

“Comfortable or Content”
 Philippians 4:10-13
 www.SoundLiving.org
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Nearly every day the soon-to-graduate teenaged daughter picked a fight with her mother. The daughter was so ready to be done with high school, so ready to move on to the next step in her life and yet so fearful of what that next step would be like and lead to that she was just continually out of sorts and took it out, mostly on her mother. It had gotten so bad and was so hurtful that the mother kept saying to her husband, “I don’t know if I can stand much more of this. **“Just as soon as”** that girl gets to college we’ll finally have some peace in this house.”

In another situation, Tom was struggling with his job. He wasn’t getting paid enough to take the grief he was taking. Every morning he had an emotional battle with himself just to work up the energy to go to work. He had applied for a different job in the company and every day he thought, **“Just as soon as** that new job comes through, then it will be better.”

Have you ever had times in your life, or are you in one of them now, when you find yourself thinking, life stinks but **“just as soon as?”** **“Just as soon as”** such and such changes then it will be better?

- **“Someday** when the kids are grown we’ll be able to take that vacation we’ve been dreaming about.
- **“Someday** when the college bills are paid...
- **“Someday** when I’m done changing diapers...
- **“Someday** when we have more money...
- **“Just as soon as** we get married...
- **“Just as soon as** the divorce is final...
- **“Just as soon as** I get that new job...
- **“Someday... Just as soon as...”**

How many of us live with that - with what I call a “bus stop” mentality? That is, just waiting for the bus to come that will carry us to new circumstances. We’re frustrated, angry, sad, discontented, anxious,

or bored (take your pick) and we're just waiting for things to change - waiting for the bus to come to take us to where life can be what it is supposed to be. How many of us live with a low-grade dissatisfaction with life, waiting for things to change. Or how many of us live with a high-fevered discontent with the ways things are, even angry with God for not changing things.

Bob and Jane Sturm were with the SIM mission agency planning to go to Ethiopia as missionaries. They had committed themselves to this, years earlier, sacrificed to get through school and spent months, traveling and speaking, raising the necessary support. Not long before they were to go, they discovered that their 14-month-old son, John, had a rare hereditary disease which results in mental deterioration, unsteadiness of movements, visual failure and arrest of brain growth resulting in death around 7 years of age. Only a few months later their second son, Mark, was born and soon began showing the same signs. There is no treatment and they were devastated both for their sons and for their plans. ("SIM Now" October 1987, p4-5 found on page 62 of [Finding Contentment in a Disappointing World](#) by Kathy Collard Miller)

With their situation in mind, or yours in mind, listen to the Apostle Paul in Philippians 4:11b-13:

"I have learned to be content *whatever* the circumstances. 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. I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

I don't know what your circumstances are and I can only imagine the mental anguish of the Sturms. But the man who wrote these words about contentment wrote them from a prison where even getting sufficient food required gifts from outside. Paul elsewhere wrote of his situation this way:

1 Corinthians 4:11-13 "To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless.... Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world. (See also 2 Corinthians 6:4-5 and 2 Corinthians 11:23-29)

Paul was about as welcome wherever he went as an Israeli rabbi in a Palestinian refugee camp. If ever there was a man who spoke from

experience, it was Paul. And he said, “I have learned to be **content whatever** the circumstances.”

Really?! Is that possible? We get so anxious about our circumstances that we fret and stew and we strategize and plan. And when our efforts don't make a change quickly enough we murmur and complain. “Content” in these circumstances? Impossible! Never!

Let's go back and see what Paul is talking about.

Philippians 4:10-11 “I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.”

The church in Philippi had sent one of their own, a man named Epaphroditus, to find Paul in the prison where he was being held and provide him probably with food and clothing among other things. And here toward the end of his written response to them, called the letter to the Philippians, Paul expresses his gratitude for the gifts. To our eyes the gratitude seems rather strangely expressed. When he says, “at last you have renewed your concern for me.” it's almost as if he is saying, “It's about time you brought me something.” But to avoid that misunderstanding Paul quickly adds, “Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it.” And when he writes, “I am not saying this because I am in need” he is not saying, “You need to know that I don't really need what you sent.” Instead he is saying, you need to know that your gift is not the basis of our friendship.

Common in Paul's day (and articulated by many ancient philosophers) was the idea of three levels of friendship: good, pleasant and useful. Many friendship are the latter, little more than a mutual advantage relationship.

