

“Contentment?”

Philippians 4:6-23

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Philippians 4:6-23 *Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; 7 and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through*

Christ Jesus. 8 Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things [are] noble, whatever things [are] just, whatever things [are] pure, whatever things [are] lovely, whatever things [are] of good report, if [there is] any virtue and if [there is] anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. 9 The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you. 10 But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity. 11 Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: 12 I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. 13 I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. 14 Nevertheless you have done well that you shared in my distress. 15 Now you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me concerning giving and receiving but you only. 16 For even in Thessalonica you sent [aid] once and again for my necessities. 17 Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that abounds to your account. 18 Indeed I have all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things [sent] from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God. 19 And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus. 20 Now to our God and Father [be] glory forever and ever. Amen. 21 Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren who are with me greet you. 22 All the saints greet you, but especially those who are of Caesar’s household. 23 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.



Bertrand Russell’s 1950 Nobel prize acceptance speech: The Four Desires Driving All Human Behavior

All human activity is prompted by desire. There is a wholly fallacious theory advanced by some earnest moralists to the effect that it is possible to resist desire in the interests of duty and moral principle. I say this is fallacious, not because no man ever acts from a sense of duty, but because duty has no hold on him unless he desires to be dutiful. If you wish to know what men will do, you must know not only, or principally, their material circumstances, but rather the whole system of their desires with their relative strengths.

Man differs from other animals in one very important respect, and that is that he has some desires which are, so to speak, infinite, which can never be fully gratified, and which would keep him restless even in Paradise. The boa constrictor, when he has had an adequate meal, goes to sleep, and does not wake until he needs another meal. Human beings, for the most part, are not like this.

Russell points to four such infinite desires — acquisitiveness, (a-qwiss-i-tive-ness...Or “greed”) rivalry, vanity, and love of power — and examines them in order: Acquisitiveness — the wish to possess as much as possible of goods, or the title to goods — is a motive which, I suppose, has its origin in a combination of fear with the desire for necessities. However much you may acquire, you will always wish to acquire more; satisfaction is a dream which will always elude you.

We live in a land and a time of plenty. We have more resources, technology, information, personal choices and entertainment available to us than most everyone else in the world today (and most people throughout history). Yet, somehow, we still clearly struggle with being content. We lack this peace because we see others who have more, or because God’s plans for our lives don’t look like what we had in mind.

One dictionary defines *contentment* as “the state of being mentally or emotionally satisfied with things as they are.” Today it is rare that we find anyone who is truly content with his or her condition in life. The Bible has a great deal to say about contentment—being satisfied with what we have, who we are, and where we’re going. Jesus said, ***“That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life — whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn’t life more than food, and your body more than clothing?”*** (Matthew 6:25).

In essence, Jesus is telling us to be content with what we have. Moreover, He has given us a direct command not to worry about the things of this world. He goes on in Matthew 6 saying, ***“...these things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.”*** (Matthew 6:32–33). From Jesus’ words, we can gather that our lack of contentment is actually sin and it puts us in the same category as those who do not know God.

How many of us honestly... in the quietness of our hearts...alone in our personal worlds, would look in the mirror and say, *“No, I’m not content. I still haven’t found what I’m looking for. I’ve not arrived at contentment. I’m not living in contentment. I’m struggling in ‘the summer of my discontent’ right now”?*

First of all, we need to understand that God **wants** His people to be content. Hebrews 13:5, tells us to *“Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have,”* and moreover that he would, *‘... never leave (us) or forsake (us.)’* Paul...the Bible...and yes even God Himself is invested in seeing that we are content. It is a significant and important need for the Christian life.

However, contentment is not innate to the Christian experience, *it is learned*. You don’t just trust Jesus for your salvation and suddenly get content. Oh, yes, your peace level can change immediately on some level, but there are battles of contentment to fight all the time, and we don’t just become content because we come to Christ. We have to learn contentment. I hope that is encouraging! If you’re struggling with contentment, I would think that that’s incredibly encouraging.

Jesus once said that it is hard for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven. Why? Because a rich man can mistake *circumstantial* contentment for *gospel* contentment. He can mistake a superficial temporal contentment with a deep and permanent and eternal contentment, therefore he cannot seek real contentment because he doesn’t sense his lack of real contentment, because he’s in circumstances that make him content.

The secret of contentment is God's providence apprehended by your soul. It is the doctrine of providence; it is the God of providence embraced by your soul so that you believe it. Gospel contentment rests on a deep personal doctrinal experiential embrace of God's providence.

