

LEARNING TO BE CONTENT

"Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therein to be content." Philippians 4:11.

The previous paragraph contained an exhortation to joyfulness and trust in God. It is followed by an exhortation to high thinking and noble endeavor. The working principle of all sound psychotherapy is enunciated in the admonition of Paul to think on the things that are good for us. Thought should be given to our thinking habits. What are the subjects of your thoughts? Humorously someone has said: "Ten per cent of the people think. Twenty per cent think they think. And the rest would rather die than think." Actually, the word which Paul has used here for "think" is a strong one and means to calculate, as a builder does when he takes careful measurements before attempting to build.

In order that our thinking and our living might be what they ought to be, we are admonished to meditate upon the things that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely and of good report. Such high thinking will prevent the things that are unworthy from controlling our minds, and will produce nobility of character and worthy deeds. Of man God's Word says, "As he thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Proverbs 23:7). That is why a proper control of one's thoughts is of vital importance. The things on which one allows his mind to dwell habitually determine his deeds and his character. The things upon which God wants us to meditate are true, honest, just, pure, lovely and of good report. He knows that if our minds and hearts are set upon them that they will be wrought into our lives. As our minds dwell upon them lovingly, imaginatively and gratefully, they will penetrate our beings, become part of ourselves and be manifested in our lives. Right thinking will be followed by determined action.

It was remarkable that after Paul emphasized the thought life he said, "Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you." What a challenge!

Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians in terms of warm thankfulness for the gift which they had sent to him, and high praise for the givers. He told them of the joy their thoughtfulness and generosity afforded him, but he went on to say that while he was glad to be helped, and was grateful for the love and fellowship behind their gift, he wanted them to know that the Lord was sufficient for him apart from them. Their gift had been timely. His expression of gratitude to them embodied ideal Christian courtesy, affection and delicacy. His great joy was in the fact that they were giving, and not in the fact that he was receiving. Under no circumstances would he sound a note of discontentment; or express his thanks in such a way as to leave the impression that he was emphasizing his needs and hinting for or requesting another gift. He sought to convince his friends that he had not been waiting impatiently for this expression of their interest, and still more that he was not dependent on them.

Paul informed his friends that he had learned to be content in all the circumstances in which his Lord had placed him. He belonged to the society of the contented. He was so superior to outward circumstances that abundance or abasement made little difference to him. Imprisoned unjustly,

cut off from the work which he enjoyed so much, deprived of Christian fellowship and of the comforts of life, and daily facing the possibility of death, Paul had real joy in Christ. Neither want nor plenty disturbed the tranquillity of his soul. If Paul did not have anything, it was all right. If he had a little, that was all right. That lesson was one that had to be learned. God had initiated him into that mystery and he had learned to be content. After learning the secret of contentment, Paul found life far more interesting, joyful and profitable. Therefore, he wanted all of his friends and readers to possess the secret which he had learned.

I. What Is Contentment?

What is this contentment of which Paul speaks, which we all covet, and which is so hard to attain? Perhaps the best way to answer this query is to do so from the negative and from the positive standpoints.

1. What contentment is not.

(1) It is not smug self-satisfaction.

We know that Paul was not contented with himself, for he said, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do" (Romans 7:18-19). In Philippians 3 we hear Paul saying that he does not count himself to have attained all that Christ has for him. When we compare Paul's contentment with our own and what we see in others, quite frequently there is a great disparity.

The most common contentment today is shallow and superficial. There are multitudes of people, among whom are many professing Christians, who are contented but really have no right to be. Their contentment grows on the scanty soil of self-esteem and is the fruit of pride and self-complacency rather than integrity and consecration. Such individuals are too pleased with themselves. Many Christians are far too easily content with their attainments. They are satisfied with their knowledge and are not inclined to go further. They are satisfied with their spiritual stature, thus making any further growth impossible. This self-satisfaction reveals itself in the mind which is closed to the reception of new truth, and in the heart which seldom feels the woes of mankind, and whose generosity is limited in its range. From such, gifts to God's work are not according to income, but are according to custom or for the purpose of maintaining respect.

