

The Secret of Being Content

Philippians 4:10-13

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The Apostle Paul wrote:

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. (Philippians 4:12, NIV)

When Paul wrote those words, he wasn't bragging. It wasn't, "I have learned the secret of contentment and you haven't! Ha-ha!" Paul testified of a positive change in his life. He understood contentment is elusive. Our nation's Declaration of Independence says:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Our nation's founders realized that happiness or contentment is something we pursue. We are not naturally content or happy. Wait a couple hours and your stomach will growl. Lie in one place and you'll get sore. Stand too long and you'll get tired. Contentment requires effort.

When I prepared this message, I searched for clipart on *contentment* in Microsoft Word (show baby picture). I got this picture of a sleeping baby. The baby looks content. It is obvious that the baby is warm, clean, full of food and asleep. Do you suppose the secret of contentment is being warm, clean, full of food and asleep (show sleeping girl)? As long as you are asleep, you are oblivious to problems and responsibilities. However, some people have nightmares and everybody wakes up (show irritated cartoon lady). Oops, how did that get in here? This lady is not content. Something's coloring her mood (show massage). Now, that is more like it. The secret of being content is a good massage... until you have to think about grocery shopping, preparing supper, cleaning up or paying the bill.

The problem with all these pictures of contentment is that they depend upon circumstances. They depend upon things external to you, things beyond your control (show cartoon with umbrella). Life can rain on your parade. If your happiness and contentment depend upon circumstance or achievement, then you'll be a hostage of the cloudbursts of life. Our nation's founding document says that you have the right to pursue circumstances favorable to your happiness or contentment, but it doesn't guarantee that you will arrive at those circumstances or that even the best of circumstances will bring you that happiness.

Thankfully, Paul didn't just discover the secret. He wrote about it. He testified that his contentment did not depend upon the shape of his pocketbook. He had learned the secret of contentment when he had plenty and when he was in want, when he was fed and when he was hungry. Nothing could rain on Paul's happiness. Nothing could rob him of contentment. The cares this life could not invade his sleep or darken his mood.

Did you know that King Solomon in all his wisdom tried to unearth the answer and learn the secret of contentment? He said:

I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly — my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives. I undertook great projects... I amassed silver and gold... and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem... I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 2:3, 4, 8, 10-11, NIV)

All of Solomon's activity was futile. He was chasing of the wind. He added no lasting thing to God's creation and experienced fleeting happiness. In contrast and without Solomon's enormous intellect, Paul learned the secret of happiness, the hidden key to contentment. From

his teaching in Philippians we learn the focus of his thinking, affections and actions. We witness what he thinks, what he does and how he feels.

Number one: Paul embraced Christ as the supreme gift. He writes:

I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.
(Philippians 1:20-21, NIV)

Christ was so precious and important to Paul because Christ Jesus restored Paul to an eternal child of God. Repeat after me: *“Thank you, Jesus, for restoring me to an eternal child of God.”* Jesus gave Paul the Spirit of *sonship*. Paul now connected with God as Father. The Spirit of the Father was leading Paul into Jesus’ business. When you confessed faith in Jesus, did you experience the Spirit of *sonship* filling your heart with the peace of being God’s beloved child? James the brother of Jesus wrote:

The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. (James 1:9-10, NIV)

What does he mean about high and low position? We’re not head lamps or gear shifts on a car. Your high position: you are a child of the Creator who owns it all, and you are God’s heir. You’re getting a big inheritance. Don’t worry about your life now. Your low position: you are on a temp assignment now. No money, no achievement, not even your body, belongs to you. You are a steward for God of everything including your time.

This week I overheard this saying: lesson one, *don’t sweat the small stuff*; lesson two: *everything is small stuff*. That is mostly right! For Paul, in Philippians being “earthly minded” is sweating the small stuff. Paul called believers to follow his example because our citizenship is in heaven. Paul joyfully wrote those very words from a disgusting prison.

Number two: Paul celebrated continuously. Imagine this great flood from heaven washing the toxins away and bring life-giving water to a desert-world. Paul saw his life as a part of this redeeming flood of God's love that is renewing the world. He was reborn in this flood of grace and now is part of its renewing work. He saw reason for joy in every situation. Therefore, he called people to rejoice always, celebrate at all times, give thanks unceasingly. We sing his words: *Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice.*" Paul commanded:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7, NIV)

When you are tempted by worry, fear, or anger, talk about it with your heavenly Father remembering to give thanks that you have great stature as God's child and are part of unfolding salvation.

Number three: Paul took charge of his thoughts. He commands:

Whatever is true... noble... right... pure... lovely... admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things. (Philippians 4:8, NIV)

Are you comparing yourself to others? Are you demanding people agree with you? Will you be miserable until your goals are met? Will you be discontent until you reach the Promised Land? You are in charge of your thoughts and the moods that come from them.

I am embarrassed by things I told my supervisor as a young pastor. I had certain goals; and if I did not meet them, I was moving on. I was not a picture of God's love. I suffered a deep discontent because I had to meet those goals, and I ran over some people in my determination to fulfill them. I forgot that I was a child of God who was being formed on the journey.

Brothers and sisters, I've got problems, issues and disappointments. I want to be more fruitful and a greater blessing. I've got some work to do to be a blessing in some situations.

Nevertheless, how can I be anything but grateful! I'm a growing, maturing child of God that is part of God's flood of redemption renewing this world. I've got to give thanks. It is the only attitude and action that is truly appropriate

Contentment is not a state or trance. It is a way of life. We all face challenging moments. Jesus who suffered horrible moments at the time of his arrest and crucifixion, but he chose faith and obedience, and in peace he released his soul to his Father. That is the happiness of a mega-conqueror, and that is the contentment you can claim as a child of God.