Now notice what Paul did *not* say in verse 13 of our text today. He's not saying you can do anything. He's not coming to some middle-aged pudgy guy, and saying, 'You can win the 100-meter sprint this summer at the Olympics.' Because you can't! He is saying, '*...anything that I ask you to do and anyplace where I put you, you can be content and thrive. Because I'm the one who put you there and the one who strengthens you.*'

Let me tell you a great spiritual truth; 'God will never call you to do something that you can do.' He will only call you to do what you can't do without Him. And Paul's saying, 'I've learned that. I can do nothing in and of myself, but I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.' Therein is the secret of contentment. The fact is it will take you years to work that truth deep down into your bones so that it is your default setting, but that is the secret of contentment. The battle is of course getting it into the heart so that it dominates all of your circumstances, however big, however real, however heart-breaking they are.

The secret of contentment is a deep, personal, doctrinal, experiential embrace of God's providence. Contentment expresses itself in a constant gratitude to God. God-glorifying gratefulness flows from the heart of the one who is content. Show me a content person in gospel contentment, I'll show you a person who's grateful to God. Put them in the worst circumstance of life, they'll still praise God. Why? Because He has supplied all their needs and they know it. And they know that nobody else in the world can take away what He has supplied. The world can take everything else away, but they cannot take what He has supplied. And so they're grateful.

4:6-7

Paul begins our text today saying "*Be anxious for nothing...*"? Well, that seems to be rather idyllic! In truth, it will only ever be experienced if one practices the rest of the verse, "*taking everything to the Lord in prayer.*" The verse goes on to say that we are to do so "*with thanksgiving.*" Sadly, it seems that man can be, especially here in the west, so forgetful and unthankful! When we think we deserve something we don't have or we didn't get, then anxiety rules. Many folks live their whole lives in such a mode, and we just become known for our bitterness and anger...a perpetual foul mood.

This passage not only speaks of how we *get* peace, but more so how we *keep it*. The "drinking of His pure water" and the "*keeping on drinking.*" Certainly, on a human level, the believers in Philippi had plenty to worry about! Severe persecution outside the church, discord amongst themselves in the church, false teachers lying to them, and even acquiring the basic necessities of life... food and shelter! But you see, this was Paul's point of the whole of the letter! That unless we have the supernatural peace of God, we are relegated to live the same as the world at large.

Prayer is both an act and an atmosphere. Indeed we are to come to the Lord at specific times and bring specific requests to Him. But we are also called to live in an *atmosphere* of prayer. The tone of our life should be a prayerful tone. And then, with this scriptural directive, comes a promise. If we will live in such a way as this, God will bring us...fill us, with HIS peace! A peace that the world will not and cannot understand. This "God peace" will "guard our hearts and minds" from the dangers and traps that wait for us out there.

The reason this is not more of a reality within the greater Christian community is that we don't really trust God as we should. We trust Him with the little things, and then go out and seek earthly answers for the big ones. We are ok when He moves in such a way as to complement our earthly will and desires, and we reject Him when he

goes against such. When He does that we just take back control of our lives and proceed to make a mess of things.

Many of us are quite willing to accept Jesus as Savior but we are quite reluctant to allow Him to be **Lord**. This says we do not trust Him...we do not believe in Him. And we need to know that such is quite mandatory to being born again in Him! The greater church today is full of folks who want to stay out of hell, but do not want to give up the control of our lives. So we struggle, we worry, we are depressed, unhappy and without peace and joy, all the while still attending church.

4:8

When we are *truly* born again, everything changes. Nothing remains as it was. God takes our life and turns it upside down and inside out. Our heart and desires change, as does our minds. Our thoughts...our 'thinking' changes. This does not mean that the world ceases to knock on our door. There must be a personal effort on our part. A "*working out of our own salvation.*" Desire, passion, and love will naturally generate a motivation to act on our part or it is without power, without effect, and quite likely without a reality!

Paul herein gives us the "short list" of the things we are to 'think upon.' To fulfill this verse we must no doubt "re-arrange" our lives. For to pull this off, we cannot live as the world does...or live like we did before we were saved and expect God to operate in the midst of it. For one thing, we have to "come up from amongst them" and "be separate." (2 Cor 6:17)

The Bible repeatedly tells us we CAN control our thought life. But that may mean that we have to say no to certain things, certain places, and certain practices...even if they are not expressly rejected in scripture! And then in turn, we will no doubt have to place ourselves in the realm where our surroundings are "true, noble, just, and pure." A place where things are indeed "lovely," a place of "good report." A life of virtue and praise. Can you think of any place like that? Welcome to the community of faith! Not just Sunday church, but a world of faith where we are to live, play, interact, love, cry, laugh, and express our faith and our spiritual gifts. I will say it again, one cannot hope to survive outside of such a community! That's why God tells us clearly that we are to belong to such. How is it that we think we can dabble in Christianity and still expect it to fly? Does anything work that way?

