

## *How to Be Content in Life • Philippians 4:11-13*

The ancient Greek philosophers called Stoics said that the highest aim of human life is contentment. Yet, after thousands of years of that quest, it seems that contentment is still a commodity in relatively short supply. We see few people who are really content with their jobs or their bodies or their marriages or their finances or their friends or their religion.

Contentment is having our desires limited to what we have. But it seems to be a never-ending chase. Our desire was to earn \$25,000 a year, but when we reached that the desire has changed to \$50,000. We desired to get a new job but found a few months later that the desire changed to having a better job.

Discontentment is probably the number one robber of happiness in life. We never seem to quite be able to match our desires with our circumstances. If only we could! If only some day would come when we either have what we want or want what we have, then we would be happy.

Actually, it is possible! The good news is that God invites us to contented living. That invitation is found in Philippians 4:10-23. Three great principles from these verses point the way to genuine contentment in life.

The first is that contentment is learned. In Philippians 4:11 the apostle Paul writes, "I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." But learning takes time. There are seldom any shortcuts. It takes time to learn a language, time to become a surgeon, time to build a strong marriage, time to learn contentment.

Sometimes we foolishly think that a quick and easy prayer will instantly quiet all the stirring inside us. Seldom does it work that way. Usually we must learn over many experiences and often over many years.

There was a man named Saul in the year 36 AD who was not a Christian. He was a young zealous Jew who stood and held the coats of those who martyred the Christian leader Stephen. He was anything but content. His life was a boiling cauldron of emotions and zeal. Eventually it

boiled over until he persecuted Christians everywhere he went, imprisoning them and even killing them.

Now, in the year 60 AD, he is in externally far worse circumstances. He is no longer called Saul the persecutor of Christians; he is now Paul the apostle and founder of the church in Europe. And he is now imprisoned in Rome, awaiting the outcome of his appeal for Caesar to save his life from the executioner's sword. It took him over 20 years to learn contentment before he could write Philippians 4:11.

What about you? Have you been looking for the quick fix? Or are you willing to allow God to do the job right and take the time to teach you to be content?

It takes time and it takes difficulty. Paul had many days in the classroom of difficulty and failure. He said and did some stupid things, as we all do. He made some bad mistakes. He went through serious illness. He was run out of town on several occasions. He was beaten, imprisoned, shipwrecked and misunderstood. He knew poverty and hunger, disappointment and distress.

But Paul learned an invaluable lesson through all those difficulties. He learned contentment! You see, every difficulty in life is a lesson time from God. It is your grand opportunity to learn to be content even if things go wrong.

Paul also spent his share of days in the classroom of delight and success. He received the best education possible in his generation. He traveled

the empire. He conversed with kings and governors, the rich and powerful, the brilliant and influential. He performed miracles. He listened as thousands shouted his praises. He was God's leader in bringing

the gospel to Europe and in writing much of the New Testament. Paul also learned a great lesson from the classroom of delight and success. He learned contentment.

To many people, success is far more dangerous than failure! They become proud and arrogant and greedy. They feel that they deserve the

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best, that anything less than what they already have is beneath them. They become the least content of all people.

You see, every delight in your life is also a lesson time from God. It is a very different kind of opportunity to be content even if things go great.

In the center of our church property in Eden Prairie is a stand of beautiful oak trees. They must be at least 50 years old. Did you know that most of the 400 species of oak trees grow in the middle latitude climates? The severe weather of the Arctic would kill a sapling long before it reached maturity. But, the warm, wet conditions of the tropics aren't any better for growing oak trees. Oak trees need the combination of winter's cold and summer's warmth, of the falling leaves of autumn and the budding leaves of spring. It is the difficulties and the delights of many seasons and many years that make for a mighty oak that can stand solid in a storm that takes out almost every other tree in the forest. There's no hurrying an oak tree. In fact, not much effect comes in the first 10 years of an oak's life. It takes time.

And, it takes time to learn contentment! Contentment doesn't come in a day or in hours. It isn't learned in one moment of happiness or in a single great disappointment. Contentment for Paul and contentment for us is learned over a lifetime in the Christ-taught schoolhouse of difficulties and delights.

The second principle from this part of the Bible is found in Philippians 4:12. It is the great principle that contentment is independent of circumstances. Here Paul says,

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

Epicetetus was an ancient Stoic philosopher. He characterized something that is frequently the attitude of our kind of hard-nosed society, and that is a care-less attitude. Let's look at what

Epicetetus wrote:

Begin with a cup or a household utensil; if it breaks, say, "I don't care." Go on to a horse or a pet dog; if anything happens to it, say "I don't care." Go on to yourself, and if you are hurt or injured in

any way, say, "I don't care." If you go on long enough, you will come to a stage when you can watch your nearest and dearest suffer and die, and say, "I don't care."

This couldn't be farther from what Paul is saying! This Stoic attitude is a denial of life's pains and pleasures, not an independence from their tyranny. What Paul is saying is that there is a higher priority than circumstances.

I play racquetball. Often I lose; sometimes I win. It would be dishonest to say, "I don't care!" I much prefer to win. However, winning or losing is not why I play the game. I play for fellowship and exercise. I can get both whether I win or lose.

