



JUNE 13, 2021 | PASTOR PETER YI

## “Learning Contentment” (Philippians 4:10-13)

**<sup>10</sup> I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. <sup>11</sup> I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> I can do all this through him who gives me strength.**

From where does contentment come? I believe this to be an important question, because being content seems to be something that is so elusive for us modern people. We are constantly told that we need more and more from everyone and from everywhere, and if you get those things, you will be content. We may have grown up in homes where parents made a very direct connection with how large your salary is with your level of contentment. They may have instructed us that we should pursue one career over another for that very reason. Or it may just have been the attitude in the home. Perhaps mom and dad were financially unstable and because of their troubles with money, you are seeking contentment in your job and salary. Or maybe our lack of contentment comes from the conversations that we have in the workplace. It seems that everyone around you is talking about the next raise, the next car, the next vacation, the next big investment and so on. So much of our society says to us that contentment or being satisfied with life or we may even say, being happy, comes from possessing things. But is that where we find contentment?

It's funny because I think we all know deep within us that contentment, true satisfaction with life, cannot come from possessing things. I think we know that the guy driving behind the wheel of a fancy sports car, or the woman who is dressed from head to toe in the most expensive clothes, though they look like they have it all, I think we know that having those things doesn't mean they have true contentment. The shine of the car begins to fade, and the clothes quickly go out of style and the cycle repeats itself. So, what is contentment and from where does it come? That's what we want to look at today.

I want to remind you again that the Apostle Paul here is writing from a Roman prison, chained to a guard. He's not stuck in a Marriott hotel, like we might be because our connecting flight was canceled and so the reunion with our loved ones becomes delayed a day or two. He's in prison, where the meeting of his needs will mostly depend on friends who can supply his needs. And this is the place from which he writes about contentment.

Now, you may hear that, and it may have little or no impact on your life. You have clothes on your back, food in the fridge, money in the bank. You don't expect to be in prison any time soon. Paul's situation seems so remote and distant to where you are right now, but you mustn't think like that. Why? For at least a couple reasons. One, because of the universal solidarity of all Christians. *You* may not be going through hard times, *you* may not be in prison, but there are thousands of Christians around the world who are. And as Christians in the rich west, we must not allow ourselves to become so detached from our brothers and sisters who are destitute, poor and imprisoned, especially if it's because of their loyalty to Christ.

Secondly because suffering Christians are meant to serve as a motivation for our faith. Here's the biblical text for that. In Hebrews 11, the writer archives the great heroes of the faith. He includes some of the most graphic suffering they endured and then in chapter 12, he tells us what to do with that information.



**(Hebrews 12:1)** Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, <sup>2</sup> fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. <sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

So, you see, we are not permitted to forget the heroes of our faith. They are to be constantly before us, as a living example of how we should live our lives. This of course applies to Paul and his situation, as well as to other great Christians throughout the ages that have lived well and died well, for the faith. Paul's situation must serve as a backdrop for what he teaches in these verses. What he says would be virtually meaningless, if not offensive, if he were writing these words from a mountainside chalet overlooking the blue waters of the Mediterranean. The fact that he's writing these words from prison is meant to wake us up and pay attention.

So, what does Paul teach us about contentment?

Here's the first thing. **True contentment doesn't mean I don't need the help of others.** Paul says, "I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me." The Philippian church had showed their love and concern for Paul by sending Epaphroditus with a gift, a care package that might have contained some food, a blanket, a pair of shoes, some parchments to write on, and some money. And he gladly accepted their gift.

Some people want to be so utterly self-sufficient that whatever the circumstance they are going through, no matter how difficult, they will not ask for help and they won't accept the help that is offered. And they may even use a spiritual reason for doing so. They say, "God will take care of me." Or "Thanks but, no thanks, I don't want to put you out." Or they may have shame or embarrassment or guilt even about asking for and receiving help from others. Friends, that is not true contentment. That's pride. In our 26 years as pastor here, there have been many times where we have received the help and support of others. There was a time, when our kids were young, where we had to take one of them to the hospital and so we called upon some church members to watch our two other kids while we cared for the sick one. Many times, we received the gift of food from members in the church, especially when we first started here and were barely making ends meet. Trust me when I say that those food gifts were actually putting food on the table for our family and guests.

The same goes for all of us too. Don't we accept the help of our friends when we're going through a family or personal crisis? Don't we accept from our friends the gifts of babysitting, food, car rides, emotional support, prayers, visits, and money? We all do. This is what the church is for. This is why the church is called a family, a body. A family cares for its family members. A body cares when a part of the body is in pain. The whole body stops what it's doing to address the pain in the body. Isn't that what our bodies do? So don't be so proud that you refuse the help of this wonderful faith community. You may refuse it by keeping silent about your struggle, and so you suffer alone. You may refuse the help when it's offered to you. Don't do that. Rather, let's continue to grow in receiving help and providing help. So, the first point was this. Being content doesn't mean we don't receive help from others.

