



The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment

Series: *Philippians – To Live Is Christ*

Philippians 4:10-13

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We are coming down to the homestretch in our preaching through Paul’s letter to the Philippians and just like any other time that we have come to the end of a sermon series, there is a certain temptation, a certain pressure, to kind of hurry through to the end so that we can put another notch on the belt. But, beloved, we are going to resist that pressure; we’re going to resist that temptation, because some of the richest teaching in this letter is yet to come.

Over these next few weeks we are going to look at three important themes: the secret of true contentment, the blessing and grace of generosity, and the promise of God’s rich provision of all of our needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. This is excellent stuff – really life-changing, soul nourishing truth. And we are going to begin today by looking at a section containing one of the most misused and misapplied verses of Scripture ever written – Philippians 4:13: **“I can do all things through him (through Christ) who strengthens me.”** (Philippians 4:13, ESV)

I have titled the sermon this morning after an old book by the Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs, ***The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment***. And it is an appropriate title, to be sure. Real contentment, real satisfaction, true soul rest – and the manifold blessings that come from it – is one of the most elusive and rarest of the Christian graces, even among those who have been in Christ for the longest. And it’s opposite – discontent – is one of the most pervasive, destructive, and disabling sins among professing believers that there is. It is a seed for all sorts of iniquity and sin. This is a sermon that we all need to hear. All of us. So let’s dig into this text. First, I want us to see the background of Paul’s teaching.

The Background – A Sincere Thank You (10) Look at verse 10 again, **“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.” (Philippians 4:10, ESV)** Paul wants to express sincere thanks to the Philippians for the gifts that they had sent to him while he was under arrest in Rome – the financial support, food, clothing, and also the gift of Epaphroditus’ service and his fellowship – that was such a blessing to his soul.

For about 10 years or so, the Philippian church had been unable to send aid to Paul, unable to send any sort of support to the one who had been used by Christ to establish His church in Philippi. It wasn’t because they didn’t love him or because their love for him had cooled. They simply lacked the opportunity. Previously, they had given to Paul to enable the ministry that God had entrusted to him, even in their poverty, and even beyond their resources for Paul’s relief effort to the church in Judea. They had given to Paul’s personal needs as well. As he says later in this letter: **“Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again.” (Philippians 4:16, ESV)** For whatever reason – maybe they couldn’t find him since Paul moved around a lot, or maybe they just didn’t have the means, or maybe they had no reliable messenger, or simply did not know Paul’s needs – they just had not had the opportunity, but now they did. So, don’t read this the wrong way, as if Paul is saying, “Finally you sent me something. It’s about time.” He’s not saying that at all. He is confident of their love; the opportunity just had not been there. But now, with Paul imprisoned in Rome for the sake of the gospel, their concern and their ability to do something had revived – that’s a word that was used of flowers blooming again, or of trees leafing out in the spring. And Paul was grateful – to them, of course, but even more to God.

He says, **“I rejoiced in the Lord greatly...”** He rejoiced in the Lord greatly, not merely because of the gifts, but because it showed the Philippians heartfelt love for him, their concern for the ministry of the gospel, it spoke well of their own spiritual condition – the genuineness of their faith. So Paul is grateful for their gift, grateful for their love and provision for him, and he wants them to know that he is truly thankful for it, but he does not want to give them the wrong impression. He wants them to know the reality behind the appearance.

The Reality Behind the Appearance (11-12) Ever the teacher, ever the preacher, ever concerned for the spiritual growth and well-being of the flock of God, Paul says to them:

“Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.” (Philippians 4:11, ESV)

Paul wants them to know that while he rejoices in their loving care, that he has not been pining away, longing for them to send him money. He wants them to know that while he is thankful for the gift, his peace of mind, his emotional and spiritual well-being was not at all dependent upon their gifts. If they had not blessed him like this, thought he was thankful, it wouldn't have been the end of the world. He wouldn't have questioned their love; he wouldn't have been bitter or sulked, or felt sorry for himself. On the contrary, He had learned what it means to be content. Even if they had given him nothing, he still would have been contented, because Paul had learned from God to be content in every situation and in every circumstance. And that, beloved, is a rare thing.