When we reject this, we reject God's clear instruction, and we are then adrift and subservient to the whims of the flesh and the winds of the world. What we think is what we become. Where we keep our minds is where we are. Our thoughts shape our behavior. What we do is what we think.

1John 2:16 warns us: "*..the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world.*" The strength to live the way Paul is instructing us lies in the Word of God. "*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.*" (Col 3:16)

4:9

Paul ends this section with one final instruction...one so very crucial to not just the success of what he has been teaching us, but truly the success of the whole of the Christian experience. He tells us that these things that we have learned from him...received from him...the things we heard him say and saw him live...**DO** these things! It doesn't say BELIEVE them...for that goes without saying. It says actually DO them!

I know...it's a simple concept, yet one that is sorely ignored today! We think that as long as we believe they are true, that such is sufficient. But in fact, it is sufficient for nothing. The Bible tells us that even demons believe that God exists and they tremble! (James 2:19) But demons are not Christians and they will not have eternal life with Christ.

We have to actually *do* this Christian life. Ironically, that simple premise and our teaching it, chases more people out the door of this church than any other. Why not? The church down the street doesn't take such a stance, so I am going to that church!

I'm not suggesting that we will in anyway ever perfect our obedience! But that is what God's grace is for. If we heed what Paul is telling us in all of this passage, the God of Peace will be with us. He promises. **God** promises...John 16:33NLT *"I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."*

4:10-12

At the point, it had been ten years since Paul had founded the church in Philippi. When Paul moved on to minister in the Macedonian cities of Thessalonica and Berea, the Philippians still backed him financially as well as spiritually. Paul then moved on south to Achaia, Athens and Corinth, and again the Philippian church continued to support him. Clearly this church did not need to be poked and prodded to loosen their purse strings...they were willing and desirous to do so...they wanted to be a part of what Paul, and ultimately what God, was doing.

Apparently however, they had not had the chance to "get into the game" recently, but now found the opportunity to send to Paul some financial support. Note that Paul was not "dying on the vine" here. By his own admission He clearly was a man that knew how to survive on a little as well as a lot, and he was holding his own. However, he did receive this gift...one that he attributed as having been given not to him, but to God, and indeed it was! No doubt Paul was happy and blessed to receive such support, and it no doubt made his imprisonment go a little easier! But his joy was seemingly more about the fact that the people were still there...they were still behind him and backing him, than the fact he got an 'unexpected check in the mail!' J. Vernon McGee says that the "Letter to the Philippians" was really a 'thank you note!' Paul was finally getting around to the 'thank you' part, after talking, praising, instructing and worshipping for 4 chapters!

Again Paul didn't send an SOS...he didn't go out to the churches to drum up missions support. No, this church just had a 'fire' in their belly! They wanted to be a part of what God was doing, and they were apparently *actively* looking for the opportunity to do so. Such reflects a great deal of maturity in these folks. They gave because they *wanted* to, not because they were in anyway compelled.

Paul was a warrior. He survived and continued in ministry whether he had a lot or a little, whether things were easy or he was being chased out of town by an angry mob. Paul had found the true source of joy, and it was not from his outward circumstances and status.

It seems here in the west that most of us are slow to realize and acknowledge our state of blessing. God has given us a chance...perhaps like no place else on earth, to actively be a part of ministry around the world. We are richer than most and freer than most. So we have the opportunity to engage a lost and dying world both financially and physically in a profound way. But our comfort and our prosperity has most often made us lethargic and selfish instead. Instead of living simply and kingdom centered, we just raise our standard of living to a place where cable TV, air conditioning, fast food, vacations and entertainment is a necessity instead of the luxury that it is in truth!

Thus we tend to feel we cannot afford to be financially and/or physically a part of God's work...locally or overseas, and we are unwilling to cut free from the "American dream" of 2 kids, 2 cars, a new I-phone and a nice house. This...in light of the Philippian church, just expresses the immature state of the broader American church today. *Sadly, much of the developing world sees us as God's chosen and the blessed.* We must stop looking at the great commission as being directed at everyone else and receive it as our own. Personally, and requiring a *personal* response.

4:13

Paul says, '*I can do all things in Christ*'—that is, in the context of the will of Christ for his life. Whatever Christ has for you to do, He **will** supply the power. Whatever gift He gives you, He will give the power to exercise that gift. A gift is a manifestation of the Spirit of God in the life of the believer. As long as you function in Christ, you will have power." (J. Vernon McGee)

Received in the context of the passage we are reading, Paul seems to be expressing the fact that whatever God has called you to...no matter how seemingly impossible it may seem in the flesh (and to your family!), God will step up and empower you to do it. How quick we are to think we "cannot" do that which we know we are being called to do! Such only expresses a lack of faith and a failure to understand that God is without limit!

