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Experiencing Joy: A Study in Philippians

The Secret to Contentment

Philippians 4:10-23

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We live in a culture of discontentment. We're discontent with how we look. We're discontent with where we work. We're discontent with where we live. We're discontent with what we drive. We're just a discontented people.

The marketeers come after us and constantly bombard us with messages that say we should be discontented. They tell us our lives would be better if we drove a different car...or if we smelled differently... or if we had whiter teeth. I was driving somewhere the other day, and the advertiser on the radio began his advertisement by saying, "Admit it. You don't feel like a man anymore." That was followed by the line, "You're losing your hair." I changed the channel!

The reality is, discontentment is a thief. It steals our joy. It steals our peace. It steals our happiness. It steals the appreciation of the moment in order to pursue what ultimately will not satisfy.

If I were to give you this sentence, "I would be happy if..." most of us could fill in the blank, just like that. We have this belief that there's something out there, that if you had it and you experienced it, you would be happy. To think about being content in the circumstances you find yourself right now would be a very difficult thing for some of you. As a matter of fact, you may be thinking, *No way*.

And yet Paul, sitting in a prison cell with guards chained to his hands and feet, awaiting the possible execution at any moment, writes: "I am content." What is this secret to contentment?

We will look at Philippians chapter 4 and see what we can learn. We are concluding our study in Philippians, as far as the text; and next week we will do a review of what we've learned. Paul has just been talking to us about the importance of a disciplined mind and thinking about what we dwell on. Day in and day out, what do we dwell on? Do we dwell on that which is right and that which is noble and that which is pure? He says that you have to have a disciplined mind—to dwell on the right things—if you're going to experience peace and joy. And the same is true today. If you're going to experience contentment, you have to have a disciplined mind and you have to dwell on the right things. So it flows into this discussion in chapter 4.

The church in Philippi sent Paul a gift of money as an expression of their love and concern for him and as an expression of their commitment to the Kingdom. Paul is responding to that, and it's in that context that he discusses contentment.

Verse 10: "But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity." Notice again his opening line of this section: "I *rejoiced* in the Lord." This whole letter has been about joy. In the midst of very difficult circumstances, Paul has continued to experience joy. But again the phrase "in the Lord" is not just a cliché. It represents this huge body of truth and theology that is the basis of his joy.

Just think about what we've learned in Philippians: about who God is, who we are, what we're becoming, and all that's involved in that. It's this magnificent theology that's all encapsulated in the phrase "in the Lord." That truth is the basis of these continual statements of joy.

Paul is talking about the fact that these people in Philippi have wanted to express their love to Paul in this gift many times. He says, "But you lacked opportunity." We don't know whether that means they simply didn't have the resources, or whether that means they had no way to get the gift to Paul. Remember, in that culture, trying to get a gift to someone was difficult. They couldn't just FedEx it; it meant somebody had to take it. And it would have been at risk to their very lives to get it to where Paul was. I think this is including not only his time in prison, but also since he's left them—that whole journey—and trying to get to him and express this love gift. So whatever the reason, Paul knows they've lacked the opportunity. They finally had the opportunity when Epaphroditus delivered the gift, and Paul is responding to that.

When he says "you have revived your concern" that word "revived" is a Greek word taken from the world of horticulture. It was used to describe a flower that would bloom repeatedly. It would bloom, and then it would rebloom...and then it would rebloom. Paul is saying, "That's how your concern has been for me." This wasn't something that just passed through them one day and they said, "Let's do this." But it was a continual expression of their concern and love for him. They wanted to let Paul know they cared, and that they were committed to the building of the Kingdom.

The believers in Philippi were thinking about Paul and his afflictions and his struggle, and they wanted to do something to minister to him, to serve him. But in times like that, it's hard to know what to do. They took up an offering and they sent that as an expression of their love. When people are suffering and going through hard times, it's really hard to know what to do. As a matter of fact, sometimes we just pull away because we don't know what to do. I think we make the mistake of thinking we're supposed to say something magical that will make it all go away. That doesn't exist. Often what people need in those times is very practical—they just need some practical help. Sometimes they need help paying the bills. Sometimes they need someone to pick up their children at school. Sometimes they just need someone to help with the cooking or the cleaning. It's the practical things that people need, but it's more than just doing the deed. It expresses a heart that says, "We're thinking about you; we care about you."