This is a very fitting message for us today in a culture and society that knows so little of true contentment. Discontent is rampant in our society. If we aren't discontent with what we have, we are discontent with how we look. If we aren't discontent with who we're married to, it's our lot in life, or where we live, or the experiences that we haven't had. We compare ourselves to others and how easy they seem to have it, or all that they have, or all that they get to do, and we are discontent. Advertisers, in fact, make boatloads of money by selling the message: “Buy this, eat this, wear this, drive this, look like this, have this and you'll be content.” They are selling a fantasy. We are bombarded with the message that to be satisfied we need more things, less wrinkles, better vacations and fewer troubles. The “more is better” mentality teaches us that to be satisfied in life, you need this gadget or this product. Apple, picking up on this, advertises their products as experiences that you just have to have.

This discontentment is reflected in a lot of ways. Our consumer debt in this country is out of control. It shows in the high rate of mobility – in friendships, in church membership – always looking for something bigger and better. It's reflected in our “victimism” and the sense that we “never get a fair shake.” Our obsession with changing our faces and bodies. The “grass is always greener” mentality. Epidemic of complaining and grumbling. Robert Reyrburn says: **“Certainly no one can deny that true contentment is not the fortune of many in our day and time. It is a scarce commodity in the world. Our world is fueled by discontent. It runs the engines of government, economy, and society. Everyone wants more than he has or wants something else than she has. They want to be happier, wealthier, prettier, whatever. Enormous amounts of time, energy and money are devoted to seeking this**

elusive contentment and for its sake sacrifices are made, families are divided, the law is broken, great risks are undertaken, pleasures hotly pursued, even coaches are fired. Long ago the prophet Habakkuk described today's man or woman to a "T." "He is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied." [2:5] But, alas, what is true in the world is too often true in the kingdom of God. There may be more true contentment to be found among Christians – there certainly is – but there is not nearly as much as there ought to be." And he is right. Studies have shown that the level of contentment among professing American Christians is not very much different from the rest of society.

In America, we are healthier, cleaner, more educated, and richer than we have ever been before. We live longer, healthier lives, have more food, more clothing, better houses, work less, play more than at any other time in history... but our souls are not at rest. It is universal. Your gender, race, marital status, your age, your social class, your level of education, your economic status – it just doesn't matter. Every human heart struggles with this to one degree or another.

Paul's words, set a stark contrast to the discontent of our age. ***"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."*** (Philippians 4:11b–12, ESV) Now what does Paul mean by this word, "content"? Let's put some definition to it. It is word that means in ancient Greek, "to live emotionally independent of your circumstances." But there is more to it than that and Scripture has a lot to say about contentment.

Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 6: ***"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."*** (1 Timothy 6:6–8, ESV) To the Corinthians, Paul wrote: ***"For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."*** (2 Corinthians 12:10, ESV) And the writer of Hebrews in chapter 13 says: ***"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.""*** (Hebrews 13:5, ESV) Isaiah says in picturesque terms: ***"Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and***

delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.”
(Isaiah 55:1–3, ESV)

When you look at the biblical testimony regarding contentment, a more full-orbed definition for this rich word begins to emerge. Contentment is an inner sense of rest or of peace, that comes from being right with God through the ministry of Christ, knowing that He is sovereign and good, and that every moment of our lives is being shepherded by God for his glory and for our eternal good. Jeremiah Burroughs, whom I mentioned earlier, defines it in this way. He says: ***“Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.”*** Another way to say it is that contentment is nothing more than “soul-rest.” It is sense of satisfaction, peace, assurance, and sense of well-being in the soul in all circumstances. It is the very opposite of striving, of coveting what others have and are and experience, and of restlessness in our souls. It is satisfaction in God in Christ.