(2) It is not indifference to sinful conditions. Paul was not satisfied with the undesirable conditions which he suffered. He had not surrendered to fate. He had learned to suffer want, hunger, and abasement, but he had not enjoyed these things. He was not reconciled to the evil which was his lot to bear. He was not insensible to what was going on around him -- to right or wrong: to that which was good or that which was bad. He was far from being satisfied with the sinfulness, the cruelty, and the baseness of the world. His discontent with the world was such that he dedicated all the power of his personality to changing it.

We ought not to be satisfied with many things as they are; with our attainments, with the harassing limitations of our daily lot,

with the things that make for injustice, poverty and selfishness. There are many iniquities around us that ought to stir our sense of indignation, and compel us to cry "I will not rest until these things are righted." To become satisfied with the undesirable is not praiseworthy; it is tragic. Instead of being indifferent to sinful conditions, we are to so live and labor that conditions will be improved.

(3) It is not the lack of ambition.

There are men who are contented because they do not have any ambition. Wherever they are placed, there they remain, making no effort, because having no desire, to change their lot. It is not wrong for men who are filled with an honorable ambition to better themselves and their lot in life. To do all that becomes a man to do is right and commendable.

2. What contentment is.

(1) It is the mastery of wants.

Webster says, "To be content is to bring to the point where one is not disquieted or disturbed by a desire for what one does not have, even though every wish is not fully gratified." To be content is to be willing to abide within the limits which God has set forth. It is to be satisfied to abide within these limitations and make the most of what we find there. Thus Paul claimed victory over his desires. He had learned to master his wants and not to be mastered by them.

(2) It is to be happy in spite of circumstances.

What is merely earthly does not satisfy or last. Knowing this, Paul proclaims a proud independence of his surroundings whether they be unfavorable or fair. His circumstances shall never be his master, they shall pay homage to him as servants. He was not content with his circumstances, but he was content in them. He had mastered the secret of being satisfied in any condition of life in which it pleased God to place him. He was not dependent upon circumstances for happiness. He did not cherish a grievance against life when he was short of money or deprived of comfort or exposed to unfair criticism.

(3) It is a cordial acquiescence in the arrangements of God.

If, under God, it was arranged that Paul spend some time in prison, he was content to have it so. If it was the arrangement of a loving Providence that Paul should suffer want for a time, he was content with that, too. His contentment was freedom from restless impatience and feverish coveting of an easier lot. It was tranquillity of soul under all circumstances. It was quiet restfulness amid all the changes of life.

"Thy way, O Lord, is best for me,
So long as Thou art leading me,
I'll be content;
Why should conditions stagger me?
So long as Thou art still with me,
I am content."

To know that God's hand is at the helm, that we are being led, that we are encompassed by a love that will not let us go, is

surely to promote within us that deep spirit of contentment that the world can never give nor take away. Let us put our trust in the divine hand that ever leads and brings us to our eternal destiny.

"He leadeth me! O blessed tho't!
O words with heavenly comfort fraught!
Whate'er I do, where'er I be,
Still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me.

Sometimes 'mid scenes of deepest gloom,
Sometimes where Eden's bowers bloom,
By waters still, o'er troubled sea,
Still 'tis His hand that leadeth me!"

II. How May We Achieve Contentment?

Paul learned to be content in the school of Christian experience. What a rare and difficult achievement is this! For our happiness we depend so much on this world and what it gives us, and how it treats us. When our fortunes are favorable we are more or less happy; when they are unfavorable we are restless and discontented.