You might be interested to know that here at the church we have a fund called the Benevolent Fund. It doesn't take money out of the General Fund, but rather it's money that people donate to that specific fund to help people who have a need. Sometimes the most spiritual thing we, as a church, can do for somebody is to help them—to help them pay their bills. It's an expression of, "Hey, we love you. We care about you and we just want you to know that." The last couple of years there has been a lot of need and that fund tends to fluctuate between red and black. Some of you may want to think about, every so often, together as a family or as a single, making a contribution to that fund as your way of saying, "We care about you and we love you," when somebody has a need. All you have to do is mark your gift "Benevolent Fund" and it will make it there. That's something which goes out to someone pretty much weekly from here, as an expression of concern and care. And that's the same thing that was happening from Philippi to Paul.

But Paul is also trying to balance this idea that he wasn't sitting in this Roman prison lacking anything. He doesn't want them to think that he's been suffering until they sent this gift. So he's trying to balance "Yes, I really appreciate this gift" with "I am content." And that's where he goes in verse 11: "Not that I speak from want [*lack*]; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am."

We've talked a lot about the fact that as citizens of heaven, there is a supernatural dimension to our lives that ought to cause us to live life at a different level. So there is this difference between those who are natural versus those who are supernatural. It isn't natural to be content. As a matter of fact, it's *natural* to be *discontent*. But in these circumstances that Paul finds himself, which are very difficult, he says, "I have had to *learn* how to be content." It doesn't come naturally. But it's the dimension that Christ brings to his life. That Greek word for "learned" is a word that means to learn by experience. He's had to learn in the ups and downs of life how to be content.

Now this word "content" is a very interesting word. This is the only place in the New Testament where this word shows up. It was a word most commonly used by the Stoics, who were Greek philosophers. The Stoics really believed in the importance of mental discipline—of what your mind dwells on. They believed it was very important to focus your energies into that which you can control and you can change—not into those things you can't control and change. The Stoics believed in self-sufficiency. They believed that everything we need is in our head, and so they disciplined themselves to think that way. The Stoics believed that they were captains of their own ship—that they were masters of their own fate. This word comes out of that idea, and Paul is taking a part of that as a way of saying that what you need to be content, to be happy, isn't "out there." He is saying what you need to be content isn't among things you can't change or control. What you need to be content is inside your head, and we need to discipline our minds to believe that. Paul is going to define that further in just a minute, so let's go on.

Verse 12: "I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need." Paul says he's "learned the secret." It's an interesting word, and this is a different word for "learned" than in verse 11. As a matter of fact, "learned the secret" is one Greek word. It was a word that was pulled out of the mystery religions of Paul's day. The word literally means "to be initiated." It meant when somebody entered into one of these mystery religions or cults, that they as members had to learn the initiation. They had to learn what it was that initiated them into this religion. Paul is pulling that word out and saying that he is starting his own club and it's the Contentment Club. He's saying, "I have learned the password; I've learned the secret." He says he has learned the password, or the secret, that allows him to join the Contentment Club.

What is that secret? We're going to find out in just a minute. But before I go there, I think it's worth noting in verse 12, that Paul says he's had to learn this as it relates to both prosperity and to humble means (both being full and being hungry). Sometimes we think of discontentment as flowing out of a lack, and we think if we prosper we wouldn't be discontent. But that's not true. One of the great lessons is that we have to learn to be content in prosperity. In fact, I think sometimes prosperity breeds more discontent than humble means. We just have this insatiable appetite that doesn't seem to be satisfied. We have this... but we want that. We have this model...but we want a better model. We have this

house...we want that house. We drive this car...we want that car. It just never ends. Prosperity can often breed this discontentment.

Even buying a new car can breed discontentment. We buy a new car, but then all of a sudden we worry about where we're going to park in the parking lot—that somebody's going to put a dent in it...or somebody's going to scratch it...or there's going to be a hailstorm today...or we've got to wash it every week. Then it starts to break down and we begin to realize that, not only is our \$20,000 gone, but now the car is falling apart. It just breeds this ongoing discontentment that never seems to quite go away.

So Paul says he has had to learn to be content in prosperity, as well as in humble means. But what is the secret? Well, it's verse 13: "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."