Paul is saying that he doesn't live to eat or drink or to be comfortable or to have people like him or dislike him. He lives for Jesus Christ. Now, I'm sure he preferred to be full and comfortable and have money. But either way he could be content because circumstances weren't his reason for living.

I remember the first time Charleen and I went to Hawaii for a vacation. Part of the time we were there I was miserably sick with a cold. Part of the time I felt pretty good. Some days were bright and sunshiney; others were wet and dreary. Some things went great and some things were crummy. But the good things didn't make the vacation any more than the bad things ruined the vacation. My purpose was to be with Charleen. I've learned to thoroughly enjoy being with her whether I'm sick or well, whether the weather is bright or rainy. My contentment is based on my relationship with the woman I love, not on the circumstances.

Even more so with Jesus Christ! Our contentment in life is based on our love for him and our relationship together. We can be content with Jesus if it rains or shines, employed or unemployed, living in New York or Los Angeles, single or married, rich or poor, sick or well.

When Jesus Christ is Lord of life we can say with Paul:

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

In other words, “I have learned the principle that contentment is independent of circumstances!”

The third principle is that contentment is dependent on God. Actually, there are three aspects of this principle that Paul outlines in Philippians 4:13-23. The first is that God gives strength. Here’s how it works.

When we face bad circumstances that might discourage us or good circumstances that might make us proud, God gives us the strength to live for Jesus Christ and to be content either way. Frankly, this is often learned by trial and error. We try doing things in our own strength and fail. We try doing things in Christ’s strength and succeed. After awhile we start to get the picture and depend increasingly on him.

Let me give a comparison. When I was a boy, the school nurse sent me to an ophthalmologist who said that I needed glasses. The teachers knew I wasn’t able to see right, the nurse and the doctor knew that as well. But I thought my vision was strong enough, so I didn’t wear the glasses. Not until I got a driver’s license did I wear corrective lenses regularly. Then I found I could do things that I couldn’t do before. I could read longer, and I could do it without getting headaches. I discovered that, through the strength of corrective lenses, I could see things I couldn’t see before.

It’s the same in our Christian lives. As new, immature Christians we’re often too proud to depend on God. We can do things by ourselves - - - no matter what anyone tells us! Then we face some failure, some difficulty, where we find we can’t do it. God puts on the corrective lenses of the strength of Jesus Christ and we can see and do the things that until now have been impossible. Then we begin to depend on him all the time until we say, “I can do everything through him who gives me strength.” The principle is that contentment is dependent upon God. The ingredient is that God is the one who gives strength.

A second ingredient of this principle is that God supplies needs. Paul has learned from experience that God meets his every need. This whole

last section of Philippians is occasioned by the money gift the Philippians sent to Paul. There is no doubt that he needed the money. He was broke and in jail. Philippians 4:15 says that not one other church sent any help. That had to be a disappointment to challenge even Paul’s contentment!

But according to verse 17, the greatest benefit was not to Paul but to the Philippians: “Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account.” This is a giving

lesson some Christians don’t understand! When we give to the Lord, the greatest beneficiary isn’t the person or the project or the church getting the money. It is the giver! That’s what the Bible says! So, when we fail to give, we hurt ourselves the most!

Out of Paul’s many years of first-hand experience in God’s care, he writes Philippians 4:19: “And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.”

Lots of misunderstanding has been laid on this famous verse. For example, what would you say are the most important words in the verse? Not, “supply every need”. It’s, “my God,” because that is the basis for the provision of the needs. “My God” is the one who delivered the children of Israel out of Egypt. “My God” is the one who split the Red Sea open so it became dry land in the middle. “My God” is the one who fed the five thousand on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. “My God” is the one who made the lame walk and the blind see. “My God” is the one who defeated death and actually came back to life. “My God” is the one who has provided me with money and encouragement. “My God” is the one who saw me through shipwreck. “My God” is the one who enables me to sing while in prison and have contentment in every circumstance. “My God” will supply every need according to his riches in Christ Jesus.

There is also some misunderstanding about our needs! We sometimes confuse our needs with our wants. We also tend to list our needs as more money, greater ease and good living. But sometimes we need a good, swift kick. Sometimes we

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need to fall on our faces in order to shape up spiritually. Sometimes we need some pain in our lives to wake us up and turn us around.

God supplies ALL our needs! And it is out of this promise that our contentment in life grows! And, according to verse 20, God gets the glory. Actually, that's the real secret of contentment that Paul alluded to in verse 12.

“To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever.” You see, at the root of malcontent is the desire to give ourselves the glory, to make ourselves look good. That's what makes us say and do so many of the bad things in our lives. The secret to contentment is to not live for ourselves but to live wholly for God and his glory forever. Then everything else falls into place!

When God's glory is our highest goal and when we're totally dependent on him, contentment becomes the mark of our lives!

Have these final verses of Philippians meant as much to you as they have to me? Would you agree that contentment is in rather short supply in your life? Has life been an internal turmoil lately for you? Are you always upset with everybody and everything? Are you feverishly trying to change things, fight the flow and manipulate people? Do you find that no matter what happens, it's never good enough? Are you uptight about life?

Then these words really are for you! Right now, today, God invites you to make a switch to contented living! No, it won't happen instantly. It will be a process that takes time. But, today is the day to begin!

Begin by making your contentment independent of circumstances and dependent on God. Here's the deal:

God will give you the strength.  
God will supply your every need.  
You give God the glory.

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