



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

The Secret of Contentment in the Capitol

PHILIPPIANS 4:10-13

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Contentment is an elusive virtue. We often seek for contentment and happiness in places where it cannot be found – money, possessions, power, positions, relationships, or freedom from trials and difficulties in life. Contentment may be particularly difficult to achieve in life and work here in the capitol. There is often the ambition to gain a higher office or position of leadership. There is a great desire to win the political battles over important issues and legislation. There are often difficult circumstances and situations that threaten to rob one of contentment. Paul has encouraged the Philippian believers to “Rejoice in the Lord, always” (Philippians 4:4). Now he writes of a quality closely related to joy, that of contentment:

¹⁰But 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.

Philippians was in part a thank you letter from Paul to the believers in Philippi for their participation and support of his ministry. As a missionary, Paul was often supported by gifts from the churches he established. He was also a “bi-vocational” minister; oft times working as a tent maker to help support his work (Acts 18:3). Life and travel were difficult in Paul’s day, and he often faced great challenges, persecution, and deprivation. Though he was extremely grateful for their gift, Paul wanted the Philippians believers to know how God had taught him to be content, whether in rejoicing in the blessing of their gift or in times of great need. The fact that Paul could be content in the midst of the great trials he faced is an encouragement to us to seek true contentment in the midst of the challenges of our daily lives. Let us consider from Paul’s example how we might learn to be content in whatever circumstances we might face.

WHAT IS TRUE CONTENTMENT?

The dictionary defines contentment as being satisfied with what one is or has and not wanting more or anything else. In Philippians 4:11 the word used for “content” had the original meaning referring to someone who was self-sufficient and needing no outside help, assistance, or resources. Here Paul turns that around and says we can be content because of the sufficiency we have in Christ and the help, assistance and resources we find in Him. Because of our relationship with Christ, we can find peace and contentment regardless of the circumstances we face. The puritan pastor Jeremiah Burroughs defined contentment this way:

“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.”¹

Burroughs describes contentment as a quiet, gracious “frame of spirit”. It is an inward heart attitude. It is closely related to the peace and joy of which Paul wrote earlier. Two of Paul’s statements in this passage immediately grip our attention: “*I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am*”; and “*In any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled...*” Paul shared how he was content in all circumstances by listing vivid contrasts in verse 13. He was content when things went well – during times of prosperity, filling, and abundance. He was content when things were difficult – during times of humble means, hunger, and suffering need. This is particularly encouraging when we consider Paul’s current situation and circumstances. We should remember that Paul is in a Roman prison, awaiting trial before the emperor. He was quite likely facing execution at the hands of Nero. This was not the first time Paul faced difficult circumstances. In another letter Paul described the difficulties he faced in his ministry:

²³...in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. ²⁴Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. ²⁵Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. ²⁶I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers,

BIBLE STUDIES

LEGISLATOR / ELECTED OFFICIAL INTERIM BIBLE STUDY TUESDAY, OCTOBER 11

12:00 NOON – TREASURER’S CONFERENCE ROOM (EB 54 IN BASEMENT OF EAST WING)

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*dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; ²⁷I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. **2 Cor. 11:23-28***

Even in prison, awaiting trial and execution, or facing the trials described above, Paul could say “I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am”.

This must be an important issue because we see Paul write of contentment in several other passages:

*Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong. **2 Cor. 12:10***

*⁶But godliness actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. ⁷For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. ⁸If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. **1 Tim 6:6-8***

*Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, “I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU...” **Heb. 13:5***

CONTENTMENT IS A VIRTUE WHICH MUST BE LEARNED

Notice how Paul relates twice that contentment was something he had to learn: “***I have learned to be content...***” in verse 11 and “***I have learned the secret...***” in verse 12. Paul knew well the great truths of the gospel. He knew that through repentance and faith in Christ's work on the cross he was now a citizen of heaven (Phil. 3:20). He knew that if God would deliver His own Son for our sin, then He would certainly take care of us as His children (Romans 8:32). Learning contentment is a matter of practically applying these truths to the circumstances and situations we face in life. We may have head knowledge of God's power, love, and provision. Contentment is turning that into experiential knowledge as we deal with the challenges of life. This is really just a part of the process of sanctification or spiritual growth.

HOW WE CAN LEARN TO BE CONTENT

This brings us to an important question, how can we learn to be content? Paul give us a simple answer:

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.

What was Paul's secret of experiencing contentment in any and every circumstance? “***I can do all things through Him (Christ) who strengthens me***”. This is one of the best known and loved verses in this letter, perhaps in all of scripture. Here Paul shares we can only find true contentment ***through Christ***. True joy, peace, and contentment in life only comes when we have a right relationship with God which in turn gives us a right perspective on the values, priorities, and circumstances of life. Apart from Christ we are totally caught up in the things of this world and its pleasures, possessions, or positions. (1 John 2:15-17). We sinfully and selfishly pursue things all the while alienated from God by our sin. Christ died and rose again so that we might be reconciled to God. When that takes place, our values and priorities change and then we can find true contentment in our relationship with Him. As we grow in the grace and knowledge our Lord, we begin to learn to be content in the circumstance He brings into our lives.

As we remember some of the truths Paul shares in Philippians, we see how we can learn contentment in every circumstance:

- Remember our citizenship is in Heaven. (3:20)
- Learning more of Jesus and His character. (2:5-11)
- Properly deal with the circumstances God allows or brings into our lives. (1:12)

All this does not mean you cannot aspire to higher offices or positions of leadership. It does not mean we should never seek to achieve success or advancement at our jobs. The issue is, what is our response when we lose those things? Paul was content when he abounded or when he suffered loss, because of the strength he had through Christ.

¹ Burroughs, Jeremiah. *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (pp. 18-19). Kindle Edition.