

Week 4 - Cultivate Contentment - Philippians 4:10-13

Scripture Reading: 1Timothy 6:6-10

Introduction

This morning we are returning to our series on Thanksgiving Living as we look at the subject of contentment

Our trusty Webster's 1913 dictionary defines contentment as being "easy in one's mind or satisfied"

However, contentment is an elusive trait that very few people seem to experience on a regular basis

In part, we've been trained to be discontent by being constantly bombarded with the idea that a certain acquisition will finally provide us with the contentment we desire

In his day, business magnate John D. Rockefeller was the richest man in America

At the peak of his wealth, Rockefeller had a net worth that equaled roughly one-percent of the entire U.S. economy

He was the Elon Musk of the early 20th century

It's widely claimed that he was once asked the question, "How much money is enough?"

To which Rockefeller is said to have answered, "Just one more dollar."

That quote has been disputed and I can't vouch for its authenticity but it rings true if only because it describes the human condition of pervasive discontent - of never having "enough"

We think if only I had more money, if only I had a nicer house or car or clothes, if only my situation were better in some way, then I could be content

But the sad truth is when our contentment is based on "if only" we will always come up short

As we just heard in our Scripture reading from **1Timothy 6:6**, contentment is profitable for us

Even more, as we read in **Hebrews 13:5**, contentment isn't just a good way to be, God tells us to be content

So we need to know how to find contentment

Fortunately, the Bible has a great deal to say about contentment

And in the passage before us this morning we see Paul's prescription for contentment

The context of the passage is that Paul is in a Roman prison and Epaphroditus has just brought Paul a financial gift from the church in Philippi

Let's look at that passage in its entirety [**Philippians 4:10-13**]

I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. 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. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Biblical contentment is possible in spite of circumstances but it can be elusive

As Paul indicates, it's an attitude that must be learned

And this morning I want to show you three things that we find in this passage from Philippians that we need to accept and internalize if we are going to be content

What we are going to see is that the contentment the Bible speaks of is based on our trust in God's sovereignty, God's purposeful provision, and seeing God as our source and supply of all things, including contentment

So let's begin by looking at God's sovereignty and how our understanding of it impacts our contentment

I. God is sovereign

We will begin to experience contentment when we are right with God and accept that God is in control of everything that happens to us

To say that God is sovereign means that God exercises his unlimited power over all of his creation and directs all things to accomplish his purposes

Still it's not necessarily instinctive or easy to accept that our every circumstance is in the Lord's control

Look at the apostle Paul

When he wrote this letter he was sitting in prison in Rome and had needs

And, while he doesn't say why the church in Philippi was unable to put their concern for him into action earlier as they had in the past, he wasn't fretting about it because he knew God was in control

Paul knew that God had not lost track of him or that God was unaware of his need and he was content to wait on God's timing for relief

We need to understand something very important though because we can get the wrong idea about contentment

Contentment is not the same thing as complacency in the sense that we become apathetic about our circumstances

It is perfectly permissible for the Christ-follower to seek to better his or her condition as God gives opportunity

The Bible encourages hard work and industriousness

Look to the parable of the talents found in Matthew 25

There we see that the servant who was given one talent was content with what he had and saw no need to improve upon it and he was chastised severely

And no one could accuse the apostle Paul of remaining still - he was forever on the move doing what the Lord had given him to do

And even when he was confined he was still busy working for the Lord

Look one chapter earlier in this same letter at **Philippians 3:12-14** where Paul writes:

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

I highly doubt that being confined in a Roman prison was a delight for a mover and shaker like Paul and I imagine he was eager to get out of his cell as soon as God made a way

After all, it was Paul who told slaves to not be overly concerned about gaining their freedom, but should they have the opportunity to get free to take it [**1Corinthians 7:21**]

But Paul was content in his cell because he used his confinement to share the gospel with his Roman guards [**Philippians 1:12-13**]

Biblical contentment comes from knowing that God is in control, that God is good and wants what is best for you

It's knowing that God has a plan for your, determining to discover what God would have you do, and committing to doing it wherever and however you are

Biblical contentment isn't going to be found in riches, or success, or putting all your energy into acquiring more or bigger or better in this world

Nor is biblical contentment merely sitting back and being satisfied; it's doing all you can with all you have to advance God's kingdom and bring him glory where you are

Biblical contentment that leads to thanksgiving is also found in knowing that God's provision has a purpose

II. God's provision has a purpose

In our Scripture reading from 1Timothy 6, Paul writes that *"the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils"* [1Tim 6:10] and that *"it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith"* to their own harm

This teaching parallels Jesus' thought in **Matthew 6:24** where he taught, *"You cannot serve God and money."*

Jesus continues in Matthew 6 to teach about how knowledge of God's care and provision should lead his followers to not be anxious - that is to be content - knowing that God would care for them

And he closed in verse 33 [**Matthew 6:33**] with the command and promise:

"But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

What Jesus was teaching is that, if we will put our focus and our energies and commit our resources to serving him and growing in righteousness ourselves, God will take care of our basic material needs

Paul says much the same in **1Timothy 6:8** when he declares that the pattern of a Christ-follower is to be content to have their basic needs met

So, is it wrong for a Christ-follower to desire to have things beyond their basic needs? Is it wrong to be wealthy?

