

**“Christian Contentment”**  
**Philippians 4:10-13**  
**March 27, 2022**

---

**INTRODUCTION:**

The Puritan author Jeremiah Burroughs wrote a classic work in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century titled *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. Today’s text is a primary text on contentment, which is a precious jewel indeed and an essential component of happiness. Even though Paul was a prisoner, he was a happy man. Having read some about the lives of Rome’s emperors, I would dare say that the prisoner in the dungeon below was a happier man than the emperor in the palace above. Paul wants his beloved Philippian church also to share in this jewel of contentment.

If you had the choice between the following two gifts for your children, which gift would you choose? Gift 1 is the ability to make a good living as an adult. Gift 2 is contentment, whether their income is meager or great. I realize that we all know the correct answer to that question, but is your functional theology the same as your formal theology in this answer? Do you put as much parental energy behind raising your children to find contentment in Christ as you do in helping them do well in school? Contentment is indeed like a precious, rare jewel. Think with me about its value. It reminds me of the well-known proverb, “Prepare your child for the road ahead, not the road for your child.” If you think it’s your job to prepare the road for your child, you are going to be a very anxious parent, because there are so many things we can’t control. But if your child grows up and learns contentment despite the road travelled, they have been given a very precious gift indeed. Let’s consider now what Paul says about this rare jewel.

**I. Contentment Needed**

This passage is actually Paul’s “thank you” to the Philippians for their financial support, delivered by Epaphroditus. But it’s an expression of gratitude unlike any I’ve ever seen from a missionary. Paul begins strongly, **“I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me”** (v. 10). That’s Paul’s way of thanking them for their monetary gift for his support. Apparently, there had been a long gap in their support, indicated by his words “now at length.” Lest they assume that Paul has inferred from this gap that they were uncaring for him, Paul assures them that he interprets the gap as a lack of opportunity rather than a lack of care. We don’t know why they lacked opportunity. Perhaps it was due to a season of increased impoverishment. This had been an impoverished congregation (2 Cor. 8:1-2), but perhaps their financial condition had temporarily worsened. Or maybe

there had been no available courier to deliver the funds from Philippi to Rome, a trip of several hundred miles that would have required several months for the round trip.

At verse 11, Paul's expression of thanks gets a little strange. **“Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.”** “Thank you,” he says, “but I really didn't need the gift.” Imagine receiving a communication from one of our supported missionaries that was similar to this. Imagine further that we as a congregation had sacrificed significantly to provide for this missionary. He then writes to us to express his gratitude the way Paul does here. Not only does Paul say he didn't need the gift, but he will say in the next paragraph that he didn't seek it either (v. 17). If a missionary were to write us to say, “Thanks, but I neither needed the gift nor sought it,” I dare say it would be the last gift he would receive from us.

So why does Paul express his gratitude in this odd way? I believe that he does so in order to help this church he loved to find true happiness through contentment in Christ. He wanted to weaken one of the chief competitors to such contentment, which is the idea that happiness and contentment come through money. It would have sent the wrong message for Paul to say something like, “Thank you so much for this money, because now I have all I need.” He wanted their hearts to be somewhat detached from money because he wanted their hearts to be fully devoted to Christ. And Paul knew that finding one's happiness in Jesus, being content in him, is the only permanent joy one could ever have. He was preparing the Philippians for the road ahead instead of trying to prepare the road for the Philippians.

The Philippians had given Paul a gift, and he was truly thankful for it. But he wanted to give them an even better gift, this rare jewel of Christian contentment. When we remember Paul's challenging circumstances, it is a notable thing for him to be able to say that he is content. He is in prison because of the hostility of unbelievers, awaiting a hearing with the emperor, after which he may be released or executed. In what must have been even more troubling for Paul, he was experiencing hostility from believers who were doing all they could to make life miserable for him. And yet he was content. He wanted the Philippians to experience the same. They were impoverished, persecuted (1:28-30), divided (4:2), and struggling with anxiety about life (4:6). Yet contentment is possible in the most challenging of circumstances. It is a precious jewel needed by us all.

## **II. Contentment Defined**

What exactly is this contentment? The word Paul uses here was often used by the Stoic philosophers and translated “self-sufficiency.” But Paul was no

stoic, and he meant something different by this word. Jeremiah Burroughs has captured more of what Paul meant when he defines 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.” To put it as simply as I can, contentment is the ability to say, “Jesus is enough.”

It often helps to understand a concept by considering its opposite. What is the opposite of contentment? It is the sin of coveting that is forbidden in the tenth commandment. **“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s”** (Ex. 20:17). When we covet, we are saying that Jesus is not enough, that I also need these other things that I don’t have. We visit someone else’s house and see something that looks like a decorator’s showroom, and we think in our hearts, “My house is such a dump; I wish I could afford nicer furniture.” Or we think, “It’s spring break week and many of my friends are off to the beach or even more exotic locations. I’ll be stuck at home all week, and the only vacation we ever take is to go to grandma’s house.”