Here's the second thing. **Paul states, that true contentment is something that must be learned.** Listen to what he writes. "I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." And then in verse 12 he says, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation." Contentment must be learned. It doesn't just come. We're not born with it. We all know that. Do you know what we're born with? Discontent. That's what comes naturally. What doesn't come naturally is contentment. Contentment is not natural but unnatural, so much so that Paul speaks of it as a secret, as a mystery, as something that's hidden that needs to be revealed to us, as something that has to be learned.



How does a Christian learn contentment? Most people would say, the place where we learn contentment is during the lean seasons, the times when we have very little. Isn't that what common wisdom would say? You learn contentment from living the life of an ascetic. An ascetic, or asceticism is a life of self-denial, like a Buddhist monk who goes around from door-to-door, asking neighbors for some rice and meat. That's the image that comes to my mind when I think of a life of asceticism. When we were a young newlywed couple, living off a very meager salary, we couldn't afford owning a television or even an air conditioning unit for our sweltering apartment; and to stretch the dollar, we rarely ate out; and we ate a lot of peasant foods like soups and stews, and pasta. Yes, those are the situations that we would think of as the place to learn contentment.

Actually, that's not what Paul says. Paul paints us a picture by using three contrasting images from his own life. He says, "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty." Then he says, "whether well fed or hungry" and finally, "whether living in plenty or in want."

When he says that he knows what it's like to be in need, it doesn't really capture the essence of the word. It describes a much more dire situation and we can see that from the second and third examples. The word for being "in need" refers to the absence of the basic necessities of life. It means to be abased, to be humble. It's actually the same word used to describe Jesus in chapter two, in the hymn that was written about him. "And begin found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross." So, Paul speaks about having almost nothing and having plenty, an abundance. He then contrasts being well fed or hungry. Most of us probably have never known hunger. Some of us might have, but my guess is that most of us have never truly experienced hunger. Hunger would be a situation where because of my lack of resources I had to go at least a day or two without eating. It's the same word to describe what Jesus experienced after fasting for 40 days in the wilderness.

Then the final contrast is that same word "plenty" contrasted to being in want. To be in want is the literal opposite of living in plenty. It's to be lacking, it's to be devoid. If we were to modernize Paul's examples to today's situation, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to look at it like this. "I know what it's like to be homeless and I know what it's like to live the life that comes with a six-figure salary." "I know what it's like to go dumpster diving and I know what it's like have a fridge full of food." "I know what it's like to live in a tent on the side of the road and I know what it's like to own a house in suburbs."

Paul is telling us from these three personal examples, that contentment or the secret of contentment is something that must be learned. It must be learned in both situations or perhaps a better way to understand it is to say that it must be learned in whatever situation. Because some living in poverty may never be rich. And others living in wealth may never be poor. But that doesn't mean we cannot learn the secret. The secret is learned in whatever situation you are in.

If that's true, then it has to keep us from thinking things like this. If we're in one of those lean seasons, we can't say, "Ah, if I only had a little more, I'd be content." Isn't that how most of us think, especially when we're younger and just getting started with life? If only I could stop buying these used clunker cars and buy a brand-new shiny car, then I'd be content. If only I could stop renting and start owning, then I'd be content. If only I could go from a five-figure salary to six figure salary, then I'd be content. If only I could go from being single to being married, then I'd be content. It doesn't mean we're not supposed to work hard and try to improve our situation. It's addressing the attitude of discontent and contentment in our hearts. So, even when we have very little, we learn to be content.

At the same time, contentment is learned in times of plenty. Now this seems very counter-intuitive. We would think that since we're in a stage in life where we have much, we would be content. We live in a nice home and drive a nice car, with a stable job, a beautiful family. What more could we ask for? We should be content and yet, we all know that we are tempted to keep asking for more.



We want a nicer home and a nicer car and a more lucrative salary and so on. We know we can become even more covetous of what our neighbors have, when we already have a lot. So even in times of having all the basic necessities of life and even more than that, we can be discontent. Contenting is not only learned in poverty but also in times of plenty.

You see, contentment really has nothing to do with the situation you are in. It's learned in whatever situation you are in, whether a situation of poverty or a situation of plenty. It's learned in "whatever the circumstances." How would you describe the situation you are in now? Happy? Sad? Plenty? Poverty? Whatever the season you are in, it's the season to learn contentment. Today and every day, we are learning in the school of contentment.