No! You won't find anything like that in the Bible

What we need to recognize is that God has placed his followers at different economic levels for his glory

Both wealth and poverty are then products of God's will and meant to be a blessing

Having more than is absolutely necessary to live a life of mere subsistence is not sin neither is living a life of affluence

What is wrong is to elevate material things and the desire of material things so as to put them above our quest for godliness and God's glory

We call that materialism

I once had the privilege of talking with a missionary to South Africa who ministered to the very poor and was surprised to hear him say that the number one problem that he saw among the people of his church was materialism

He went on to explain that the people were discontent and always wanting the next thing

If they had a cardboard hut they wanted a dung hut, if they had a dung hut they wanted a mud hut, if they had a mud hut they wanted a wood hut, then a sheet metal hut, and on and on

They were being hindered in their walk with Christ because they were focused on things rather than God

Materialism isn't an amount; it's an attitude

Rather than focusing on storing up riches on this earth we should be storing up treasures in heaven by doing what God has called us to do

Jesus' brother, James, wrote about the quest for more in **James 4:2-3** saying:

You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

God doesn't require his followers to take a vow of poverty and renounce all worldly goods

In fact, he often blesses the faithful with abundant wealth

He is the giver of all good gifts and he wants us to enjoy the things he has graciously provided to us

But he also has a purpose in his giving

Look with me at 1Timothy 6 a little further down from our Scripture reading at verses 17-19 [**1Timothy 6:17-19**]

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.

Notice that Paul, under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit, didn't say "Tell the rich to get rid of their riches"

He said tell them, "Don't put your faith in your riches and use your riches in God-honoring ways"

Let me caution you that it is dangerous to look around and judge how other people handle their money

But you *do* need to consider yourself and what you are doing with the things the Lord has given you

A wise man once said, "Don't tell me what you value and where your priorities lie. Show me your check register and I will tell you."

That's what Jesus said in **Matthew 6:21** isn't it?

Our hearts go where our money goes and how we use our money reveals our priorities

When God blesses us materially, it's not so we can add to our pile of wealth like Scrooge McDuck; it's so we can use the abundance for kingdom purposes

When we shift our focus from this present life, knowing that God will meet our needs, to having our eyes fixed on eternity and the part we have to play in it, we will find that we will become less anxious about having enough

And we will find that we are less prone to accumulate for ourselves and we are more generous toward others

And we will find that our contentment isn't based on our circumstances but on the goodness of God

And, in the process, we will come to understand that God is the true source of our contentment

III. God is the source of contentment

Looking back at Philippians 4, we see that Paul had to learn how to be content

In verse 11 [**Philippians 4:11**] he writes:

I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content

And again in verse 12 [**Philippians 4:12**]

I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need

And then he reveals the secret to contentment in verse 13 [**Philippians 4:13**]

I can do all things through him who strengthens me

To strengthen someone means to cause them to have the ability to do or to experience something

And the word Paul uses here is called a present active participle which simply means that it is an ongoing thing

The secret that gave Paul the ability to be content no matter what was going on with him was the all-powerful presence of Jesus Christ that was his through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit

And every true follower of Christ is likewise indwelt with the Holy Spirit who can never be stripped from them to empower and enable them in any and all circumstances

Contentment doesn't come from a sense of self-sufficiency

Paul wasn't saying that he was some kind of super-adaptable super-Christian; just the opposite - he said he had to rely on Christ for the strength to be content in all circumstances

Psalm 1:3 paints a great picture of contentment when it says that a blessed man is one who delights in the Lord and *He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in season, and its leaf does not wither*

Notice how the psalmist is saying that God is both the object and source of contentment and how, regardless of the circumstances, the tree that is rooted in God has nothing to fear

That was Paul - I don't think we would ever get the idea that Paul was a mellow kind of guy who just floated along without a care in the world

No, Paul had to learn to be content and he found contentment in the Lord

Notice also that Paul says he had learned to be content in whatever situation - in plenty and hunger, abundance and need

As we considered earlier, we often believe that our lack of contentment would evaporate if we just had more

But Paul says he also had to learn to be content in times of plenty and abundance

We typically think of a person succumbing to discontent when they don't have what they think is enough

When we are in poverty or have a gap between what we think we need and what we have we can easily lapse into discontent - that's plain to see

But when we have a great deal, discontent becomes a bit more obscure because our discontent isn't caused by a lack of something but by a feared loss of something

Many a wealthy individual has lost sleep from worrying about losing what they have acquired

All the things we own have the power to own us if we let them

We need to learn to be content in times of need and in times of abundance

We need to recognize that looking for contentment in the things of this world will always fail

Thomas a Kempis put it this way in his book The Imitation of Christ:

"You cannot find complete satisfaction in any temporal gift, because you were not created to find your delight in them. Even if you possessed all the good things God has created, you could not feel happy and glad; all your gladness and happiness rests in the God who created those things."