Now think about this as it regards Paul. His was a life that was subject to wild swings of circumstances, wasn’t it. He knew what it was, as he said, to have plenty, to have abundance. There were times in his life and in his ministry that were marked with great spiritual harvest, with success, when he was kissed and hugged and highly esteemed, when he was well-loved and when he enjoyed the blessings of excellent fellowship, feasting for instance at the home of Lydia in Philippi. He knew the blessing of health, of freedom to evangelize, of a congregation hungry for the truth. But he also knew what it was to experience hunger and need, to be beaten, bruised and battered, to see very little obvious spiritual fruit, to be deprived of fellowship, to be jailed and shipwrecked, to see others preferred before him, to be wracked with illness, to be persecuted and hated and falsely accused for Christ. He had experienced it all and through it all, he had learned the peace of true contentment.

Now, don’t misunderstand what Paul is saying. There are some things about which we should never learn to be content. We should never be content with seeing people dying and going to hell and never hearing the gospel. We should never be content with real needs around us that we can meet in real ways. We should never be content with remaining sin in our lives or with our spiritual growth in Christ. Paul wasn’t. We should never be content with leaving the gifts God has given to us unused for His kingdoms sake. It was Paul who wrote:

“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. 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.” (Philippians 3:8–14, ESV) Paul was never spiritually lethargic at all. But as it concerned his personal “fortunes in this world,” you might say, Paul was content, at peace, at rest in His soul.

Paul’s contentment, his soul-rest, was founded on truth about God and about Paul’s own identity in Christ, the substance of which you can find throughout this letter. He learned to be content by thinking like this: “Circumstances change, that’s life. I cannot be dependent for contentment on my circumstances and I never can be. What matters is what really matters and what really matters first and foremost is my soul, my life with and relationship to God. That is the first thing and, ultimately, that is the only thing, my salvation. In Christ I have found peace with God, the forgiveness of my sins, eternal life and an unchanging and invulnerable place as a child of God. God is now my heavenly Father, not my condemning judge, and He loves me with an everlasting love. Nothing happens to me apart from his will. His will and His way with me may be a mystery. I may not understand everything, but this I know – that whatever he wills for me is for my ultimate good. Everything in my life is a manifestation of God’s love for me and goodness to me whether I see it or not. God is, in any case, after a greater Christ-likeness in me. The good and the bad, the plenty and the hunger, the abundance and want, are necessary to make me holy, to deepen my faith, to soften my heart, to make me less enamored of this world, to make me more useful in the Kingdom of God and they are all worth it. Whatever my conditions may be at this moment, they are only temporary. If they are great, and I am enjoying a great period of happiness and prosperity, I am soon to die and be in heaven and no matter how much prosperity a person has in this world, it is abject poverty compared to heaven. And if I am in want, and I am not in prosperity at this particular moment, very soon my wants will be made up beyond my wildest dreams. Nothing in this world can rob me of the joy and the glory that await me because Christ has gone ahead to prepare a place for me.” (paraphrase of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression*) “I will be content in Christ.”

That is a simple and unassailable argument. When Jesus Christ is the defining principle of your life, when he – the conqueror of sin and death, the Great Redeemer to whom is given all power and authority in heaven in earth – is the object of your faith, your hope, and your highest love, then the true contentment of which Paul speaks can be ours in Christ. But only in Him.

The truth is that the answers for discontentment in our age are superficial at best. They simply don't address the real issue, the heart issue. The world typically teaches us that the way to achieve contentment is by going out there and getting what you want. Get out of your bad situation and what is personally unfulfilling and get that thing that makes you happy. It's tempting to think that the right circumstances would make us content, if everything just fell into place, it would all be better. We have all fallen into that trap. Maybe you are there even now. Answer this question for me. "I would be fully and completely satisfied if (fill in the blank). What would your answer be? Be honest now, truly and brutally honest, what would it be? If the answer is anything other than, "I am fully satisfied in Christ," you will never find contentment and do you know why? The dot will always move. Always.

There is also the worldly "simple living" mentality which says satisfaction comes by getting rid of all your stuff and living with less. But Paul says that he has learned to be content in both plenty and hunger, in abundance and need. Getting rid of everything is not the answer. A simple lifestyle, though perhaps there is much to commend it, is not the guarantee of a contented heart. Only Christ is. Paul learned that secret.