Note that Burroughs defines contentment as an inward frame of spirit. It is that internal satisfaction of heart with Jesus. It is like the submarine below the surface of the water when a storm is raging on the surface, but the submarine is completely calm. Paul names some of the storms of life that can rob us of our contentment. **“I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need”** (v. 12). We are most familiar with contentment in the last area he mentions: abundance and need. Contentment is challenged by need, when there is insufficient money to pay our bills. When that happens and we forget God, anxiety displaces all contentment. But contentment is challenged also, and perhaps even more so, by a condition of abundance. Mother Teresa once visited New York City from her home city of Calcutta, one of the poorest cities in the world. She said of New York, easily one of the wealthiest cities of the world, that she had never seen such poverty as she faced in New York. She was obviously speaking of a spiritual poverty. Calvin comments wisely on the challenges of contentment amidst abundance:

He who knows how to use abundance soberly and temperately with thanksgiving, prepared to part with everything whenever it may please the Lord, giving also a share to his brother according to his ability, and is also not puffed up, that man has learned to excel and to abound. This is an excellent and rare virtue, and much greater than the endurance of poverty.

Paul also reports that he has learned contentment in a situation of being “brought low.” That is something different than poverty, having more to do with status and respect. For example, suppose you are in a work environment where your gifts are under-appreciated. Maybe less-qualified people get the

promotions and raises while you get overlooked. That's what Paul has in mind here.

To repeat, contentment is essentially a heart attitude that says "Jesus is enough." One qualification is needed. Contentment is not the same as the complacent, "whatever" approach to life. If you're in a condition of financial need, there are certain things you should be doing even while your heart is saying "Jesus is enough." You should be praying for God's provision, either through increased income or decreased expenses. You should seek help in budgeting and financial management. You should seek to improve your future prospects for greater income. None of that is a violation of the requirement that we be content. But at the core of our lives, we are saying, "Jesus is enough."

There is a wonderful illustration of contentment in Psalm 131. **"I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me."** One might expect to read that contentment is like a nursing child with its mother, but that's not what it says. The weaned child is with its mother, close by to that provision of milk it used to regard as essential. But now that child can be with its mother and without that milk and still be content. Contentment is not the absence of trials, but the ability to say within trials, "Jesus is enough."

### **III. Contentment Acquired**

How do we come to possess this precious jewel of contentment? I see a couple of answers to this in the passage. First, Paul says that he *learned* to be content. Apparently, it's not something natural to us but something that must be acquired in a learning process. We are born with a nature that covets instead of one that finds contentment in God. This puts us in a dangerous position, even opening us to the devil's work in our lives. I was reading this week the account of Jesus' betrayal and crucifixion in John's Gospel. I was struck by the description of Judas. He left to betray Jesus after "Satan entered into him" (13:27). In the chapter just before that, we read that Judas resented Mary's anointment of Jesus with expensive perfume. Ostensibly, his resentment was that the perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor. But John tells us, **"He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it"** (12:6). Covetousness and the lack of contentment is a gateway sin into other destructive sins. So we learn from this word "learning" that contentment is not natural to us.

Something else we discover from the word "learning" is that the acquisition of contentment is a process. It is a process that is captured well by that statement that goes, "You will never know that Jesus is enough until Jesus is

all you have.” In other words, it is through weakness in which we look to Jesus that we learn contentment, that Jesus is enough for us. The weakness doesn’t have to be financial but could be anything. Whenever you feel yourself in over your head, that is an opportunity to find Jesus sufficient. It could be a challenge at work, a relational trial, or a parenting dilemma.

This brings us to the oft-quoted, and we might add “mis-quoted” verse 13. **“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”** It’s not a verse whereby God promises to strengthen us to do whatever we want to do. I think it refers to what Burroughs said in his definition of contentment. The contented person “freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.” That’s what Paul is referring to here. He is saying that God strengthens him to be able to submit to and delight in God’s ordering of the circumstances of his life in all situations. Paul is not passive in this effort. Notice that he takes responsibility to do these things. But he is also aware of the fact that he lacks the strength to do the things he needs to do to be content. He needs God’s help for that strength. As one commentator said, “Christian contentment is something that we fight for. We must exert effort to wage war against the temptation to complain, to envy others, to fixate on what is uncomfortable and inconvenient and downright wrong in our circumstances” (Johnson, p. 295).

## **CONCLUSION:**

Let’s conclude with an application. Is there a challenging situation in your life that you would really like to see changed? It could be financial, relational, work-related, family-related, or any number of other possibilities. Can you think of something right now? There’s nothing wrong with trying to change those unwanted circumstances. But if all your attempts have failed to bring about the desired changes, can you say, “Jesus is enough”?

The key to this rare jewel of Christian contentment is to find Jesus a great and matchless treasure. If we can say by faith, “I am his and he is mine,” then we can know and experience this happy contentment. We are ready to endure all things without fear or anxiety because we have all things in Christ. If our children learn to treasure Jesus like this, then they are well-prepared for the road ahead, whatever it may bring. All of us are able to learn contentment through finding Jesus to be enough, because “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

**Small Group Discussion Questions**  
**Philippians 4:10-13**

1. Would you say that Americans in general are content or discontent? Why do you say that?
2. To the extent that people you know are discontented, what are the primary sources of such discontentment? Is it financial, relational, political, health-oriented?
3. Think about Jeremiah Burroughs definition of contentment. He defines it 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.” What strikes you about that definition?
4. The short definition of contentment is to be able to say, “Jesus is enough.” It has been said that we will never know that Jesus is enough until Jesus is all we have. Have you ever had an experience of that?
5. Is there a current situation in your life where you need to believe that Jesus is enough?