As we talked before about the Stoics, this word for "content" is a word that literally means to be self-sufficient. The Stoics believed that within them was everything they needed for life. Paul is redefining by saying that in a sense, yes, it is true. Within us is everything that we need, but it is not a self-sufficiency; it is a *Christ*-sufficiency. So he's taking that Stoic belief and he's adding the reality of Christ and saying that what you need to be content, or happy, is not "out there." It's not out there among things you can't change or control. What you need to be content is inside your head; and it is your sufficiency *in Christ*. That is the secret to contentment. It's focusing your mind on what you can control and what you can change, and that has to do with who you are in Christ.

What Paul is *not* saying is that we can do *everything*. I can't fly. I can't go leap tall buildings in a single bound. What he is saying is that I can—I am sufficient—to do everything that God has called me to do today. He's saying that I can do everything that God has called me to do through Christ who strengthens me. Therefore, I have no reason to be discontent. There isn't anything out there that I need, that I don't have, in order to be faithful to obey what God has called me to do today. So I'm content. I'm okay with that.

The problem is, sometimes when we hear that, what we hear is, "Okay, if that's true, then I don't need anybody else. It's just Christ and me." But that isn't really true. There's a strong teaching throughout the New Testament of what we call biblical community. It means we need each other, and that's exactly where he goes in the next verse.

"Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction" (v14). Paul is trying to balance this idea that he was content because he knew God would take of him. But he still wants to say, "I was greatly appreciative of what you did for me, and how that encouraged me—how that caused me to rejoice." We need to understand that oftentimes God uses the community of faith to be what helps strengthen us, especially in those times of affliction. It's true—I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me, but sometimes *how* He strengthens me is that He uses the community of faith to do that. In other words, our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ are a part of that promise.

That word "affliction" in verse 14 is a strong word. When we talk about the tribulation and the Great Tribulation in prophecy, it's this word. Paul was afflicted, and I don't think this is limited to just his time in prison. I think it's what he went through from the time he left Philippi, all the way until now when he's in this prison cell. And God has used the believers in Philippi to strengthen him.

As a matter of fact, when he says, “You have shared with me,” that’s the Greek word *koinonia*, where we get our word “fellowship.” He says, “You have fellowshiped with me. You have experienced this community with me in order to strengthen me—to share my affliction, to help carry my load.”

One of the great dangers that we face as a church is when we come to church to gather for worship, we tend to put on our “churchy” faces. We put on our masks and we want to give the impression, “Everything’s okay...got everything wired...no problem.” And we look around and everybody else is wearing that mask, so we get the feeling that everybody else is getting it right and everybody else is living this thing. So we’re afraid to admit when we’re struggling and when we’re failing. We think people will think we’re a bad Christian or that we’re failing or we’re somehow less than we should be, because nobody else seems to be struggling. So we all just put on our masks and we go about our Christian life. But if we all took our masks off, the reality is: we struggle. This is hard. It’s really hard.

All of us need places where we feel the safety to be able to say, “Hey, I’m struggling right now. I’m not doing very well. This is what’s happening in my life.” That’s not going to happen in a worship service. This isn’t the environment for that, and it’s not going to happen out in the hallway. It’s going to happen with a group of people that you know and trust. That’s again why we continue to emphasize the need for these LifeGroups. There has to be a group of people in your life that you trust enough to be able to say, “Hey, I’m hurting. I’m struggling. I’m not doing very well.” And the saints can come along and say, “Let us help. Let us fellowship with your affliction. Let us help carry that load.” That is a part of how God strengthens us as He promised He would.

In the case of the church in Philippi, they expressed their concern in very tangible ways—they continued to support Paul in his missionary church-planting endeavor. Verses 15-18: “And you yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs. Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account. But I have received everything in full, and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God.”

Paul talks about the fact that once he left Philippi and continued planting churches, it was the church in Philippi that sacrificially gave the resources to help meet his needs, which encouraged him in his affliction. There wasn’t a lot they could do to keep Paul from being arrested and thrown in prison. But what they *could* do was continue to meet his practical needs and express with that, “We love you; we care about you.” So he told them, “You did. And you were the only church that kept doing that continually.”