1. Make much of life's blessings.

Make every blessing an occasion for thanksgiving, for thankful souls are happy souls. Appreciative people see the gladdening things of life more than its trying things, and they meet life contentedly. Paul here appears as a deeply appreciative soul. He makes much of the kindness of others. He warmly thanks them. This is part of his habit of looking on the bright side of everything. He praises his Christian friends for whatever is praiseworthy in them. Such is the spirit of all who make much of life's blessings. It makes them happy and contented. So, concentrate on life's good things, rather than its trying experiences, and you will be much more contented with your lot.

Never allow discontent to possess you by brooding over what you have suffered or of what you have lost, or of what others have which has been denied you. An old man, who had this tendency, related the following experience. He said: "I had an attack of the blues once, but it was not long before I was cured. I was a young man and was working on the Erie Canal. It was late in the fall. Winter was coming on and I had no shoes. I had to send home every cent I made except what my food cost. I did not know how I was to manage to get those shoes before cold weather. It worried me day and night. But one day I met a man who didn't have any feet. That cured me, and when I am tempted to be discontented and complain of my lot I think of that day, and of how many blessings I have which are denied to others."

In one of Ian MacLaren's books he told of a little blind girl, who was the happiest person in the village. One day, someone asked her what made her so cheerful. She replied: "I have so many blessings no one else has because I am blind. The flowers are more fragrant to me. The birds sing sweeter to me, and the oatcake tastes better to me, because I cannot see; and everyone is so kind to me because I am blind. No, no, let no one say I am unhappy. If God has seen fit to let me be blind, He has given me so many other blessings that I can do naught but thank Him."

"Happy the man, of mortals, happiest he,
Whose quiet mind from vain desires is free;
Whom neither hopes deceive, nor fears torment,
But lives at peace, within himself, content."

2. Work for others.

Paul did not spend the days of his imprisonment fretting and complaining. He witnessed to the Roman soldiers who guarded him, and through them preached to the household of Caesar. He made the most of his opportunity. Some of his time was spent in reading, some was spent in writing to his friends and churches across the empire. John Bunyan lived in a turbulent time, but he learned Paul's secret of contentment. He spent eleven years in Bedford jail, but these years were not wasted. When he turned his back upon the prison he had in his hand the immortal Pilgrim's Progress.

When you are inclined to be discontented, go out into the highways and byways of life and carry a little cheer into the lives of others. You will bring to them a blessing, and the clouds will scatter and the sun will shine again in your own heart.

In Chester Cathedral there is a quaint prayer. Here is part of it:

"Give me a mind that is not bored,
That does not whimper, whine, nor sigh:
Don't let me worry over-much
About the fussy thing called I.
Give me a sense of humor, Lord,
Give me the grace to see a joke;
To get some happiness from life,
And pass it on to other folk."

3. Make the most of your Saviour.

Paul says, "For to me to live is Christ." You could put such a man in prison, but you could not rob him of Christ. The Lord Jesus was everything to Paul. Trust in Christ and delight in Him made Paul independent of circumstances. From Christ he drew strength to endure trial cheerfully, saying, "I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me." Make the most of your Saviour. That is the un-failing secret of contentment. Paul was content because he believed in Christ, had fellowship with Him, and was persuaded that "All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to His purpose." Having Christ, whatever reverses time may bring, we may still be contented for He will never leave us nor forsake us, and Christ is the secret of Christian joy and satisfaction.

"Thou, O Christ, art all I want;
More than all in Thee I find."

With Him as Saviour, Helper, Friend and Guide, we do not need more for real contentment. May God in His infinite grace enable all of us to learn this great and vital lesson!

"He never leaves His people,
He ne'er forsakes His own,
He marks their path, though lonely,
Their wants to Him are known.
In sickness and in sorrow
He listens to their cry.
His arm is ever round them,
He never says, 'Good-bye!'"

Our pathway may be rugged,
And strewn with many a thorn,
But yet, He shares its roughness,
When we are faint and worn;
And then He takes His tired ones,
His arm doth strength supply,
He will not leave them helpless,
He never says, 'Good-by'."