the impression that Christ Himself was insufficient to sustain his joy in all circumstances. And so beneath the surface of this thank-you note, Paul sets out to model for the Philippians what it looks like to be utterly content in the Lord Jesus Christ, no matter what circumstances he finds himself in.

And we can benefit from that same lesson as well. In the midst of our own present difficulties and the challenges which we face from day to day—and in the midst of a society which is characterized by discontentment almost as a philosophy of life—we too need to “learn the secret,” as Paul says, of true contentment in Christ. Let's read our text. Philippians chapter 4, verses 10 to 13: “But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned *before*, but you lacked opportunity. ¹¹Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. ¹²I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. ¹³I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”

In this text we discover **four characteristics of Christian contentment**—**four spiritual truths** that will aid us in “learning the secret” of being truly content in the Lord Jesus Christ.

I. Patiently Trusts in the Sovereign Providence of God (v. 10)

The **first characteristic of Christian contentment** that we see in this text is that contentment springs from a **patient trust in the sovereign providence of God**. Look again at verse 10. Paul writes, “But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you *were* concerned before, but you lacked opportunity.”

From the very beginning of their salvation, the Philippians had outdone the rest of the churches by financially supporting Paul's missionary journeys. If you look down to verse 15 of chapter 4, Paul says, “You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs.” And the reason Thessalonica is important is because it was Paul's very next stop after he left Philippi. So the Philippians were committed to Gospel-partnership with the Apostle Paul from the very beginning. As soon as he left them they sent money! And he says they did this “more than once”—something no other church had done.

But since that time, more than 10 years had passed. And though they may have been able to support Paul on other occasions, the text implies that considerable time had gone by since their last gift. He says he rejoiced that “now, at last” they had revived their concern for him. And as the Philippians read that phrase, “now at last,” they may have wondered to themselves if Paul was issuing them a subtle rebuke for waiting so long. You’ve all been “thanked” like that at one time or another haven’t you? “Oh, thank you! You *finally* remembered me and decided to send me some help! Took you long enough!”

So because Paul was tactful—because he was socially aware of how his remarks could be taken—he anticipated that misconception, and he assured the Philippians that that wasn’t his intent at all. And he communicates that in a number of ways. First, he describes their gift as a manifestation of the *revival* of their concern for him. And the Greek word translated “revived” in the NAS is a horticultural or botanical term that was used in extra-biblical Greek of a bush or a tree blossoming again in the springtime after a period of dormancy through the winter. And even though we don’t have long winters here in Southern California, we can understand that image. In December and January, when there are no leaves or flowers on our trees, life nevertheless remains in those trees. We might not have seen *signs* of life, but the sap was still flowing through the branches. And we see that life “revived” in springtime when the trees begin to bud again.

Paul is using that same imagery. He’s saying to the Philippians: “I know that the life of your concern for me has been there all along, even if it has revived only recently.” And then he even goes on to say explicitly, “Indeed, you *were* concerned before, but you lacked opportunity.” Maybe they weren’t aware of Paul’s needs, or didn’t know how to get a hold of him. Perhaps they were so financially pressed that they had nothing to give—2 Corinthians 8:2 speaks of the “deep poverty” of the Macedonians (Philippi was a city of Macedonia). Whatever it was, Paul makes it clear that the Philippians were not to blame. Their love and friendship were there all along; they had simply lacked opportunity.

Now, that kind of magnanimous attitude reflects Paul’s **patient trust in the sovereign providence of God**. The entire time in between the instances in which he received help from the Philippians, he wasn’t sitting there tapping his foot, frustrated, questioning their love for him. Still less was he panicking, stressed out about how he was going to have enough resources to make it through the next month. He knew that His God was on the throne of the universe—that He is absolutely sovereign over every detail that happens. And because of that he could be content.

