

8.9.09

Learning to Be Content

Philippians 4:10-20

Pastor Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

I was in the office of an orthodontist this week and a mother was talking with the woman at the desk about hair. The receptionist was talking about how frizzy and curly her hair got in the heat and the humidity and how she wished it was straighter. The other woman, whose hair was straight, talked about how she wished her hair was more wavy. Then she said, "I guess whatever way it is, you wish it was the other way." I wanted to interrupt and say, "I am preaching a sermon about contentment this weekend you might want to hear because I think she is right. So often we want what we don't have. Paul was in prison when he wrote to the church in Philippi a letter filled with joy and contentment.

"I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need, for **I have learned to be content with whatever I have.**

I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty.

In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.

**I can do all things through him who strengthens me.**

In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.

You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of *giving and receiving*, except you alone. For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. Not that I seek *the gift*, but I seek the *profit* that *accrues* to your *account*. I have been *paid in full* and **have more than enough; I am fully satisfied**, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my **God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to the riches in glory in Christ Jesus.** To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen."

I want to begin by telling you an old Italian folktale. Once there was a king who had an only son whom he thought the world of, but the prince was always discontented. He would spend days on end at his window, staring into space. "*What on earth do you lack?*" asked the king. "*What's wrong with you?*"

"I don't even know myself, Father."

*"Are you in love? If there's a girl, tell me, and I'll arrange for you to marry her, no matter whether she's the daughter of the most powerful king on earth or the poorest peasant girl alive!"* "No, Father, I'm not in love."

The king tried in every way imaginable to cheer him up, but theaters, balls, concerts, and singing were all useless. Day by day the rosy hue drained from the prince's face. The king issued a decree, and from every corner of the earth came the most learned philosophers, doctors, and professors. The king showed them the prince and asked for their advice. The wise men withdrew to think, and then returned to the king. "Majesty, we given the matter close thought, and we have studied the stars. Here's what you must do. Look for a contented man, a man who is content through and through, and exchange your son's shirt for his."

That same day the king sent ambassadors to all parts of the world in search of a contented man. A priest was taken to the king. *"Are you content?"* asked the king. "Yes, indeed Majesty." *"Fine, how would you like to be my bishop?"* "Oh, Majesty, if only it were so!" *"Get out of my sight! I'm seeking a man who is content just as he is, not one who is trying to better his lot."*

So the search resumed, and before long the king was told about a neighboring king, who everybody said was a truly contented man. He had a wife as good as she was beautiful and a whole slew of children. He had conquered all his enemies, and his country was at peace. Again, hopeful, the king immediately sent ambassadors to him to ask for his shirt.

The neighboring king received the ambassadors and said, *"Yes, indeed, I have everything anybody could possibly want. But at the same time I worry because I'll have to die one day and leave it all. I can't sleep at night for worrying about that!"* The ambassadors thought it wiser to go home without this man's shirt.

At his wit's end, the king went hunting. He fired at a rabbit but only grazed it, and the rabbit scampered away. The king pursued it, leaving the hunting party far behind him. Out in the open field he heard a man singing. The king stopped in his tracks. *"Whoever sings like that is bound to be content!"* The song led him into a vineyard where he found a young man singing and pruning the vines.

*"Good day, Majesty,"* said the youth. *"So early & already out in the country?"* "Bless you!" said the king. *"Would you like me to take you to the capital? You will be my friend."* "Much obliged, Majesty, but I wouldn't even consider it. I wouldn't even change places with the Pope."

*“Why not? Such a fine young man like you...”*

“No, no, I tell you. I’m content with just what I have and want nothing more.”

*“A contented man at last!”* thought the king. *“Listen, young man. Do me a favor.”*

“With all my heart, Majesty, if I can.”

*“Wait just a minute,”* said the king, who, unable to contain his joy any longer, ran to get his entourage. *“Come with me! My son is saved! My son is saved!”*

And he took them to the young man.

*“My dear lad,”* he began, *“I’ll give you whatever you want! But give me...give me...”*

“What, Majesty?”

*“My son is dying! Only you can save him. Come here!”*

The king grabbed him & started unbuttoning the youth’s jacket.

