
Stewardship: Contentment

Philippians 4:11-13

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Introduction September is the month that we devote to stewardship. This is the beginning of a new ministry year and we want to remind ourselves that we are stewards of all that God has given to us. As Russ mentioned last week, for those of you who are our guests, this may fit into your stereotype of church – always asking for money—but that is not our emphasis. We are focusing our attention on our responsibility and accountability to God. This month we are talking about our spiritual gifts, the gospel, and our money. We are wanting to focus on the fact that God has given us everything that we have and we are stewards of those gifts.

Last week, Russ made a parting comment at the end of his message, that was not a part of his manuscript. He said that he believed that God gives us what He intends for us to give back to Him. It is our responsibility to make sure that is given back as opposed to used for our own purposes. I thought about that for some time this week. Was that really true? Does God give us what He wants us to give back to Him?

In my investigation, I discovered that to be a true statement. It can be shown from several places in Scripture. So I thought, since that is true, what happens to that gift and why? I came to the conclusion that the root issue with not having what God gave us to give is not being content with life as we live it. We are not content people.

A couple of years ago, I read a book entitled The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment by Jeremiah Burroughs. Burroughs was an English puritan preacher who lived between 1599 and 1646. It had a profound effect on me.

Russ has mentioned that all of the elders are to prepare a series of messages each year. I told him that I would do a series on contentment as a result of reading that book. That was last ministry year. I obviously didn't get the series done for last ministry year. This is the introductory message from that series. Hopefully I will get the series done for this ministry year. Much of this message has been taken from Burroughs' book.¹

Contentment Must be Learned

(v.11)

We have been reminded frequently from this pulpit that we need to read our Bibles carefully. This is one of those texts that I have read hundreds of times, and have never thought about what I have read. Look at verse 11 again. <read verse> Do you see those words “have learned”. I never thought about those words until I read Jeremiah Burroughs book. God is telling us through the apostle Paul that we need to learn contentment. And it is not just learning about contentment, it is learning to be

¹ Jeremiah Burroughs, The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1964)

content in every situation. Pastor Burroughs describes this as a great art that is the duty, glory, and excellence of a Christian.

And notice that Paul said that he has learned contentment. That means that he went through God's school in the past and he can say that he has now attained it. He does not say that he is still learning, or that he is looking forward to a time when he will have to relearn or learn the next lesson; he has learned and is standing in full assurance that he has graduated from God's school with a diploma in contentment. Learning contentment will take up another message.

Contentment is a Secret

(v.12)

But look with me at verse 12. Paul refers to this learning as a secret. Is this something that we must have a special key to unlock or a special insight into? I doubt that. What Paul is referring to is that contentment is like a mystery. When an unbeliever looks at what contentment really is, it is a mystery to him. Contentment involves knowing and experiencing affliction, seeking to remove that affliction by Godly means, and yet being content with all of it. There is the mixture of joy and sorrow. How can there be both of these emotions at the same time? That is the mystery – the secret. It doesn't make sense to a rational mind. Learning about what this secret is will take up another message, as well.

Contentment is Possible

(v.13)

The crowning touch on this teaching about contentment is that it is possible. Just to have to mention that God is the One Who has to strengthen me to learn contentment makes it a very hard course to complete. We are unable to complete this course without the enabling grace of God working in our lives. What seems impossible to the natural man is only possible through the work of the mighty power of God in our lives. We can read of examples in Scripture of those who were able to graduate from this course successfully. Reading Acts we can see what the school of God did in the life of Paul. And reading the Gospels we can see what the school of God did in the life of Christ. The hope of this passage is that God tells us that all of us have all that we need to graduate with a degree in contentment.

What Contentment Is Not

I believe that many Christians have a distorted view of what contentment is. So I would like to give a few items of what contentment is not. Many times describing what something is not helps to better understand what something is.

First of all, contentment is not acknowledging that you are in a situation that is not to your liking. God doesn't call us to be Stoics. He doesn't say that we are to act like nothing is the matter. We aren't supposed to tell ourselves that the situation in which we find ourselves is really nothing. We must acknowledge that there is pain and suffering in our lives. Jesus told us to take up our crosses daily and follow Him. There are crosses to bear. So being content in that cross-bearing doesn't mean that we say there is no cross.

Second, being content does not mean that we can't complain to God and to others about our plight. Before you go off and say that Greg told me I could complain, let me qualify that word complain by saying that there is a God-honoring way of complaining. Just read the Psalms and you will see God-honoring complaints. God knows our hearts. He knows our weaknesses. Jesus has experienced all of our emotions and pains and is touched by our weaknesses. He understands and intercedes for us. And how are we going to get Godly counsel on how to handle situations if we don't make our situations known to other believers. How can they come along side and hold up the mirror of God's Word and show us our hearts and encourage us with The Word, if they don't know what we are experiencing. So contentment has nothing to do with keeping everything to ourselves.