The Secret is Christ (13) Paul says in verse 13: **"I can do all things through him who strengthens me."** (Philippians 4:13, ESV) Here is proof positive why you never take a verse out of context and just run with it. This verse has nothing to do with scoring touchdowns, getting A's on tests you didn't study for, or being able to fly, climb Mt Everest, or write a best-selling book. It has everything to do with real soul satisfaction and contentment. Paul can be content in all things, in every situation, in every providence of God, in every moment of life through, actually literally "in" Christ who gives him strength.

Paul found his contentment in Christ, in his union to Christ, in his life in Christ, in his living and growing relationship with the living, all-sufficient, all-powerful, loving Christ. He found contentment, not because he aimed at being contented, but because His focus was: “Give me Christ. I only need Christ. My world is totally in, totally defined by, totally devoted to, totally in love with, totally centered in, on and around Christ now, forever, and always.” Paul made it his life ambition to know Him more and more. His contentment was the by-product of that kind of living, do you see it? The only people who are truly content are those whose ultimate aim in life is something bigger than mere personal contentment. They seek to know Christ and have Christ and please Christ and when they do, they experience real contentment, genuine soul-rest, true satisfaction.

But this is not simply a good idea; we **must** find our contentment in Christ and that becomes so very clear when we realize what a powerful and destructive opponent discontent really is. Beloved, we have got to see that discontentment is a serious, debilitating and soul-crushing sin. It is a world of iniquity. It first raised its wicked head in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve had everything they ever could have wanted, but they weren’t content. Satan came as a serpent into the Garden and turned their attention away from all that God had richly blessed them with to the one tree that was forbidden them, they listened and distrust of God and discontent began to blossom in their hearts and they plunged humanity into sin. Discontentment leads to rebellion; it gives birth to all manner of sin.

Think about it: I am discontent with who I am, therefore I lie. I am discontent with what I have, therefore I steal or buy. I am discontent with my marriage, therefore I am unfaithful in my heart and in my body. I am discontent with what I have left over, therefore I do not tithe. I am discontent with my friends, therefore I am unloving or mistrusting. I am discontent with my lot, therefore I covet. I am discontent with God’s provision, therefore I complain. I am discontent with my place, therefore I exalt myself. I am discontent with my God’s commands, therefore I disobey. I am discontent to serve, therefore I demand to be served or do nothing. I am discontent with Christ, therefore I seek other idols and give myself to worthless things. I am discontent with God’s grace, therefore I am angry. I am discontent with God, therefore I do not worship with my heart. The list goes on and on. Discontentment is a hellish sin and one of the chief tools of Satan to destroy a Christian and to nullify the appeal of the gospel.

But, beloved, when I am content in Christ, I can love God with all my heart, and my neighbor as myself – not perfectly but with the sincerity of a new man in Christ. I can forgive those who sin against me. I can bear all things, endure all things, believe all things and hope all things. I can love my wife as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her. I can esteem other Christians better people than I am. I can rejoice with those who rejoice without getting jealous and I can weep with those who weep. I can pray without ceasing. I can become strong in the Scriptures. I can present my body a living sacrifice to God. I can serve others with joy, gladly pouring myself out. I can give a reason for the hope that is in me to anyone who asks me. I can die daily to sin and live to Jesus Christ. I can run the race gladly and hard to the end, and finish the course. Content in Christ, I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

The only way that you or I can oppose and defeat the powerful influences of discontent is to be completely satisfied in Christ. That's it. There is no substitute. Paul was completely satisfied in all that Christ was and did for him. But like Paul did, we have to learn it.

Learning to Be Content in Christ

How must we learn to grow in true contentment in Christ? I know I said earlier that the way to contentment is not merely seeking contentment, but that it is the by-product of other things. What are those other things? Let me just share a few of them, gleaned from the life of Paul, with you.