But Paul says what really excited him (verse 17) was not the gift. But it was the fact that he knew, by doing that, they would experience this incredible return on their investment. That’s basically what he says. Verse 17 has business language when it talks about “the profit which increases to your account.” We would say the return on your investment. In other words, Paul is saying that when you sacrificially give what you have in order to build the Kingdom, then every time God multiplies the building of His Kingdom, you receive a return on your investment.

Now just think about that. Paul went out and started these churches in Macedonia and in Asia, and eventually to the west, and hundreds of thousands—millions—of Christians now have flowed out of that. And the promise for every single one of those is: He who started the work will be faithful to complete it. It is a sure investment. And every time another believer comes to faith, God says, “I’m going to put that in your account, because you made this initial investment.” So every time God does a God-thing, there is a return on that investment. Even today, when somebody here trusts Christ as Savior, that goes back to the saints in Philippi, because they were a part of that...2000 years ago.

Let me ask you a question: How are your investments doing? Are you just thrilled with how the stock market is going? I mean, *this* is a magnificent investment that is absolutely guaranteed. Think about the people who sacrificed and invested into this ministry 20 years ago and the multiplication of that as people have gone around the world. Every time something happens that’s a God-thing, God turns around and puts a return in their investment, as if to say, “Here you go. You’ve been a part of that.” It’s spectacular! And that’s what Paul says really thrills him.

When we talk about giving here, it’s not out of desperation. It’s not that we think we can’t pay our bills. As a matter of fact, I’m convinced God will supply. I don’t worry about that at all. What I want is for you to receive this spectacular return on your investment. I want to see *you* be a part of that and invest into what God is doing, so you can experience it yourself. It’s the same thing Paul is talking about. There’s nothing like it!

Paul says in verse 18 that this is an act of worship. These people weren’t just giving cash to Paul to help in a lull. He says it was “a fragrant aroma, a sacrifice that was well-pleasing to God.” It’s an act of worship when we help people by sharing what we have and by helping others in their affliction to carry their load. That rises up to God, and He gets a big smile on His face. That’s pleasing to Him.

But there’s only one way any of this is going to happen, and that’s if we choose to believe. Verse 19: “And my God shall supply all your needs [*not some of them, not most of them—all your needs*] according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”

If that verse is true, then why is there so much discontent? If it’s true that He will supply all of our needs, it means that everything that we need, God has promised He will supply. It again is this Christ-sufficiency. Therefore, whatever I need to be content, it isn’t out there. It’s been promised. I just have to choose to believe. And when I believe that, it frees me up to share what I have with others, because I believe God will take care of me. If I believe I have to take care of myself, I’m not going to share what I have. I’m too busy trying to take care of myself. But if I really believe God will take care of me, it frees me up, and I’ll share what I have.

Sometimes people say, “I just can’t afford to give.” Well, there are probably a few people for whom that’s true. There are probably some single parents who just absolutely can do nothing but pay the bills. I understand that, and so does God. But probably most people, when they say that, really need to be honest. They need to be honest and say, “You know, I have been so discontent that I’ve bought a house I can’t afford. I’ve bought vehicles I can’t afford. I’ve maxed credit cards I can’t afford. Therefore, I don’t have any money to give.” I mean, let’s get down to the bottom line: *that is* what’s going on.

And the reality is, the only way to address this is to come back and believe that contentment comes from our Christ-sufficiency. He will meet our every need. Therefore, it frees me up to live within my means and to share what I have with others in the building of His Kingdom. When I do that, God receives the glory. It enhances God's reputation, which is how Paul ends this text.

Verse 20: "Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen." Do you realize how much glory goes to God when we live as content people? In a culture of discontentment, we stand out like a flashing light when we're content. And it gives glory to God because we say, "Christ is my sufficiency. Everything I need I have. Everything I need in order to accomplish what He's called me to today I have. And I believe He will supply all my needs. I am content. No matter what the circumstances are today, I'm content."

Let me finish the sentence for you: I would really be happy if...I learned the secret of contentment...if I learned the secret of being Christ-sufficient in every circumstance.

Our Father, we're thankful for the truth of Your Word that reminds us that You have promised we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. Lord, we're not self-sufficient; we're Christ-sufficient. We understand that sometimes how You strengthen us is through our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. Lord, help us to really believe that You will supply all of our needs; to live within our means to be free to share, to invest what we have in that which will last forever. Lord, help us to really understand the secret of contentment. In Jesus' name, Amen.