All of a sudden he stopped, and his arms fell to his sides.

The contented man wore no shirt.<sup>1</sup>

We listen to this old story with our sophisticated ears and think it sounds foolish. Who would believe contentment can be found in wearing the shirt of a contented man? We would never be so silly as to think that.... or would we?

How many people are looking for contentment in something external, in stuff, like clothes, cars, and houses where contentment can never be found? Far more people are infected with “**if only**” syndrome than with the swine flu: *“If only I had those clothes, that car, that house, that job, that man, that woman, that bank account, then I’d be content, then I’d be satisfied.”*

The philosopher Immanuel Kant declared, **“Give a man everything he wants, and at that moment, everything will not be everything.”**

Contentment can’t be found in a shirt, or a promotion, or anything external.

It is found in a relationship with God.

In today’s passage from Philippians, Paul speaks of learning the secret of being content in all circumstances. He knows what it’s like to have a lot or little, to have food and to go hungry, he knows what it is to be free and to be in prison. The secret of Paul’s contentment lies in his relationship with Jesus. It is through the priority, intimacy, and commitment of that relationship that Paul has learned that he can do all things, endure all things, persevere through all things and be content. Contentment doesn’t come from a soft or easy life; no one would describe Paul’s life that way.

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<sup>1</sup> Story by Italo Calvino, in William J. Bausch, *A World of Stories*, Twenty-Third Publications, Mystic, CT, 170-171.

Contentment is something commended and commanded by God in the Bible. Paul commends us in 1 Timothy 6:6, “*Godliness with contentment is great gain,*” and we are commanded in Hebrews 13:5, “*Be content with what you have.*” Contentment, though commended and commanded by God, is disregarded and ignored by most people.

“Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., observes that our society is marked by *“inextinguishable discontent.”* For the average American, discontent has become a way of life. Greed and envy are powerful forces in our economic system. Discontent as a driving force for a society might make some in that society rich, but it will bankrupt it in the end. It’s like planting a garden with weeds. Come July there will be plenty of green, but in September we’ll have nothing to eat.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Richard Swenson writes, “Contentment isn’t denying one’s feelings about unhappiness, but instead a freedom from being controlled by those feelings. It isn’t pretending things are right when they are not, but instead the peace that comes from knowing that God is bigger than any problem and that God can work them out for our good. We won’t find contentment unless we diligently seek it. There are a number of steps we can take if we’re serious about pursuing contentment. **First, remember the conflict between contentment and discontent is a struggle that never ends.** It requires effort on our part to paddle upstream against all the currents that create discontent. Many people are striving not for contentment but for **more**. Our thinking needs to be kept untainted from our society’s relativistic standards. God says, “*Be content,*” not “*Be content IF...*” Don’t allow others choices or decisions to influence your contentment. Turn off the ads and tune out the lies that want you to believe “*You need/deserve this product which will make you sexy, desirable, prominent, powerful, and cool and without it you’re nobody.*” Recognizing that no material goods can make us content, we can stop buying as much stuff, and use our money for God’s work and relieving suffering, and living within our means.

Secondly, **develop “counter-habits.”** Instead of getting, try giving. I am sure there are plenty of people like me who have reached the point that we are happier when we stuff leaving our house rather than coming in. Instead of replacing, try preserving. Instead of feeling covetous, try feeling grateful. Instead of feeling inferior before people, try feeling accepted by God. Instead of being ruled by feelings, try enjoying the freedom of contentment.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Swenson, *Margin*, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 186.

Subtract from your needs. Make a list of the things you need and then start crossing things off. 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans believe they have far more needs than their grandparents did. G.K. Chesterton wrote, *“There are two ways to get enough. One is to accumulate more and more. The other is to desire less.”*

God comes first and possessions come second. Possessions are to be used, not loved. One Christian author has written, *“Discontent will destroy your peace, rob you of joy, make you miserable, spoil your witness. We dishonor God if we proclaim a Savior who satisfies and then go around discontent.”*<sup>3</sup> And when it has done its work, discontent abandons us, leaving us no comfort in our indebted, friendless self-pity.