I was putting a roof on a small but tall building in my yard when the ladder slipped out of place leaving me stranded much higher above the ground than I wanted to be. I waited for a while, then seeing my neighbor I called to him to rescue me. I remember saying something

like, “Man, was I glad to see you.” He was probably not overly flattered that I now saw him as only momentarily very useful to me. Incidentally, that’s not the only basis of my friendship with my neighbor. And Paul didn’t want the Philippians to assume that his feelings for them were based only on their gifts. For earlier he had expressed his deep love for them

Philippians 1:7-8 “I have you in my heart... God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.”

So what does Paul mean when he says, “I am not saying this because I am in need for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances”? As we would learn from the immediately preceding text, Paul has urged the Philippian Christians:

Philippians 4:6-9 “(To) not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus... Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me--put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.”

What follows is our text, where Paul thanks them for their gifts to him. It appears to me that in the very thinking of their gifts Paul realizes he has an opportunity to demonstrate from his own life the very thing he has been urging on them – That is, not to be anxious about life but to allow the peace of God to be their experience – in other words, to live contented lives. Did he not just say, “Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me--put it into practice...”? Well here is Paul’s own example:

Philippians 4:11b “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.

Paul longs for them to know peace and contentment rather than anxiety about their experiences, regardless of how good or bad.

In verse 12 Paul expands on this idea of being content whatever the circumstances. The first sentence of verse 12 is more literally translated, “I know how to be humbled and I know also how to abound.” This seems to be the more *general* way of saying regardless of the circumstances, be they material, physical, emotional

or spiritual, he has “learned the secret of being content in any and every situation.” Lest Paul be accused of being too abstract in his application, in the last phrases of the verse he brings it right down to the nitty-gritty of food and money. I have learned to be content “whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.” Paul speaks of being content not only when he’s comfortable but even when he is extremely uncomfortable. Contentment then is not in the much or the little. For many of us our “little” consumes us and for others our “much” consumes us. We strive to get and we strive to keep. And the anxiety of either is debilitating. But a person is not contented by having much. A person with much may be as unsatisfied and discontented as a person with little. Contentment is not found in the much or the little.

Changed circumstances may bring a measure of comfort but they can’t bring contentment. Because contentment is not found in changed circumstances. And so Paul puts the lie to our “Someday” or “Just as soon as.” Paul says not ***because*** of the circumstances ***but in the very midst of*** the circumstances he is content. Is that really possible? Paul says, yes, it can be learned.

Before I define what contentment is and how we can be content regardless of circumstances, **let me tell you what Christian contentment is not.**

1. It is not just a phlegmatic personality which is unruffled by anything. Paul knew of the philosophy of Stoicism. The Stoics taught that a person was self-sufficient and could discipline himself to be unmoved by joy or grief or any outside influence. We all know the kind of people who are just steady and appear unruffled. But controlled discontent is not contentment.

2. Contentment is also not just the sanguine personality who is cheerful all the time. A happy naiveté is not contentment. Now hear me, I’m grateful the world is not made up of only choleric and melancholies, but steadiness and cheerfulness are not the same as contentment.

3. Contentment is also not just fatalism with a different name. Fatalism is based on a belief that imppersonal forces have

predetermined every aspect of life and we are helpless to change them – “che sera, sera” (Italian – “What will be, will be.”) But a fatalistic attitude is not Christian contentment.

I still haven’t told you what Christian contentment is or how we learn to have it. But before I do, let me tell you more of what it is not.

4. Contentment is not ignorance. **We know when we are in a difficult situation or when we are in pain. It would only be comfort not contentment if we weren’t actually experiencing the difficulty.** You hear the dozing sighs of a baby after it has eaten and you might say those are the sounds of contentment. At one level you are right but let that baby feel a hunger pang and the contentment is gone for everyone. Contentment is not naiveté.

5. Contentment is also not passivity. Some might think that contentment means that we give up any effort toward justice or fairness in our situation. That we lay back and let whatever happens, happen. Contentment doesn’t mean we can’t express our disappointment and pain to God or godly friends. The Psalmist often seemed to learn contentment in the very process of complaining to God. God met him in his discontent and showed him another perspective. (E.g. Psalm 94 among others.) It also doesn’t mean we can’t seek to mitigate our negative circumstances. The classic biblical examples are when Paul was imprisoned improperly and demanded proper treatment and when he was being denied due process of law as a Roman Citizen and demanded that he be taken to Caesar. We are responsible to seek to change what we can change. Contentment does not mean passivity.