In the same idea, this verse does not give license or empowerment to do something that you simply want to do or have self-anointed in order to do that which you see as grand or flashy. Many rightfully read this in its original as saying "I can do all things IN Christ..." Meaning that only when we are in that special place of obedient living to our individual gifts and calling, will God "have our back" to see us through whatever we are doing. This verse is not saying that if you get up and preach, that God is going to just rock through you if He has not called you to preach. It's the same for any aspect of faith manifest!

We are all very anxious for God to change our circumstances. But the fact is God is far more concerned with changing *us*. When Paul said 'yes' to Christ, it was not done flippantly or without understanding of what he was getting in to. He "counted the cost" **and he paid it**. But he knew that his very survival was dependent upon Jesus. Such was not just an acknowledgment: **it was a way of life**. Paul did not just "talk the talk." He did not first negotiate a "pay and benefits" package with God before he stepped out to serve Him. The only thing he was promised was that it would be hard. **Really** hard. And he didn't flinch. All he had belonged to God. Even the very breathe in his body. He had given it all to Jesus, so therefore he had nothing to lose. In COL 1:29 Paul says "*That's why I work and struggle so hard, depending on Christ's mighty power that works within me.*" **This** is Christianity. The **real** McCoy. It's this that separates the Christian from the religious person who attends church.

Apparently, God came through for Paul. Despite all his hardship, he was alive and well. Through it all...good and bad...he is now writing this letter...**a letter about joy**. The Phillips paraphrased version renders this verse this way: *I am ready for anything through the strength of the one who lives within me.* Let me ask then: Are **you**? If not, how do you rectify the difference between the faith version you are living and the that which Paul was living? It is here that the Christian finds his or her contentment, or will loose it.

4:14-19

The church in Philippi had done well. They had more than supported Paul financially. They had done more than "pay their tithe." They had learned to separate themselves and their joy from the world, from money and things ...from their earthly and present circumstances. They had found the secret of contentment. They had found the path to joy.

Paul too had learned (verse 11) how to be content in any situation. But this knowledge was not an epiphany. It was an experiential ‘lesson learned’. One that was learned no doubt over time. But it *was* learned. If he had not, he wouldn’t have survived it all. He would have at some point packed in and moved to a beach somewhere where things were easier. How many faces of people that have passed through...*and back out* these doors come flooding into my mind as I say those words!

This church had grown up. At least the survivors did. They matured in their faith and did not stay babies in their understanding and their living. Their support of Paul was not upon request, but rather an issue of maturity and growth, and Paul did indeed want that from them. The “account” that Paul refers to, is that which resides in the eternal. Because as they say “you can’t take it with you” and the only part of your stuff that you will see in the hereafter is that which you have sent on ahead...investments in the lives of others...investments in the kingdom battle.

This passage is surely to be seen...in the light of the whole of the letter, as more than just a call to give financially. And that is not the purpose of our hitting it hard today either! The issue is much greater than that. The call is for us to stop and truly analyze whether our desires, our commitments and passions really lay where they ought. And if not, to acknowledge the fruit of such a life...a world of dis-contentment. Are we “all in?” We cannot dance out of Luke 12:34 when it tells us “...*where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*” Where is your heart today? Maybe the better question...and certainly the more accurate, would be “where is *your* treasure...?”

Matt 6:20... “*Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal.*”

Paul reminded them of the promise of God: that He would supply their every need. Few believe that today, because few would agree on what is a *want* and what is a *need*. The question today is do you know the peace and contentment that this letter is about? Because this is what Christ wants you to have. This is ‘growing up.’ Yet in our oft immaturity, we often will state that God ‘won’t’ and God ‘can’t.’ Yet here is the promise that is contrary to that opinion. The promise of God here is stark and without ambiguity. He will supply our needs. Not just of our financial needs, but all of them. Our answers lay in Christ.

4:20-23

The joy that had sustained Paul...even in prison, rolls right on through his salutation. To God be the glory...forever and forever. Hmm...the ‘Letter of Joy.’ Do you know that kind of joy in your life? Jesus gave us everything. Have you given everything back?

Romans 8:37 reiterates this passage, reminding us that “...*despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us....*” Look at Philippians 4:11, 13, and 19: “I have learned to be content in whatever circumstance I am.” (Phil. 4:11.) “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” (Phil. 4:13.) “My God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 4:19.) Are *you* content? Right where you are now, right in your life situation? **Are you satisfied?**

Bertrands Russell’s final words before he died were these: “*The time has come to review my life as a whole, and to ask whether it has served any useful purpose or has been wholly concerned in futility. Unfortunately, no answer is possible for anyone who does not know the future.*”

That is true Bertrand! And I do know what the future holds...and I know the answer.