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Learning to be Content

Philippians 4:10-14; 2 Corinthians 11: 23-27; 1Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19

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So...life is a gift, and every day matters! But practically speaking, how do we live that way? One of the requirements for capturing the moments every day is: you must have a heart of contentment. I'll guarantee you a discontented heart will miss the moments again and again and again. That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Philippians 4. Philippians is one we refer to as the prison epistles. It's really helpful as we dig into what Paul has to say, to understand Paul is not writing from a cabin in the mountains somewhere, contemplating contentment. He's writing from a Roman prison. He's waiting to hear whether he will live or die. He's in prison because of his proclamation of the gospel. This is the person who is writing about contentment. Pick it up in verse 10 of chapter 4:

> **But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned *before*, but you lacked opportunity.**
>
> (*NASB, Philippians 4:10)

Verse 10 is talking about a financial gift that Epaphrodites delivered to him from the Philippian church. It kind of moves him then into this discussion where he wants to be grateful for the gift, but he also sees this as a teachable moment. He wants to also remind them, no matter what, he has learned to be content. Verse 11:

> **Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through** (Christ, or through) **Him who strengthens me. Nevertheless, you have done well to share *with me* in my affliction.** (Vs. 11-14)

Paul says he has **learned to be content**. It's really helpful to understand that there is nobody in the room where your default setting is contentment. This is something that Paul had to learn. It wasn't a default switch because he was so super-spiritual. So it's helpful to start with: this is something I have to discipline myself for; it's a perspective I have to learn. When we stop and just kind of ponder what Paul said, it's really helpful not to miss the fact that he says, *"I've learned to be content in any and all circumstances*," which includes going hungry, which includes humble circumstances, which includes suffering need. It's real easy to look at biblical characters and think, somehow, for them life was different. You look at the apostle Paul and you think it was probably a miracle every day. If he was hungry, he got manna from heaven. If he was sick, he was healed. I mean, it's different. He could be content because God gave him a miracle every day. But that's simply not true. As a matter of fact, Paul lived a brutal, abusive life as an adult. It would be hard to imagine anyone in the room this morning who has lived a more abusive life as an adult.

One of the challenges in the miracle stories—you read through the Bible and see these great miracle stories—and we love it that Joseph ended up the number two man in Egypt. We love it that David made it on to the throne—all these great deliverance stories. Peter got delivered from jail, and it kind of gives us a false sense that whenever there was a problem, God showed up and God

delivered. We lose sight of the fact that that was actually extraordinarily rare, and most the time life was hard and often times abusive for these core leaders of the gospel.

One of the realities we all struggle with is, when someone gets a miracle, we find ourselves happy but also confused, because for everyone that gets their miracle, there are a hundred that didn't. It's great when someone gets healed of cancer by the power of God. For every one of those, there are thousands of Christians that die of cancer, and they find themselves wondering, "Where was my miracle?" You read these great missionary biographies—stories about God's power and God's deliverance and God's protection—and they're amazing stories. When I was a kid growing up, we had an album—vinyl records—that had these classic missionary stories, and we used to listen to them again and again and again. I remember one story where the missionaries were in a tribe full of cannibals and they were in their hut. And that night the cannibals were going to attack them and kill them and consume them, but when they looked out, there was this army of angels surrounding the hut with flaming swords, and once again God protected them. Great missionary stories—but then there are those among us this morning that would ask the question, "Where were those angels with their flaming swords when I was sexually abused night after night after night?" I hear these stories all the time—young girls who cried out to God to do something, to rescue them! And there were no angels with flaming swords and they wonder, "Where was my miracle? And where was God in that moment?" That's the struggle we all wrestle with. And it's easy to think that somehow the people in the Bible, their stories were different, and they always got their miracle. But that's simply not true. The one who's telling us to be content lived an abusive, difficult, painful life.