So if contentment is not passivity, ignorance, fatalism, cheerfulness or unflappability, what is it? 350 years ago Puritan theologian and preacher Jeremiah Burroughs defined contentment this way: “Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every situation.” I like Burrough’s wording better, but let me attempt to put it in contemporary English. **Christian**

contentment is a decision of the mind and attitude of the heart to trust our heavenly Father and be thankful for his choices for us.

The day **before** Epaphroditus arrived with the gifts, Paul was in prison and he was hungry. After the gifts arrived, his stomach was filled and his heart was overjoyed at the love expressed by the Philippians. But Paul says no matter which it is, I have learned to be content. How is that possible? His answer: “I can do everything through **him** who gives me strength.” Let’s be careful that we don’t take this verse out of context and try to make it say more than God means. Some would use the verse as a kind of Christian mantra suggesting that the Christian can do anything in Christ’s power. That if we just had sufficient faith we could depend on Jesus to give us the power to do whatever we set our minds to do. While we don’t want to unnecessarily limit the great promise here, we do want to see that Paul is talking about “contentment.” In every circumstance of life, Paul says, it is possible, through Christ, to be content.

It all hinges on those two little words, “through **him**”! For Paul every circumstance of life is viewed from the perspective of his relationship with Jesus. He completely trusts Jesus to be back of and even in every situation of his life. If this is what Jesus has willed for the moment, then Paul yields to that in peace. For Paul contentment is found in Jesus.

But to learn that contentment we must stop looking for it in all the wrong places. **First we must stop trying to find it in our circumstances.** Especially in our culture we equate contentment with comfort – physical and emotional.

- We say to ourselves, surely God couldn;t mean for me to live this way.
- Surely God doesn’t mean for me to be suffering this way or that way.
- Surely God doesn’t want me unhappy, or stressed out, or whatever.

The truth is that God promises **difficulty** and we ought not to think it strange. It is through hardship that God shapes us most and best. We like to pick the ways that God will test us and grow us. But we must not be our own sculptors.

Hebrews 12:7-11 “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father...? Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live...! God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹ No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

Very few people in the Bible were made better through comfort and in fact most were brought down by it. But nearly without exception, God’s people were made better through adversity. We might **find** comfort in some circumstances but we won’t find Christian contentment.

Secondly and similarly, we must stop demanding things of life and God. Our problem is that we think God owes us. We’ve gotten it all wrong: we think the faithful Christian life should result in prosperity, health, happiness and comfort. Our discontent lies in the disorder of the heart wherein we think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. In our pride we assume we have rights. I know this is a negative way of expressing it, but false expectations about life are fatal to contentment. Unmet expectations result in discontent and a complaining (it is often called “murmuring” in the Bible).

- In murmuring (whether aloud or only in our hearts) we become distracted, unstable and confused in our thinking flitting from one thought to another.
- We become consumed with our circumstances and are distracted from our service of God and others.
- We become faithless thinking this situation is too hard for God.
- Or we become angry with God thinking he won’t do anything about it.

- Murmuring leads us to devise sinful ways to take the situation into our own hands.
- Complaining becomes habitual and creates a chronic **discontent**. (Much from Jeremiah Burroughs in The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment, 1648, Republished in 1964 by The Banner of Truth Trust.)

I borrowed much of that from Jeremiah Burroughs who also wrote: “Sometimes the very saints of God find the beginnings of rebellion when an affliction remains for a long time and is very severe and heavy indeed upon them... They find in their hearts something of a rising against God, their thoughts begin to bubble, and their affections begin to move in rebellion against God himself.” (P 25 The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment) We are discontented and even angry with God because our expectations aren’t being met.

But Contentment comes when we stop focusing on our circumstances or our expectations and instead focus our attention on God himself.

There are two things I want to say about focusing our attention on God. **First of all contentment is found in putting our souls under God’s loving authority.** We grow discontented because we don’t truly believe in the providence of God. We don’t think that God is truly working for our good in every detail of life. We act like deists or agnostics who believe that maybe God started everything but he is now largely absent and if good things are going to happen to us **we** must make them happen. And when bad things happen to us we are on our own to fix it. But what if we really believed what Jesus said:

Matthew 6:24-34 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear.... Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they...? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

What if we really believed that God is in complete control of every detail of our lives and loves us more than we love ourselves?