Friends, one of the most important keys to enjoying true contentment is a rock solid trust in the absolute sovereignty of God. You say, “How sovereign?” *Absolutely* sovereign. “Yeah, but only over the big stuff, right? I mean God’s got better things to do than to be concerned with the trivial matters of my life.” Wrong. What does Romans 8:28 say? “And we know God causes...”

some things? The *big* things to work together for good? No. We know that God causes *all* things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. Jesus Himself taught us that faith in God’s absolute sovereignty is the proper antidote to fear and discontentment. As He taught His disciples not to fear even death in the cause of following Him, He asked them, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows” (Matt 10:29–31). God numbers the hairs on your head. Sparrows are sold two for a penny, and not one of them dies apart from the sovereign providence of God. That great hymn, says, “Heav’nly peace, divinest comfort / Here by faith in Him to dwell / For I know whate’er befall me / Jesus”—not “doeth *some* things well,” not even “*alloweth* all things well,” but “Jesus *doeth all* things well.” Therein is my heavenly peace, and divinest comfort.

Friends, if we are to know anything of the kind of contentment that Paul experienced, then like he did we need this rock solid foundation of the absolute sovereignty of God. How could you ever be content and at peace if you didn’t know and believe that God is in control of absolutely everything? And for those who buck against attributing absolute sovereignty to God, I’ll make an observation here: A god who is not sovereign over absolutely everything is a god who cannot promise peace and comfort for your soul. He can try his best, but because he cedes control to the “free will” of man, there are some things that are just out of his control. But *Paul* can be content—we can be content—whatever our circumstances—because we have a God who is working *all* things after the counsel of His own will (Eph 1:11), and who promises to sovereignly govern every aspect of this universe in such a way that it all works for your *good*—which he defines in Romans 8:29 as your ever-increasing conformity to the image of Christ. And so when circumstances come that would tempt you to be discontent, you need to remember that in those circumstances, no matter how sharp they may seem, God is sovereign, and He is purposefully intending to display His love and goodness to you through those circumstances. Therefore, it is your business to spy out that goodness, to behold His glory put on display, and to look for the way in which you are to grow more fully into Christlikeness.

And what is the result of that robust understanding of **God’s sovereign providence**? It is contentment. It is great joy. Look at the text. Paul says, “I rejoiced in the Lord *greatly*.” Why? Calvin says it best: “...[because] that man can never be poor in mind who is satisfied with the lot which has been assigned to him by God” (124). And note that Paul is not rejoicing merely in the gift; he is rejoicing in the Giver *of* that gift, whom he acknowledges to be the Lord. Another indication of Paul’s trust in the **sovereign provision of God**: when he receives the Philippians’ gift, he doesn’t let his joy terminate on the gift, but recognizes that that gift as ultimately from the Lord Himself—that the Lord is **sovereignly providing** all things for His children by means of the church.

And even more than that, I believe Paul rejoices *in the Lord* because of the glory of Christ that is displayed in the Philippians' obedience. Don't miss this here; this is precious. What Paul saw in their gift was certainly a manifestation of their own concern and love for him. But more than that, their gift was a manifestation of the grace of God at work in their lives. God had so graced them to make Christ *so* glorious and precious to them, that they could count their money as loss for the sake of Christ, and gladly give away their already-meager resources for the sake of the Gospel! You see, when the souls of God's people are so satisfied in Christ that they joyfully and sacrificially lay down their earthly treasures in the service of the Gospel, Jesus is magnified! And so if you want to glorify Christ, dear friends, cultivate your heart to find your satisfaction in Him! And then display that satisfaction, by laying down your life in the service of God's people!

Paul is content. Even as he sits under house arrest—chained by the wrist to a Roman soldier 24 hours a day—he rejoices greatly, because he **patiently trusts the sovereign providence of God.**

II. Independent of the Circumstances of Life (vv. 11–12)

A **second characteristic of Christian contentment** is that true contentment is **independent of the circumstances of life**. Look with me at verses 11 and 12: “Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. ¹²I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need.”

Paul has already anticipated one misinterpretation of what he's saying in verse 10. Here in verse 11 he corrects another potential misunderstanding. He says, “Not that I speak from want.” In other words: “Please don't misunderstand my enthusiasm. Yes, when I received your gift from Epaphroditus, I rejoiced in the Lord *greatly*. But I wasn't trying to manipulate you into sending another gift soon. Neither was I rejoicing particularly at the improvement of my financial situation. My joy—my contentment—is not in my circumstances. In fact, I've learned to be content in *whatever* circumstances I am.”