1) You can only know contentment when you come to a place in your life where you understand that God is sovereign and is ordering everything for His own holy purposes, and is working all things according to the perfect counsel of His will, and is making all things work together for eternal good in your life because He loves you with an everlasting love. Until you understand, believe and accept this as true, you will always be discontent because you will take on the responsibility of organizing and ordering your own life, thinking you are wiser than God, because deep down you do not trust God's hand or His heart.

We can have contentment in the good and bad, the easy and hard, the enjoyable and painful

times of life because we trust the one who guides the circumstances in our life. It is easier to preach that and to hear that than it is to believe and practice that, but we have to be convinced that Jesus Christ is in charge of today and every single day of our lives. The Savior who loves us has written my history and yours. He is the author and the finisher of our faith.

2) You can only know contentment when you have your expectations corrected by biblical reality. CS Lewis said: ***“If you think of this world as a place intended simply for your happiness, you find it quite intolerable. Think of it as a place of training and correction and it’s not so bad.”*** To be content, our expectations need to be in line with biblical reality and the basic reality is that this is a fallen world. People get sick here. People get hurt here. People die here. Relationships fall apart. Christians are persecuted here. Life is not easy here. We aren’t exempt. We shouldn’t be surprised because Jesus told us it would be like this. He told us we would face trouble, and we wouldn’t always have everything we want. But Jesus also told us that this fallen world is a temporary world. This is just the training ground. This is where we make ourselves ready for the real world to come by receiving Jesus as Savior and learning to follow Him as Lord, as we await the world to come when He returns in glory and reverses the curse once and for all.

And beloved, we need to recognize that we have been afflicted with an entitlement mentality. We naturally believe that God is our debtor, that He owes us. But beloved, I have said this before, the only things to which we are entitled are hell and death and anything short of that is grace. It’s true that in God’s wisdom he has made some rich and some poor and some one or the other at different times. He made some handsome and beautiful and others not as much. He has made some intelligent and others less so, some confident and some shy, some capable and some less gifted. Some have an easier road and others an uphill climb. Whatever He does He does it all out of love, with sovereign wisdom and with our ultimate good and welfare in view.

And, here’s the thing: no matter the circumstances of our lives, we know that we are getting better than we deserve. We deserve eternal punishment but are given eternal life in Christ. We deserve to be cast from God's presence but we are declared to be part of His family. We deserve to die in our sins but we have been forgiven. We deserve judgment but we have received grace. Do you understand what a treasure this is? There is nothing – nothing – that compares in value to what we have been given by God's grace. We are the most blessed of people because of His mercy. Contentment begins to grow when we realize

that our greatest treasure is our relationship with and the salvation that we have in Jesus Christ our Lord. If you have Christ, what else do you need?

3) You can only find contentment by investing your life in the right place – Christ and His Kingdom. The aim of our lives is something far greater than mere contentment. The aim of our lives is know Christ more and more, to become more like Him, to enjoy and be satisfied in Him. What we have to do is go to Christ, spend our lives with Christ, meditate on Christ, and invest our lives in His work, His purposes, His kingdom. When we invest our souls in any other place, when our focus is supremely or the majority of our time on something other than Christ, we will always get diminishing returns.

Only a life supremely focused in Christ can bring contentment to our souls, can satisfy the human soul, because the human soul is an eternal soul. What we ultimately crave is the eternal. What you crave cannot be satisfied by any human circumstance or human relationship or possession or earthly experience. It can't, because you are an eternal being, created to live for all time -- and beyond -- with God. Contented people are people who have learned this. They seek Christ and things and endeavors and undertakings and activities of eternal significance or that can be turned to eternal purposes because they know that as eternal beings only that will satisfy.

And if you are a Christian, if you are united to Christ by faith, if you are a follower of Christ and a child of God, your name is forever written unchangeably on His heart. And to know that and to believe that is contentment of the truest, the highest, the deepest, and the most imperishable kind.

And if you are not yet a Christian, do not wait another day. Whether you know it or not, your soul has been made to crave the Living God and the contentment, the soul rest, that He offers. There is only one place where true soul rest can be found and all the all the years of human history have proven this true over and over again – only one place, only one person -- Jesus Christ, Savior and Lord.

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