Let's look at what the author of Proverbs wrote about having too much or too little in **Proverbs 30:8-9**

Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, "Who is the LORD?" or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.

There is need to learn contentment at both ends of the spectrum

Because when we don't have what we feel is enough we can forget God, begin to worry, and try to take matters into our own hands and bring dishonor to God

And when we have plenty we can forget God and transfer our dependence on him to reliance on our possessions, again bringing him dishonor

Focusing on things and circumstances dethrones God

If you want to be truly content, commit to using what God has given you fully for his glory

Philippians 4:13 is probably one of the most quoted verses in the Bible and it is one of the most misused

Philippians 4:13 has been turned into a kind of incantation or super-power that we whip out whenever we have some difficult task before us

Listen to what pastor and author Joel Osteen had to say about this verse:

Most people tend to magnify their limitations. They focus on their shortcomings. But scripture makes it plain: all things are possible to those who believe. That's right! It is possible to see your dreams fulfilled. It is possible to overcome that obstacle. It is possible to climb to new heights. It is possible to embrace your destiny. You may not know how it will all take place. You may not have a plan, but all you have to know is that if God said you can...you can!

It's too easy to pick on Joel Osteen but what he says there is a prime example of how many people use Philippians 4:13
People like to believe that God has promised them success in every venture that they desire

But to have that view, the verse has to be plucked out of its context where Paul is talking about learning to be content

What Paul is actually saying here is that he can be content in abundance or need because he knows who his supplier is and that he is confident that God will provide him with precisely what he needs to do the work God has for him

We see a miraculous example of this provision in 1Kings 17

In the account we find there, we see the prophet Elijah learn that God was going to send a drought upon the land

And God sent him to a brook where he had water to drink and God sent ravens to bring him food and Elijah had bread and meat in the morning and in the evening along with the water in the brook

Now, that's miracle enough to show God's provision and I suspect Elijah began to learn something about being content and relying on God in those circumstances

But God was just getting started

Because one day God allowed the brook to dry up and God sent Elijah to Zarephath, a city in Sidon where there was a widow God planned to use to feed Elijah and this is where the story really gets good

When Elijah got to Zarephath he met the widow and asked for a drink and something to eat only to learn that she only had a handful of flour and a little oil that she was planning to use for a last meal for her son and herself

Look with me at what Elijah told her [**1Kings 17:13-16**] (page 299)

And Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.'" And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

I don't get the sense that God miraculously filled the flour bin and oil jug for the widow so that she would have seen plenty

I believe that at each mealtime she went and reached all the way down to the bottom of the bin to find just enough flour and that she had to hold the oil jug so enough oil could trickle out to make small cakes for the three of them

But God provided what was needed when it was needed to accomplish his purposes

The source of their food wasn't in the flour bin or the oil jug - it was God and his supply was unending even if it was parceled out one meager meal at a time

And although the widow didn't have a full pantry she had what she needed to do what God had prepared for her to do
Scripture doesn't record whether the widow learned contentment through her situation

It appears she may not have readily done so given her reaction to the death of her son that occurred some time later

But, the final word concerning her was her pronouncement that she recognized the word of God is truth

Conclusion

I would say it's impossible to be truly thankful without also being content

To learn contentment we need to change our focus from our circumstances to God who provides

As we read in **Hebrews 13:5-6**

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." So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"

We will only find true contentment when we move our focus from temporal things to God and determine to do the most we can each day with what we have each day to do what God has given us to do

We may not like our circumstances at any given time - I truly doubt that Paul liked being in prison - but we can still be content knowing that God is in control and that nothing happens to us without God having a reason for it

And maybe his reason will be to test us, to mold us, to shape us, to teach us patience or humility, or to give us compassion and empathy

Maybe God is seeking to eliminate pride, conceit, or complacency from our lives

Perhaps God is preparing us for his use in some way we cannot even fathom

Or maybe he's just putting us where we can't help but move closer to him

We may not readily see the reasons for our circumstances but we know that God means to strengthen us and to make us conform more to the image of his Son

So whether you find yourself in plenty or hunger, in abundance need, put your trust in God who is sovereign and the source of all good things

Use what God has given you, whether a little or a lot, to serve him for his glory

Remember that contentment is not complacency and that God expects you to seek to better your circumstances when bettering your circumstances will better your service

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and don't make your focus personal gain but gain so as to further minister in the kingdom

God has promised to meet your every need so if you ask him he will help you become content in all circumstances

Let's pray

1Timothy 6:6-10 (page 993)

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. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.