Just to remind us of a couple of experiences, flip back a little bit to 2 Corinthians, Chapter 11. What's helpful about what Paul lists in Corinthians is to realize Corinthians was written before Philippians. Therefore, everything that he mentions in Corinthians had already transpired when he was writing to the Philippians. So when he says "*I've learned to be content in every and all circumstances*," this is just a sampling of what he's talking about. So pick it up in 2 Corinthians 11, partway through verse 23:

> **...in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine *lashes*. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. *I have been* on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from *my* countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; *I have been* in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.**
>
> (2 Corinthians 11:23b-27)

You get just a sampling of Paul's life as an adult. Now think about this. He is probably the greatest theologian, the greatest missionary, the greatest church-planter in the history of Christianity. What sense does it make that God would allow Paul to rot in a Roman jail? Why not release him and let him plant a hundred more churches? How could this possibly make sense? Eventually Paul will be released from this imprisonment. A few years later he'll be arrested again, this time there will be no release; he will be executed by Nero. This is the man that is saying, "*I have learned to be content in every and all circumstances."* So before you're tempted to say, "Yeah, but if you knew what I was going through,"...maybe rethink that.

So what is Paul talking about? What does he mean by *contentment*? This is kind of the key to our discussion. It is two Greek words put together, meaning "sufficiency in self or self-sufficiency". Probably Paul was utilizing a concept that had been made popular by a group of philosophers called the Stoics. The Stoics captured this concept of self-sufficiency, of contentment. It was to them kind of a creed; it was something that defined them.

Now before we quickly arrive at a judgment with them saying *self*-sufficiency, it's helpful to unpack that they were actually much closer than what we might think to the truth. Basically, the idea of the Stoics was this: On any given day, there are hundreds of circumstances beyond my control. I can't control the people around me. I can't control my circumstances. There is very little on any given day I can control. So if I simply surrender to that, then everyday my perspective...my mood...my emotions...my attitude is at the mercy of a hundred different things and people I can't control. So the Stoics basically said, "I won't live that way! Rather, I *choose* that regardless of the external circumstances, this is my life, and I choose today my attitude. I choose today my perspective. I choose today my emotions. My life is not at the mercy of a hundred different things I can't control or change. I can choose today to be happy. I can choose today to be at rest. I can choose today to be at peace. It's my life. It's my choice." That's essentially what the Stoics meant by contentment.

So Paul is capturing this concept—he does this a number of times in the New Testament. He takes something that is known in the culture and he "Christianizes" it, so that's why he goes on to say, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." As a matter of fact he says, "I've learned the *secret*." It's a Greek word from which we get our English word *mystery*, connected with the mystery religions of the Greeks. Basically, there was this insider information that unlocked the gods—that's how the Greeks thought of it. Paul's taking that term and he's saying, "Actually the Stoics were close but they couldn't pull it off because at the end of the day they were not sufficient." Paul's learned the secret. The secret is when you have Christ, the eternal God of the universe, then you are in a sense self-sufficient, because you are Christ-sufficient, and when you have Jesus, you have enough! No matter what was going on externally, every day Paul disciplined himself to accept that this is my story today, and no matter what's going on, I do believe Christ is enough!

Now think about that. Contentment is not giving up. It's not being passive...not rolling over...not some sort of fatalism. If Paul could get out of prison, he would. If Paul could avoid beatings and persecution, he certainly would. There's always *our* part and *God's* part. It's more a matter of: this is my life today. Whatever it is that you're going through—there are a hundred different circumstances and people that are beyond your control—no matter how much you fuss, no matter how much you worry, no matter how much anxiety you have, no matter how much anger or bitterness you stir up, you cannot control or change a hundred different things today. So contentment is accepting that. But this is a day and it's a gift and I'll never get this day back, so contentment is saying that this is my situation today and such as it is, I will accept the fact that as long as I have Christ, for today that is enough! I am not a victim of all the circumstances around me that I can't control or change. I choose my attitude today. I choose my perspective today. I choose my emotions today. I can choose to be joyful. I can choose to be at peace. I can choose to be at rest. It's not positive thinking; it's a deep understanding that I have Christ and as long as I have Christ this day, that is enough!

That is the essence of the contentment. That's the secret that Paul is talking about. I do not have to live my life at the mercy of a hundred different things I can't change and control. This is my life. This is my day. That's what I choose. That's contentment. That is the frame of mind that puts us in the right place to capture the moments everyday that you will never get back.