**Third, remember the many advantages of contentment: freedom, gratitude, rest, and peace.** When we’re content we don’t worry about the latest styles or what to wear. We can rejoice in the good fortune of others without being jealous or envious. We don’t worry much about wrinkles or gray hair or no hair because we’ve learned to accept what life brings. If we have wrinkles, gray hair, or no hair it means we have been blessed to live a much longer life than hundreds of millions of people. When we focus on being content we don’t worry about buying this or that just for the sake of going shopping to get this or that. When we are content we have more time for relationships, and gratitude for small things and simple pleasures.

God commanded contentment because we need it to anchor our relationships. **“We relate better to God** when we are satisfied with what the Lord gives.

*“The Christian position from the beginning has been that people are satisfied by becoming reconciled with God, not by acquiring wealth.”*<sup>4</sup>

**We relate better to self** when we are contented with our circumstances. If allowed to write a prescription redesigning our body, personality, or station in life, most of us would grab at the chance: smarter, funnier, richer, better looking, more artistic or athletic. Yet none of these requests would be an issue were not for our comparisons with others. If we were all alone with God (which, in regard to contentment we are), we would have a different set of values than the one society offers.

**We relate better to others** when our relationship is stabilized by contentment. If every encounter with my neighbor reminds me of something I covet or wish I had, that relationship becomes tenuous. Envy makes it hard to have friends because everyone

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<sup>3</sup> J.I. Packer, “The Secret of Contentment,” address given at Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois, 27 February 1984.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction: Christian Faith and its Confrontation with American Society* (Nashville: Nelson, 1983), page 136.

we know has something we do not – personally, financially, relationally, or spiritually. When we are content, we are no longer dependent upon the approval and the opinions of others for our self-worth.

**God is what we need; things are what we use. “Contentment lies not in what is yours, but in whose you are.”** From his prison cell Paul invites us to the freedom of contentment that comes from knowing our contentment rests in a relationship with God that shapes everything else about us.

A Vietnamese woman whose husband was a pastor in Vietnam had seen her husband taken away to prison, and her home and all their belongings confiscated when their church was closed by the police. Like Paul, she wrote Christian friends,

“You know around here we are experiencing hardships, but we thank the Lord He is comforting us and caring for us in every way. When we experience misfortune, adversity, distress & hardship, only then do we see the real blessing of the Lord poured down on us in such a way that we cannot contain it.

“We have been obliged recently to leave our modest apartment and for over two months have been living on a balcony. The rain has been beating down and soaking us. Sometimes in the middle of the night we are forced to gather our blankets and run to seek refuge in a stairwell.

“Do you know what I do then? I laugh and I praise the Lord, because we can still take shelter in the stairwell. I think of how many people are experiencing much worse hardships than I am. Then I remember the words of the Lord, *“To the poor, O Lord, You are a refuge from the storm, a shadow from the heat (Isaiah 25:4),* and I am greatly comforted. Our Father ...is the One who according to the Scriptures does not break the bruised reed nor put out the flickering lamp. He is the One who looks after the orphan and the widow. He is the One who brings blessings and peace to numberless people.

“I do not know what words to use in order to describe the love that the Lord has shown our family. I only can bow my knee and my heart and offer to the Lord words of deepest thanks and praise. Although we have lost our house and our possessions, we have not lost the Lord, and he is enough. With the Lord I have everything. The only thing I would fear losing is his blessing!

Could I ask you and our friends in the churches abroad to continue to pray for me that I will faithfully follow the Lord and serve Him regardless of what the circumstances may be? As far as my husband is concerned, I was able to visit him this past summer. We had a 20-minute conversation that brought us great joy...

I greet you with my love, Mrs. An

I think that is the kind of letter Paul would write today. She has learned the secret of contentment. She has **learned to be content with whatever she has.**

She knows what it is to have little, and she know what it is to have plenty.

In any and all circumstances she has learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.

**She can do all things through him who strengthens her.**

And so can we.

**Blessing:**

“And my **God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to the riches in glory in Christ Jesus.** To our God & Father be glory forever & ever. Amen.”