See, Paul didn't find his satisfaction in a “healthy” bank account. Paul's joy isn't the joy of someone who's just found out he's won the lottery, or who's been given the opportunity to win big on a game show. His joy, his satisfaction, his contentment are rooted much deeper than that. And he believes he would do a disservice to the Philippians if he were to mislead them to believe otherwise. And so he adds this qualification: “Not that I speak from want.”

And it is here we learn that that true Christian contentment is **independent of the circumstances of life**. Now notice that I did not say it is *indifferent* to circumstances. There *was* a popular philosophy in Paul's day called Stoicism that taught that to be content was to learn to be

indifferent to circumstances—to cultivate such an emotional detachment, such a universal apathy, that no matter what happened to you, you were to be truly unaffected; you simply were not to care. You were to cultivate a numbness to all physical and emotional pain. I can't think of a description of the Apostle Paul that is any further away from reality! Especially in this epistle, where the depth of his emotions are displayed almost without parallel in the entire New Testament! Where he speaks of longing for his brothers and sisters with the affection of Christ Jesus (1:8), where he speaks of having sorrow upon sorrow if Epaphroditus were to die (2:27), where he speaks of weeping over apostates (3:18), and where he repeats the term “beloved” throughout the letter (2:12; 4:1). Paul was no Stoic! He was not indifferent to circumstances!

But his contentment was *independent from circumstances*. No matter what was happening around him, and no matter what was happening to him, his contentment was steadfast. And as we'll see in verse 12, Paul's life ran the gamut of circumstances. There were times when he had plenty, and there were times when it was all taken away from him. There were good times and bad times, easy times and difficult times. But the change in circumstances didn't make one bit of difference in his contentment. He was not mastered by the circumstances in which he found himself. In every situation, his happiness, his joy, and his satisfaction were solidly grounded in something circumstances couldn't touch.

You say, “How is that possible? How did Paul get to a place where his contentment wasn't touched by his circumstances?” He says he learned it. Verse 11: “...for I have *learned* to be content in whatever circumstances I am.” You see, contentment is not a virtue that is natural to mankind. It must be learned. It must be cultivated. I love the way Spurgeon illustrates this. He says, “You will see at once...that contentment in all states is not a natural propensity of man. Ill weeds grow [rapidly]—covetousness, discontent, and murmuring—are as natural to man as thorns are to the soil. You have no need to sow thistles and brambles; they come up naturally enough, because they are native to earth, upon which rests the curse. [In the same way] you have no need to teach men to complain, they complain fast enough without any education. But the precious things of the earth must be cultivated. If we would have wheat, we must plow and sow; if we want flowers, there must be the garden and all the gardener's care. Now, contentment is one of the flowers of Heaven, and if we would have it, it must be cultivated! It will not grow in us by nature; it is the new nature, alone, that can produce it, and even then we must be especially careful and watchful that we maintain and cultivate the Divine Grace which God has sown in it.” And then he says, “Do not indulge, any of you, the silly notion that you can be contented without learning, or learn without discipline; it is not a power that may be exercised naturally, but a science to be acquired gradually!”

And we know it is to be acquired gradually, because Paul uses a form of the Greek verb that communicates that he had learned the lesson over time, and that its benefits are still present in the forefront of his mind. In fact in verse 12, he borrows a word that was used in the pagan

mystery religions that meant “to be initiated into the secrets.” Paul says this is insider knowledge.

But unlike the mystery religions, he didn’t learn this by some ecstatic experience, or by achieving an elite religious status. No, he learned this secret in the laboratory of life experience—walking through life as a follower of Jesus Christ and in constant communion with Him. Paul learned to be content through God’s own dealings with him. He learned, as we said before, that God is in control of all things. He learned that God was working all things for his good. He learned that his experiences and circumstances were the gifts of the sovereign providence of God, and that he could be satisfied in what his Father had given him. He learned, as he pled with the Lord to remove the thorn from his side, that God’s grace is sufficient for his people in times of trial, and that God’s power is made perfect in our weakness. He learned. So what did he say, 2 Corinthians 12:10? “Therefore, I am *well content* with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak [in my own strength], then I am strong [in the strength of Christ].”

III. Satisfied in the Surpassing Value of Christ (vv. 12–13)

And that is “the secret.” I’ve been hinting at it all along, but here I want to say it explicitly. Paul could be content “in any and every circumstance,” no matter how much those circumstances fluctuated, because he found his joy and his satisfaction in something—or better said, *Someone*—that never changes: the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is the **third characteristic of Christian contentment**. True contentment is **satisfied in the surpassing value of Christ**.