Years ago I was aware of a gentleman who had gone through a painful, bitter divorce. He was very angry, very bitter. That was very obvious. He had full custody of his son and his son was absolutely a most delightful young man. When I knew him, it was primarily through his middle-school and high school years. I actually spent a lot of time with this kid and it was always enjoyable—he was just a wonderful young man. But his father was so angry and bitter about the divorce, that's all he thought about...all he talked about. On numerous occasions I said to this man, "You have become so angry and bitter that you don't see that you have a treasure living under your roof everyday. And if something doesn't change, if you don't realize the gift that you have, you're going to wake up one morning, and he's going to be gone, and you will have missed it all." I had that conversation with him multiple times. I remember being at this young man's graduation party, and his father came up to me and he started to cry. First words out of his mouth, he said, "I missed it...I missed it! He's gone...he's gone! He'll never be back and I missed it!" He even said, "You warned me again and again and again and I wouldn't listen. I was so angry and bitter and now he's gone. I'll never get those days back again."

Anger...bitterness...anxiety...fear—these are all good ways to waste a life—day after day after day that you'll never get back. Contentment doesn't mean that everything's working out. It doesn't mean that you're getting your miracle. It doesn't mean that life makes sense. It just means that today, this is my life such as it is, and there are a hundred things I can't change or control, but I'm not at the mercy of my circumstances. I can choose today to be content because Christ is enough!

One other passage I want to look at quickly is 1Timothy, Chapter 6. I just want to emphasize that this is such a common theme in the Scriptures. 1Timothy 6 is very Ecclesiastes-like. Paul sounds just like Solomon a thousand years before him. In chapter six Paul is writing to Timothy. Timothy is a young pastor. This would be a few years after he wrote Philippians and getting closer and closer to his imprisonment and death. He's talking about false teachers in chapter six. By the time he gets to verse five, he says the false teachers are in it for the money. They think godliness is a means of great gain—he's talking about financial gain. Paul then takes the language and turns it to something else starting in verse 6:

> **But godliness *actually* is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment.**

There it is. Paul says, *"Actually there is great gain in godliness*." What is the gain? It's not financial; it's this elusive thing called contentment. That's the gain—to understand this deep, rich theology that tells us that no matter what, Christ is enough! That is the great gain of true godliness! So what's the enemy of contentment? Verse 7:

> **For we have brought nothing into the world, so we can take nothing out of it either. If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.** (Vs. 7-10)

...very Solomon-ish. What is the great enemy of contentment? Well, first he reminds us that you brought nothing into the world, so you will take nothing with you. To spend a lifetime accumulating stuff you will leave behind is an utter waste of a life. Then he goes on to talk about the real enemy of contentment is this *longing* to be rich. Now he's not saying the problem is money. The problem is this longing or lust for more—this desire to be rich—this love of money. It's

exactly what Solomon said, “Because the more you have...the more you want; the more you spend...the more you want,” and it just turns into this cycle that is nothing more than *chasing after the wind*. It is the enemy of contentment—a big problem in our culture. We live in a discontented culture—a culture that always wants the latest and greatest. We live in a throw-away culture. This is old—like six months old—so we throw it away. We want the new! We want the best!

Over the Christmas holidays I always listen closely to the commercials on television and radio because I always know these stewardship messages are coming. There's absolutely no question that the motive of the marketers is to make you dissatisfied with who you are and what you own, in order that you will purchase their product. We live in a culture of discontentment—the enemy of contentment. If you don't learn to be content, you're going to miss the moments that ultimately bring joy to life. He says that it **plunges men into ruin**. That word plunge means "to drown". You end up drowning in a whole series of foolish choices. In verse 10 he's talking about the love of money leads to all kinds of disastrous decisions and at the end, he says, “You **pierce** yourself; you ruin your own life by your own foolish, lustful desires. In verse 11 he tells Timothy, “Flee from that way of thinking,” verse 12, “Take hold of that which is eternal.” The rest of that paragraph is a reminder of the return of Christ—that one day when Jesus comes back, all that will matter is what we've done for eternity. Those who live for the things that matter will know in that moment, that was the right way to live. We pick it up then in verse 17:

