

Enjoying Life By Choosing Contentedness Philippians 4:10-13

Contentment is a matter of the heart and only the heart can choose to be content. A survey was conducted in the late 1980's where they asked people whether they had achieved the American dream. Of those earning less than \$15,000 annually 95 % said they had not achieved the American dream. Of those earning more than \$50,000 annually 94% said they had not achieved the American dream. There was essentially no difference between the two groups of people. Contentment is not determined by how much you have.

We continue our sermon series today on Living with Joy. Today we are going to find out that we can experience joy by choosing to be content.

I invite you to turn to Philippians 4:10-13. Philippians is the eleventh book in the New Testament. Go past the four Gospels, Acts, Romans, and the two Corinthians and you will finish with Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians. Philippians 4:10-13. Read.

I want to first explain the principle in this passage and then apply it to our lives. The principle is this: Jesus helps those who choose to be content in any circumstance. Let's first understand what the principle means.

What is the context of this passage? Paul wrote this letter to the church at Philippi in part to thank them for sending money to support him in his ministry. Paul said he rejoiced in the Lord that they had revived their concern for him. However, he wanted them to understand that he was not rejoicing in their gift because he desperately needed the money. He said in verse 11 that he did not speak from a want or from great need. No, he was content in his circumstances. Even if they had not sent the gift he would have been content.

Paul experienced joy because they cared for him. Brothers and sisters in Christ cared for him, because Paul had cared for them. The joy of Christian fellowship is one of the privileges of serving together in the body of Christ. Note that I was careful not to say that going to church together was the source of his joy, because being in the same building at the same time is not a guarantee of joy. Serving together, sharing together, being involved in one another's lives is the context in which joy of Christian fellowship grows. If you want that kind of joy then you need to serve alongside others, build relationships through our ABF's or life groups, and even pray together.

Paul shared with the Philippians that he was glad that they had sent him their gifts but he wanted to impart a greater gift to them, namely the gift of knowing the importance of being content in all circumstances.

Paul said that he had learned to be content in whatever circumstance he was. He said in verse 12 that he had learned to be content both in times of prosperity and in times of poverty. Wouldn't that be great? Wouldn't that be enjoyable- to always be content no matter what? Would you like to know how to do that? Let's see what we can learn from the word of God.

First, Paul tells us that contentedness is a learned skill. He says in verse 11 that he learned to be content. In verse 12 he says, "I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry." Contentedness is not innate. You are not born with the ability to be

content. You learn how to be content. Because contentedness is something you learn, it is something that all of us can achieve.

The word that Paul uses in verse 12 when he says that he has learned the secret of being filled and going hungry is an interesting one. This particular Greek word was used normally to refer to someone who was initiated into one of the mystery religions of that day. During the first century AD a number of mystery religions sprang up. These groups claimed they had access to spiritual mysteries and that if you really wanted to be in the know spiritually you had to join their group. They had secret initiation ceremonies in which you were taught the secrets of their religion. You learned the mysteries of their group and that supposedly gave you an inside track to spirituality. This Greek word referred to a person who had been initiated into the deeper life of the mystery religion, because they had been taught its secrets.

I believe Paul is using some sarcasm and irony against the mystery religions of his day. What he is saying is something like this, "Hey, you want to know the real secret to a life-changing spirituality? Then learn how to be content in every circumstance and you will have mastered something that is really worth knowing." I think he is also suggesting that knowing how to be content in every circumstance is such rare knowledge that it truly qualifies as a mystery to most people. Most people do not have a clue how to be content in every circumstance, so it is a real mystery to them. Paul says, "I have learned the secret of how to be content."

Being content is something you can learn to do. That means contentedness is also a choice. If being content is something you learn, then you have a choice as to whether you are going to learn to be content or not. If you are discontented it's because you have chosen not to learn how to be content.

Paul makes that very clear in this passage. He said it did not matter what circumstance he experienced, he had learned to be content. Contentment is a matter of the will.

You may say, "Well, I really want to be content, I just do not have the strength or ability to be content. I want to be content, I just can't." It is true that within your own natural ability you cannot choose to be content, but it is not left up to your natural abilities. Look at what Paul says in verse 13. Read. Most people quote this verse out of context. This verse is not a blanket promise that I can do anything I want to through Christ who strengthens me. This verse does not mean that I can go out and win the Olympic marathon because Christ will strengthen me. This verse does not mean that I can be an opera star because Christ will strengthen me. This verse does not mean that I can become President because Christ strengthens me.

In the context the "all things" refers to being content in all circumstances whether in poor circumstances or wealthy circumstances as Paul has just described in verse 12. Verse 13 is saying that I can do everything that God wants me to do, through Christ who strengthens me. I cannot say to God or anyone else that I am incapable of doing what God wants me to do. I can never use weakness as an excuse for my disobedience. I can never use lack of power as an excuse for my discontent. In short, I am discontent because I have chosen to be discount. Abraham Lincoln, who was a wise man, said, "A man is about as happy as he makes up his mind to be."

So, how do we actually become content? What do I have to do or think in order to become content? The whole book of Philippians is an exposition of how to have joy or

how to be content in all circumstances. Last week we learned that if you make Christ and his Gospel your chief desire and you look through the eyes of faith you can have joy. Today I'm going to highlight five more key applications for you from the book of Philippians as to how Paul learned to be content in all circumstances and thereby experience joy.