Third, being content doesn't mean that I sit idly by and wait for some means of deliverance without first making an evaluation of your situation to see what you can and should do about it. The situation in which you find yourself may be a result of sinful choices and actions on your part. You need to see if you are guilty of being lazy, loving ease and pleasure too much, sinful pride which brought you to this place, or that this is just a part of the harvest for sinful seeds that you have sown. If so, then you need to repent, seek forgiveness, and change your heart and behavior to honor God. It is also OK to be looking for a way to change your situation. Perhaps you are not making enough money to support your family. It is not discontent to be searching for a different job, or going after more training in order to qualify for a better paying job. What shows discontent is when trying to change your situation becomes your obsession. You do not acknowledge God in the situation and believe that you are the one who must change it. Working and looking for a way to change your situation must still be submitted to a sovereign God Who knows and delivers in His way and His time.

What Contentment Is

Now that we have looked at what contentment is not, let's begin with a definition of contentment. I am indebted to Jeremiah Burroughs for the following discussion concerning contentment. I have distilled and summarized his thoughts².

“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 condition.”

I think that we can understand more about contentment by enlarging each part of this definition.

A work of the heart

The first part of the definition describes contentment as a work of the heart. It is described as a *sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit*. Many people think that contentment has to do with what they display outwardly. They believe that as long as they show calmness, do not speak in a way that would be considered

² Jeremiah Burroughs, The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1964), pp. 19-40.

rude, angry, disappointed, or depressed, then they are content. They show calmness and control, but inwardly they are disturbed, angry, fretting, or down. If contentment were as easy as keeping quiet on the outside, then we wouldn't need the work of God to learn it.

Having a sweet, quiet spirit is one that doesn't murmur or complain. It doesn't worry or fret. It isn't so distracted that you can't perform what you need to do. You are not so occupied with your situation, that you can think about productive matters. You do not have trouble sleeping, eating, and your relationships with God and others are not affected. Having a quiet spirit does not mean that you don't think about your situation. It just means that your thoughts are controlled and do not consume you.

A contented heart will not give up hope and question God's goodness. It trusts in a good God Who has the good of His children and His glory as His primary purpose. This contented heart does not give in to trying to make its situation better by any means that it can. It doesn't take matters into its own hands. Many times we are so tired of our situations that we believe that the end justifies the means. It doesn't matter how I get out from under this situation, just so I get out!

And one of the biggest signs of a discontented heart is when we get angry with God. Somehow He doesn't act the way we believe He should. He doesn't move in our time, and in our way. We believe that we are better able to handle this than He.

A sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit shows what we are really like at the heart level. If we have a heart that believes the truth about God and His workings in our lives, that is only part of the heart. We need to obey in a believing way what we believe to be true. There are times when we are content when a situation comes into our lives because we are in a good mood, or some other outward event makes it easy to receive life's curve balls. But a gracious frame of spirit is always poised to receive life's curve balls, even when we aren't in a good mood. This gracious frame of spirit does not depend on someone's personality – whether they are normally a quiet person. It doesn't depend on being able to have a strong will to endure that is conjured up by sheer will power. It doesn't depend on a resolution that I carry around with me to remind me to be gracious and quiet. A contented heart is one that actively pursues God and works to please Him in all that he does. A contented heart lives for God's glory whether or not he likes his situation or not. No one would know that his situation were anything but good by observing his life, his desires, and his attitudes.

Submitting to God's Providential Care

The second part of the definition describes our response to God's providential care. It is described as *freely submitting to and delighting in God's wise and fatherly disposal*.

To freely submit to God involves a number of actions, attitudes and beliefs. It is described as being done freely or easily. This could be illustrated by how children respond to their parents. Children can submit freely, or only after much hard and painful work. When we have a situation that is not to our liking, we can be

very disturbed about it and make a big issue out of it. And we will only quiet down when someone has worked with us over and over again. We are confronted with our sinful response and our lack of submission to God's wise work in our lives and we quiet down for a little while. But it's not long before we are back to the same place we were before. And then we must be confronted again with God's truth. It is only after much work and time that we finally submit to God and His providential care. Contentment shows itself to believe in God's wise care very quickly and easily. There may be a short time of questioning and wondering about God's goodness, but it is short-lived and is repented of quickly.

Being submissive to God's providential care means that I voluntarily and willingly place myself under God's sovereignty, His authority, His power, and His dominion over all things. But being willing to submit is not enough. Submitting must also be a great pleasure to you. It must be a settled condition of your heart. Seeing the hand of God in all situations, and believing that He is just, and righteous, and good is the beginning. But taking pleasure in God's providential care means being able to say truthfully and wholeheartedly that it is good to be in this situation in which God has placed me. There is a quiet assurance and a joyful satisfaction that God is a good God Who has my good at the heart of this time. Pleasure in submission is not dependent on whether or not you can see why God has brought you to this situation. It is pleased just to know that God is in this no matter whether or not you will ever know why.