> **Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches...**

So the problem is not money; the problem is the *love of money*; the problem is the lust for more. The problem is this discontentment that drives us, causes us to spend a lifetime *chasing the wind*. So he says, “For those that are rich, that's not a problem. God's not a minimalist. God doesn't think that less is more.” I know people that have very little who are extremely conceited, because they think somehow less is more and they are more spiritual. That's a foolish notion. There's no problem with having it, and frankly this would describe almost all of us in the room. Compared to the way the rest of the world lives, God would consider all of us very rich. So don't become **conceited**. Self-worth is not determined by net-worth. Just because you have a lot doesn't mean that you're worth more, doesn't mean you're opinion is worth more, doesn't mean that you should deserve certain treatment by others. We're all equal in the eyes of God. Nobody is *more than* or *less than*. The challenge with this is that when you have more, God has blessed you. Good for you! But when you step out into the culture, in the eyes of the culture your net-worth does define your self-worth. In our culture, you are worth more to them. We all know this. If you drive a Mercedes, in the eyes of the culture you are worth more than somebody that drives an old minivan. You are given deference. You are given certain treatment. You are treated as if your opinion matters more. That's not your fault; you can't control that. The danger is that starts to define you and you start to think, “Because I have more, I *am* worth more. My opinion's worth more. I should be treated differently.” You have to discipline yourself to say that isn't true; in the eyes of God we are all equal!

The second warning is: don't put your trust in riches. Riches are uncertain. Riches ultimately can never deliver the goods...

> **...but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. *Instruct them* to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for**

themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed. (Vs. 17-19)

This is the critical part of cultivating a theology of stewardship. If you've been blessed, good for you! Celebrate that! Enjoy that! Be thankful for that! God doesn't have a problem with that. He is the one who has blessed you with that. Share it! Do good with it! Be generous with it and invest it into the things that last forever! That last verse basically is just like what Jesus said. If you take what you've been given—you enjoy it, you do good with it, you share it, you're generous with it, you invest it into the things that matter—because where that money's going is where your heart's going to be going. And if your money goes to the things that matter, your heart will go to the things that matter—and you will live for the things that last forever! Jesus said, "Where your money is, that's where your heart will be." Invest it in the things that matter forever because your heart will go with it, and you'll find yourself living for the things that matter forever!

Many of you know this has been a big theme for us—especially in this decade. We're towards the tail end of what we've referred to as *A Decade on Purpose*. For those of you that were here at the beginning of the decade, we asked you to frame the next ten years of your life—to think about what are the things that really will matter forever and then to really discipline yourself to live for those things—so when you get to the end of the decade, you'll realize, "I've really lived for the things that matter." It's hard to believe, but if this was a football game, we're in the fourth quarter, and we want to finish the decade well, then we should all go out of the auditorium this morning with four fingers up, fourth quarter—and we're going to take the fourth quarter; we're going to win this thing—so we want to finish well and on track.

In the spirit of that, we want to offer a tool to help with that. It's a small group DVD series called, "*Money Talks*". The subtitle is "A Biblical Study of How Money Reveals What Matters Most to Us". This is not about budgeting. It's not about debt or saving or about money management. About ninety-some percent of every passage in the Bible dealing with money has nothing to do with those things. The very consistent message of the Scriptures, as it has to do with money, is that money is a very objective way to measure what matters most to you. It's a way to measure: "What am I actually living for?" A lot of people say they're living for the things that matter, but at the end of the day your money is the most objective way to measure that. So it's simply a tool to put in your hands, to again assess what matters most to me. If you want to live for the things that matter, then let's continue to ask ourselves, "Is that actually how I'm living, and what is the evidence of that?" It's just a way to help you kind of think through this. It's meant as a small group curriculum. If you're already in a small group, we just ask that sometime in the next year you go through it. It's only six weeks. The lesson is on DVD and then there's a discussion guide. If you're not in a small group, grab a group of friends, say, "Hey, let's get together for six weeks. Let's do this thing together." A great way would be to do it within your section. Just find a handful of people in your section—"Let's form a group; let's do this together." Whatever works for you—but sometime in the next year we'd ask you to take it and to go through it as a group. The discussion guide and the DVD are at the Publications Center. Discussion guides are $2—that's our cost—and the DVD is $5—of course you just need one per group. Or if you prefer, in the bulletin there's information how you can simply go online, download it yourself; then it doesn't cost you anything. But this would be a tool that we would encourage you to take advantage of, to assess your life, to make sure, at the end of the decade, we're all really living for the things that matter.

The last thing would be: right after I pray, our final song is going to be the song "*Christ is Enough*". Based on what we have discussed this morning, this is an opportunity to declare our pledge, our

creed, to say, “You know, that's the way I want to live. No matter what's happening in my life right now, this day, this is my life—and I'm going to accept the fact that no matter what's happening, on this day I do believe...Christ is enough!

Our Father, we're so thankful for You, that You know us and that You love us and that no matter what it is we're going through today, this day Christ is enough. God, help us to live that way so we capture the moments—the moments that matter. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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