This of course anticipates what Paul says in verse 13, though we’ll camp out there just a bit later. He says, “I can do all things”—I can be content in all circumstances—“through *Christ* who strengthens me.” But aside from pointing ahead to verse 13, this also looks back to statements Paul has made earlier in the book of Philippians. You remember in chapter 1 verses 19 to 21, in that great sentence that so succinctly summarizes the essence of the Christian life, Paul says that his eager expectation and confident hope is that Christ will be glorified in his body, whether he lives or dies. And he says that he can be *sure* that Christ will be magnified in his body because for him, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

“To die is gain” means to survey all the wonderful things that death can take from us, and to prefer Christ as more valuable than those things, such that the loss of those things can be called gain, because we get Him. In the same way, “to live is Christ” means to survey all the wonderful things that this life can offer us, and prefer Christ as more valuable, such that everything else in our life is dispensable—it has no hold on our affections. If it becomes plain that, for you, following the Lord Jesus will mean loosening your grip on those things and even losing those

things, then in the language of Philippians 3:8 you count all those things to be loss in comparison to the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus your Lord.

Now you see, if that describes you, if for you to live is Christ—if your satisfaction is in the surpassing value of knowing Christ—then when circumstances require that you “get along with humble means”—when money goes, when food goes, when the house goes, even when friends and family go—though you feel the sting of that loss, though you feel hunger pangs, though you face the real, practical hardships of life in a fallen world, you are still content. In the face of all that loss, you can still behold Christ with the eyes of faith and cry, “Gain!” Because your satisfaction, at its most fundamental level, isn’t in the things you’ve lost. It’s in Christ. And He will never change. He will never leave.

That’s why Scripture says what it does in Hebrews chapter 13 verse 5. Turn there with me. Hebrews 13:5: “Make sure that your character is free from the love of money,”—or free from the love of stuff, free from the love of gadgets, free from the love of cars and houses and fancy restaurants—“being content with what you have.” Why, writer-of-Hebrews? What is the basis for my contentment? Why can I be content with what I have? “For He Himself has said, ‘I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.’” Do you see the way Scripture reasons? You can be free from the discontentment that is inherent in the love of money—or in the love of any other idol—and you can be content with what you have, because what you have is God! You can count everything as loss, because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ! You see, friends, contentment is a matter of proper worship! We do not worship the things that our circumstances bring us. We worship Jesus. And if the Lord decides to change our circumstances and remove our worldly comforts from us, our contentment is untouched, because our satisfaction is in Christ who will never leave us.

That is the secret of contentment. And when you know that secret, and when you live like it’s true, then you along with Paul will be able to say, verse 12, “I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound.” You know *how*, because you know *Christ*, and because you are more satisfied by Christ than by all that life can offer you and all that suffering can take from you.

When that is true of you, you will be able to be content with little. Paul says he knows how to be brought low, he’s learned the secret of going hungry and suffering need without losing his contentment. And we know it’s true for Paul! Paul was no ivory tower theoretician! He’s writing from a Roman prison, chained to a Roman soldier, maligned by fellow preachers in Rome, and prohibited from ministering the Gospel freely as he longed to do. And life on the outside wasn’t much different! In 2 Corinthians 11:27, while he was ministering freely, he writes, “I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.” In 1 Corinthians 4:11, he says, “To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless.” And a few verses

later he would summarize it by saying, “we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things.” And you say, “And how do you feel about all that, Paul?” And he says, “I count food, and drink, and fine clothing, and respectful treatment, and even a place to lay my head—all the things I have lost for Christ, I count it all as refuse, that I may gain Christ. And gaining Christ, I am content.”

And friend when the Lord providentially governs your circumstances so that you feel that your spouse or your children don’t appreciate you, so that you feel you’re undervalued at work, when someone else is given the promotion that you deserved, when someone else advances to a place in ministry that you feel should have been yours—when you suffer the loss of all things on the path of obedience to Christ—dear friend, you can be content, because your pleasure and your satisfaction is in Christ, and He is ever yours.