In Every Situation

The last part of the definition deals with how we view every situation of life. It is described as *God's disposal in every condition*. Do we see God in every detail, or do we look at the ways and means that He uses and try to explain away the situation as something that we can respond to sinfully.

God uses people, events, natural disasters, and everything else in His created world to put us into situations for our good and His glory. But many times we blame people and events for our situation. We reason that if only so-and-so had not done that, or said that, or been there, then we wouldn't be in this mess. We do not see God working behind all things for our good. We see it as undeserved trouble and situations that we could have stopped or controlled, if only we had known about them ahead of time. We squirm and wiggle under them and try our best to get out from under them. A contented heart looks at all things and sees the wisdom of God. It understands and believes that God knows how to order everything for good. God knows better than I what I need and how it can be brought about. The Lord knows the beginning from the end and therefore, has the whole picture in view. I have only a very small slice.

When we think about viewing God's hand in every situation, this means no matter what the affliction, no matter when the situation comes, or for how long the situation continues, or how many afflictions come at the same time, I will be content and find pleasure in God's dealings with me. It doesn't matter if God works in the idol that I am treasuring dearest in my heart, I will humbly and joyfully submit to God's care. Whether God takes a member of my family, my job, my health, my wealth, my position, my reputation, I will be content in God's good

and sovereign care of me. Whether God sends affliction to me for a day, a week, a month, a year, a lifetime, I will be joyfully content in God's goodness to me. I will not complain that I could have handled this situation better if it would have been at a different time. I will not fret that if the hand of God does not remove in this situation soon, then I won't be able to handle it. I will trust in the enabling grace of God that He knows how much I can bear and will not allow me to have more than that. At the same time, I become deathly ill. How much and how many more situations will God give me? In all of this, the contented person will be the same in heart and fruit as they were before. It does not matter how long or how many are the afflictions, God-given contentment is there.

Our Biggest Obstacle to Contentment

There are many reasons why we are discontent. But I think that the overarching reason is a lack of faith in God's providential care of us. It could be called temporary atheism. We just don't believe what God tells us about Him and about us.

God tells us that He has every atom of this universe under His control. He controls the affairs of nations and leaders. He controls the workings in every family. He controls each person in each family. He controls every situation, every word, every deed. He controls how many hairs went down the drain this morning when you bathed. There isn't an ant that dies without His permission and plan. Yet we act like we don't believe that. Somehow when things happen to us, God is unaware and not involved.

We somehow believe that we can alter situations by what we say or do. We believe that somehow we are going to alter what God is doing by our discontent, impatience, or ability to work behind His back. We can't change the color of one hair on our head, or live one second more than God has ordained, but we believe that we can change things by our worrying, talking, begging, being angry, being downcast, being mean, being hard, being whatever we think we need to be to get our way. We believe that God is not good; that He is not working in us to make us more like His Son.

It never crosses our minds that God has millions of situations going on at the same time and they are all interrelated. He sees the big picture; we see one small piece. How dare we demand that God change our situation because we don't like it. How arrogant that we think that we are so important that God would change His will for the entire creation just for our comfort. The problem is not with God. The problem is with us. We don't see the loving providential Hand of God in every detail of our lives. We are not loved by God more if we have a carefree life. We are loved less. We view life as if God doesn't exist, and when we believe He is involved, He is not good and is not in control. We are functioning like atheists.

So what does all of this have to do with God providing what He wants us to give? Since it is true that God does provide us with what He intends for us to give, then what happens to it? I would like to suggest that we consume it because we are not content with our lot in life. Let me illustrate it this way. When we were in Bible college, I can remember us driving home from church and saying to each other, "I can't wait until we can go out to eat after church on Sunday. We will really be living then!" Of course, that has happened but it seems like such a small thing now. We have more "needs" and "wants" now that cost even more than going out to eat on

Sunday after church. We in the United States live on what we make. Our expenses equal our income, no matter how little or how much we make. We do not plan on what we are going to give. Nor do we define what our lifestyle is going to be and how much it will take to maintain that lifestyle. So let me encourage each of us to evaluate our manner of living and see if we need to attempt to make a change in how we make a living, or if we need to make a change in this matter of being content. Let us go to the school of Christ and learn contentment.

Lessons

Let's summarize what we have learned from this message:

- Contentment must be learned. It is learned in the hard places of life.
- Contentment requires that we look at life from God's perspective. We are not the captain of our ship. We are under the loving and sovereign hand of all-wise, all-good, all-powerful God who controls His creation for His glory and our good.
- Contentment involves the heart. What we believe and what we want are exposed by our lack of contentment.
- Let us repent of our lack of faith and trust in God, Who works everything after the counsel of His Will.
- If you are not able to give, then be back this evening. Steve Vaughan will be giving us practical help in identifying the areas in which we try to find contentment with God's gifts.