Theologian Helmut Thielicke wrote “If (I could see that God’s) Heart beats for this world, then my anxiety would be removed with one blow. There (I would know that) nothing could touch me that had not first passed the censorship of that Heart and been declared by that Heart to be wholesome and good for me. Then in everything that troubles me, in everything I dread, the hidden theme of love is at work, even though I am unable to detect it in the confused beat of this disjointed world. Then for me it would simply be enough that all these things come from the heart of God...” Thielicke Sermon on the Mount 140)

We learn contentment when we deliberately put our souls under the loving authority of God’s will. Paul completely trusted Jesus to be behind and in every situation of his life. If this was what Jesus had willed for the moment, then Paul yielded to that, in peace. Earlier I said contentment comes when we stop focusing on our circumstances or our expectations and instead focus our attention on God himself.

The second thing I want to say about that is that Christian contentment comes not only by submitting our wills to God’s will but through truly finding contentment in God himself. Paul said, “I can do everything **through him** who gives me the strength.” Obviously Paul didn’t find his contentment in circumstances. Just as obviously he didn’t find contentment in just lowering his expectations. He didn’t even find contentment just in submitting his will to God’s will in some abstract or fatalistic way. He found contentment in Jesus himself. His life was not bad or good based on pain or comfort. He centered his life in Jesus and then knew that every thing that Jesus allowed was for his good. He was content in life because he was confident of Jesus. Earlier he wrote, “For to me to live, is Christ” not just in that he obeyed Jesus but that he lived in constant awareness of Jesus’ presence and love. Oh Christian, do you know that he loves you that much? How long will it take us to learn? Hardship, suffering, and even tragedy in the life of the believer are not signs of God’s displeasure. You might say “Well, it is my sin that has put me in this difficult place. And I say “Then confess your sin and turn from

it. But you say, “I have and nothing changes!” And I say, “Then know that your heavenly Father has left you there so that his loving purposes can be accomplished in your life.” And then you have a choice to murmur or trust.

I don’t know if the illustration works for you or not but I recall several times when I disciplined my children when they were very young. They would cry in their pain and sometimes be angry. But even while still in their pain, when they got past their anger (their murmuring?), they would come to be held. Why? Because they trusted that there, there was love. In our most difficult situations we can choose to murmur or trust. When we murmur, we pull away. When we trust, we climb into the lap of Jesus to know his presence.

Christian contentment is found in God himself. Jeremiah Burroughs wrote, “A soul that is capable of God can be filled (satisfied, content) with nothing else but God.” (43, Burroughs)

The Psalmist knew it:

Psalm 73:25-26

“Whom have I in heaven but you?
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but **God** is the strength of my heart
and my portion (my contentment, my satisfaction) forever.

The Old Testament prophet Habakkuk knew it:

Habakkuk 3:17-18

“Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.

Contentment is being in love with God in the moment rather than wishing for the past or waiting for the future.

Bob Sturm, of whom I spoke at the beginning of this message, wrote, “Needless to say, seeing (our sons in this crippled condition) is very hard emotionally.... Our hopes that Mark would enjoy a normal life were very high. But we’re eternally grateful that we know the Lord, and that he can somehow use these little lives for his glory. And we know that they will spend eternity in his presence...whole. John continues to be a content little boy. He has continued to regress and is now very floppy and hard to hold. We have pretty well accepted his condition and though his care involves a lot of time and work, we are happy to serve his needs. Being forced to deal with the possibility of his death has been a time of grieving. We still desire very much to serve in Ethiopia. In fact talking and thinking about that is second only to the grief we feel for our boys. We’re so glad we can place these two things which are so important to us into the Lord’s loving hands.”

(“SIM Now” October 1987, p4-5 found on page 62 of Finding Contentment in a Disappointing World by Kathy Collard Miller)

Philippians 4:11b-13

“I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² 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. ¹³ I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”

You will find the following two books very helpful on this matter:
The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment by Jeremiah Burroughs
 published by Banner of Truth Trust (An excellent biblical treatise on the subject – much more substantive than the following)
Finding Contentment in a Disappointing World by Kathy Collard Miller
 published by IVP (A more popular, illustrated treatment of the subject)