And Paul says, that is not only the secret of being content with little. It is the secret of being content with much. He also says in verse 12 that he knows how to abound, how to be well-fed, and how to have abundance. Now, you say, “Isn’t it easy to be content with abundance?” Well, it may be easier to be content in *circumstances* when you have abundance. But precisely because of that, it is often much more difficult to find your contentment in Christ when you have an abundance of other things to find your contentment in. Lloyd-Jones said, “How difficult it is for the wealthy person not to feel complete independence of God. When we are rich and can arrange and manipulate everything, we tend to forget God. Most of us remember him when we are down. When we are in need we begin to pray, but, when we have everything we need, how easy it is to forget God” (*Life of Peace*, 209).

That’s why Jesus says it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 18:25)—because the seductive power of riches entices you to trust in and give your heart to riches. And yet Jesus says you cannot serve God and money (Matt 6:24). Knowing how to abound means knowing how to enjoy the blessings of God’s good gifts while still finding your satisfaction in the Giver. It means understanding what Jesus said in Luke 12:15: that “not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.” Knowing how to abound means living consistently with the reality that even when abundance is present, that is not what your life is about. It is not what secures your happiness. You know how to abound when you can hold your abundance loosely—when it doesn’t have a grip on your heart—when you can enjoy it while all the while being perfectly prepared to part with it, if it should be the Lord’s will to take it from you.

Now, you who are blessed with a season of abundance from the Lord, do you know how to abound? Do you enjoy God’s gifts for the sake of the Giver? enjoying them all for what they show of God? Or, have you forgotten God in your abundance? If the latter, don’t fool yourself into believing you’ve learned the secret of contentment. If your satisfaction is not in Christ

Himself, you're nothing more than an idolater, happy with your idols, using Jesus as a means to get to your real god—to what you really want.

And if that's you, I would just invite you to repent. Confess your idolatry and your discontentment to God, and turn to Him, asking that He might open your eyes to behold the loveliness of Christ; because *true* contentment is independent of the circumstances of this life only when you are satisfied in the surpassing value of Christ.

IV. Fueled by the Strength of our Savior (v. 13)

Well finally, we come to our **fourth characteristic of Christian contentment.** True contentment trusts in the sovereign providence of God; it is independent of the circumstances of life; it is satisfied in the surpassing value of Christ. And **fourth**, it is **fueled by the strength of our Savior.** And we see this in verse 13: “I can do all things through Him”—or better translated: *in* Him—“who strengthens me.” “I can do all things in Him who strengthens me.”

And I hope that as we come to this very familiar verse in its context you can see for yourselves what violence this text has suffered at the hands of those who have treated it like a triumphalistic mantra of personal fulfillment. This might be *the* most popular verse at every Christian sporting event. I used to attend a church that met in the gym of a Christian school, where the basketball games were played. And this verse was printed on a 25-foot banner hanging on the wall. And it always made me laugh: they only played other Christian schools, so the members of both of those teams are looking at that banner and “claiming the promise” to be able to do *all* things through Christ who strengthens them. You've got one kid thinking, “I can slam dunk over this kid through Christ who strengthens me.” And you've got the kid guarding him thinking, “I can block this slam dunk through Christ who strengthens me.” But at the end of every game, *one* of the teams loses! They could not do *all* things through Christ who strengthens them!

Well, I hope you see how foolish that is! This verse does not promise us omnipotence in order to fulfill our worldly ambitions! It does not promise that we can do whatever we set our mind to as long as we pay lip service to Jesus. When we read this precious text in its context, it's plain that Paul is saying he can experience *all* of those circumstances—of being well-fed and hungry, of having abundance and suffering need—with *contentment*. What this verse teaches, is that the Christian's contentment is **fueled by the strength of our Savior.**

See: again, Paul was no Stoic. Stoicism taught that the contented person was the one who was “sufficient unto himself for all things, and able, by the power of his own will, to resist the force of circumstances” (Vincent, 143). No. Paul was sufficient; he was content. But his was not a *self*-sufficiency; his sufficiency was entirely due to the sufficiency of Another; his was a *Christ*-sufficiency.