The first application is: Kill your expectations by reckoning that you really are a slave of Christ. Paul began the letter to the Philippians in chapter 1 verse 1 by describing himself as a bondsman of Christ. Frankly most of us really don't think of ourselves as being a slave of Christ.

I will give you a quick test to see how much you think like a slave. Think about what you expect this next year. What do you expect from your family? What do you expect from your work? What do you expect to do this year? What do you expect at Christmas? What do you expect in terms of your health? What do you expect to acquire this year? Now, do you have all those expectations in your mind?

What do you think a slave expects? How many of the things on your mental list would a slave expect to receive? A slave would probably expect some food, a little something to wear, hard work the rest of his life, no freedom, and not much else. A slave would probably view everything on your mental list as a wonderful, incredible gift that he never expected.

Unfulfilled expectations wreck havoc on our happiness. Read Historian comment on Expectations. Read Green book p. 36. If you will kill your expectations, put them to death so that you have few of them, you will find that you are more content. One of my professors at Dallas Theological Seminary said, "If you want to be content, make God all you want." Repeat. List all the expectations you have and then ask which ones are fitting for a slave of Christ and put to death each one that is not realistic for a slave. Then if God should give you one of those things from your former list you can see it as an incredible gift and not a right. That is a step toward contentment.

The second step will help you with the first step. The second step is to reassess what are your real needs versus your wants. In Philippians 4:11 Paul said that he was not speaking from need. The Greek word means need. I do not speak from need. He wrote those words from prison. What do you suppose Paul felt were his legitimate needs?

We have a problem with expectations because we have identified many things as needs that are really wants. What are our true needs? Spiritually, our true need is to have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. What are our true material needs? I believe Paul has given us that list in I Timothy 6:8. Read. What are our true needs? Food and covering. You can include water with food, and covering would include clothing and some kind of shelter from the weather. That is it. Food and covering are our true material needs. Paul had both in prison. They did feed him. He did have some clothes and the prison did keep him out of the rain and weather. He said that if we have food and covering then we can be content. All our true needs are met. No one sitting in this room has a true material need according to the Bible. All we have is wants.

Read Timeline article. Read Puritan card.

All of these applications intertwine. The third way to be content is to trust in God not in things. In Philippians 4:19 Paul wrote to the Philippians and said, "Read". All the true needs that you have, trust God to supply them. Paul says that God will supply them according to his riches in glory in Christ. God will meet your needs in ways that far

exceed your true needs. Each of us is living proof that God has more than abundantly met our needs. He has not merely supplied us with bread; he has stocked our refrigerators and pantries with a mind-boggling plethora of foods. He has not merely given us a shirt and pants; he has filled our closets. Not one of us can deny that God has met our needs out of his abundance.

Are you trusting God to meet your needs? Are you content knowing that God will provide what you need? Or are you looking to other things to supply your needs?

Let me give you some questions to test how much you are trusting God to meet your needs. Do you worry when your pantry is empty and relax when it is full? Do you get nervous when your bank account gets low and do you feel relieved when it is full? Do you get anxious when the stock market drops and are you at ease when it rises? Now, did God's ability and power to provide for your needs at all change with the fluctuations of your bank account balance, your pantry, or the stock market? No, God's power and ability to meet your needs did not change nor did his commitment to meet your needs change. So why did your emotions change? The answer is simple. You were not really trusting in God, because if you were, it does not matter what those other things do.

You cannot be content in life and enjoy life until you really trust God to meet your needs. Paul was content in all circumstances because he knew God would supply his needs.

A fourth step to contentment is to value eternal things and not earthly things. In Philippians 3:8 Paul wrote, "Read". Paul had just finished listing in verses 4-7 all of his accomplishments and positions he had and then he said he counted all those things as garbage compared to having Christ. One of the reasons Paul could be content in all circumstances is because he valued eternal things, not things of this world. We saw that last week in Philippians chapter 1 where Paul said he did not care if he was in prison and others were trying to cause him distress as long as the Gospel was being proclaimed.

A lot of our discontentment flows from the fact that we are excited about the wrong things and are placing too much value on the things of this world and not enough value on the things of God. You can be content by valuing eternal things rather than temporal things.

Finally, you can be content when you stop comparing yourself with others. Read "Comparison Obsession."

Philippians 2:5 says that we are to have Jesus' attitude when he did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself and became a bondservant. Being a bondservant means that I cannot try to claim or grasp equality with others. I cannot keep comparing myself with others wanting to be equal with them or even better than them because the very nature of Christlike service is to let go of all attempts to be equal or superior in order to focus on serving people. And so we have come back full circle to our starting point and that is that we are a bondservant of Christ and if we can think like a slave of Christ we can learn contentment.

These five steps that I have mentioned are all choices that you make. They are steps to learning the skill of contentment. Kill your expectations by reckoning that you are a slave of Christ. Reassess your needs and your wants. Trust in God, not in things. Value eternal things and not temporal things. Stop comparing yourself with others. Take these steps and they will lead you to contentment.

I would like to close with this story that Michelle Baldwin tells from Today's Christian Woman. Read story. Alfred is much like most of us. We would rather say, "You do it. You be content in all circumstances, because I can't. I don't know how." Now you do know how and you can do it through Christ who will strengthen you if you choose to learn the skill of being content. If you learn contentedness, you will also find joy. Pray.