### **Lastly, our contentment must be in the Lord.**

Look with me to verse 13. This is one of the most popular verses in all the Bible. I knew a person who had it tattooed onto their body. It's made into posters, framed, and hung on walls. People make word carvings of this verse. Though it's one of the most popular, it's also one of the most mis-applied verses. It's up there with Matthew 18:20:

<sup>20</sup> For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

We like to apply Philippians 4:13 when we have a big, daunting final exam. Or we apply it when we have to get that last rep for our chest workout. Or we apply it when we work with a difficult boss or live with a difficult spouse. The funny thing is that we apply it all these different situations, but we don't apply it to the immediate situation in which this verse is found. Yes, sure, it can be applied to challenging relationships. We can also pray, "Lord give me the strength to get through these cancer treatments." We can pray, "Give me the strength to deal with this abrasive colleague at work." Yes, for sure, it can be applied broadly like that, but what does it mean here, in chapter 4? What is the 'all this' referring to here? Surely, it has to do with being in situations of want or being in situations of plenty, being hungry or being well fed. I can handle either situation, either extreme, and every situation in between, through Him who gives me strength.

This verse shows us that Christian contentment is a supernatural gift. It's learned, but at the same time it's a gift. It comes 'through Him,' through God, through Christ. It doesn't come from within our mental fortitude; it doesn't come from within ourselves. Singing in prison while put in stocks doesn't come from yourself. Rejoicing during cancer doesn't come from a strong will. Being content after losing your job doesn't come from a balanced personality. Trusting in Christ after breaking up with your boyfriend or girlfriend doesn't come because you're thick-skinned. These things are supernatural. Christian contentment is a miracle of Christ's work in us. They come from deep within, where Christ is, where he made a powerful change.

As well, to be content requires strength that comes only from God. Yes, it's hard to be poor. It's hard to live paycheck to paycheck. It's hard to have your credit cards maxed out, not because you went on a spending spree, but because you're trying to feed your family. I've been there. Indeed, those are hard things and that's why they require the strength of God. When we don't have much, we could rationalize our complaining and discontent. We can rationalize our stinginess. We would say, well, I don't have much of anything; I myself am barely surviving, so how can I give to help others. We've all made those excuses.

And then it's difficult to have plenty and not always want more and more. It's hard to be content with the wealth that you have. It's hard not to buy a conspicuously luxurious item that you don't really need. In plenty, we would rationalize our greed and desire for more things. We might be tempted to say, "Oh boy I can't tithe, that would be just too much, especially since I earn so much!"



Without God's strength, we would just rationalize our attitudes and behavior. That's why we need the strength that only God can give. I can do all things, living in poverty and living in plenty, through Him who gives me strength.

How about you? Have you learned the secret of contentment? You must! or you will always live with discontent, never being happy with the station of life you are in; always thinking that only when you reach a certain lifestyle that you will be content. Trust the words of Scripture. Contentment has nothing to do with dollar signs and everything to do with Christ. Being content is a supernatural work, that Jesus does in you. How? He gives you a new heart which in turn gives you a fresh and new perspective on everything. Here are three things Jesus does, as it relates to our contentment.

One thing Jesus shows you is this. Because you are in Christ, God is now your heavenly father. He loves you and cares for you. He will meet your need. You can pray today and every day, "Give us today our daily bread." You can ask him for help. Therefore, you can be content.

Another thing Jesus shows you is this. This life is fleeting; the life to come is forever. Remember the attitude Paul showed us in chapter one, when he said,  
<sup>21</sup> For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. <sup>22</sup> If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! <sup>23</sup> I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; <sup>24</sup> but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.  
It's like the line in a Gospel song I used to sing. "This world is not my home, I just a passing through." Of all people why should we be so caught up in this world and so disinterested in the world to come? That's not how we are to live our lives. The way we live in the here and now must be based on where we will be when Christ returns. The things of this life are fleeting, the things of the next life are forever. Thus we can be content.

Finally, you can be content because you have Jesus. You have the most valuable and precious thing, the most important person, you could ever have. Nothing is more valuable than Jesus. Remember that t-shirt?  
Jesus + nothing = everything. And the opposite:  
Everything - Jesus = nothing  
It's like what Mother Teresa once said. "You realize Jesus is all you need, when he is all you have."

Do you believe that? Jesus said it like this. What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? Jesus is appealing to our sense of reason with these words. He's saying, let's put these two things on a scale. On one side of the scale, you have the whole world, all of its riches and possessions. All the wealth you could own. And on the other side of the scale is your soul—your soul that will go on forever in heaven. Which do you choose? Wealth or your soul? 50 years of living rich or an eternity of reigning with Christ? Having all the money you want or having Christ. Choose, he says. We can be content because we are in Christ and to be in Christ is to have Jesus.

## **Conclusion:**

Friends, true contentment can only be found in God. That's how you and I were designed. It's programmed into us, into our hearts. Stop trying to find it in things. Find it in God. If your heart is searching for contentment, it's telling you something. It's telling you what the ancient mathematician Blaise Pascal said, "in our hearts there's a God-shaped vacuum that only God can fill." That feeling of discontent is there to tell you that contentment can be had. Listen to how C.S. Lewis says it.

"The Christian says, 'Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim; well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire; well, there is such a thing as sex.





If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or to be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that country and to help others to do the same.”

Your discontent is the proof that there is something, dare I say, someone, who can satisfy all of your longings. That person is Jesus Christ. Go to him and find your contentment.

Let's pray.