The translators uniformly render this verse, “I can do all things *through* Him who strengthens me.” And that’s a legitimate option. But an even more literal translation is, “I can do all things *in* Him who strengthens me.” And that fits better with the “in Christ” motif that abounds throughout Paul’s letters (cf. Phil 1:1, 26; 3:9, 14; 4:7, 19, 21). He is pointing to the paramount importance of his union with Christ. He is saying that “when he reached the limit of his resources and strength, even to the point of death, he was infused with the strength of Christ” through his union with Him by faith (MacArthur, 303). Commentator William Hendriksen wrote, “The Lord is for Paul the Fountain of Wisdom, encouragement, and energy, actually infusing strength into him for every need” (206).

And where did this strength come from? How is it that the believer can experience this infusing of strength and power into our own souls, enabling us to be content in any circumstance? It is as we realize the privileges of our *union* with Christ through *communion* with Christ. Jeremiah Burroughs, who, we mentioned earlier, wrote that classic work on contentment, said that we draw strength from Christ as we *act our faith upon Him* (63). I love how active that phrase is! We must “act our faith upon Christ.” We have to actively trust Him—to intentionally trust all that His Word says He is for us. Which means that we must maintain communion with Him in the Word and in prayer.

We will never be **fueled by the strength of our Savior** unless we are satisfied with His surpassing value. And we will never be satisfied with His surpassing value if we don’t go taste and see (cf. Ps 34:8) that surpassing value as it’s infallibly displayed for us in the inerrant Scriptures. Divine strength for contentment comes from meditation upon, and communion with, the Savior.

But it also comes from obedience to His Word. We can’t expect enjoy the peace and contentment that are found in Christ if we are being disobedient to His Word. If we are walking in sin we should not be surprised when we experience the unrest of anxiety and discontentment. Disobedient people *should* be discontent! Divine strength comes from communion with Christ, but disobedience severs communion with Christ. And so we can’t expect to be **fueled by the strength of our Savior** when we aren’t doing the things that our Savior is telling us! Because He’s not just our Savior; He’s also our Lord.

Conclusion

Well, we’ve seen that true contentment (1) trusts in the sovereign providence of God; it is (2) independent of the circumstances of life; it is (3) satisfied in the surpassing value of Christ; and it is (4) fueled by the strength of our Savior. It is not to be found in an ever-growing bank account. It is not to be found aboard a cruise ship, in a boat house, in a summer home, or in a relaxing

retirement. Contentment is not found behind the CEO's desk, in the driver's seat of a fancy car, or in the many rooms of a Beverly Hills mansion. Contentment isn't even found *merely* in the relationships we have with our friends and family—because even friends and family disappoint, and leave, and eventually will pass away from us into eternity. Contentment is found in one place, and one place only. And that is in Christ Jesus.

And maybe you're here this evening, and as you listen to God's Word preached you're aware of the convicting work of the Holy Spirit in your conscience. You recognize that you don't have a contentment that rises above circumstances. You recognize that your satisfaction does not finally terminate on Christ—that for you, to live is not Christ. To live is money; to live is marriage, or to live is singleness; or to live is sex, or alcohol, or partying; to live is self-commendation and pride, or any number of the idols of your heart! My friend, you have no contentment because you are not fueled by the divine strength of a Savior, because that strength comes only through union with Him. And as you cling to your sin and to your own self-righteousness, you don't find yourself in Him this evening, but outside of Him.

But I have good news for you. You *can* be in Him! The door of gospel mercy stands yet wide open! It's not too late! This Jesus—this wellspring of contentment and satisfaction—this Jesus died on the cross, and bore in Himself the wrath of Almighty God for sinners like you! All the sin of all those who would ever believe in Christ was counted to be His on Good Friday. The same wrath that we deserved to suffer in hell for eternity was poured out on Jesus—the infinitely Righteous One, the One who never disobeyed God, the One who lived the life you were commanded to live but couldn't live. And as life crept away from Him, and darkness fell over the earth, He cried out, "It is finished!" "It stands accomplished!" All that is necessary for salvation is done! And three days later, He rose from that grave, triumphant over sin and death, demonstrating that sin's penalty had been paid in full! And now the promise is: for you who turn from your sin—you who turn from pursuing your life and your love in everything *but* Christ, and turn *to* Christ, and put your trust in His work to commend you to God—God will save you from your sin. And He will unite you to Christ by faith, so that all that is His is yours—and so that you can say, "I can do all things—I am content in all circumstances—in Christ, who strengthens me."