

PEACE AND CONTENTMENT

Philippians 4:7-11

The need of peace and the value of it are everywhere apparent. This is a restless world. To many people the suggestion of the availability of such peace seems only a wild dream. However, peace is a reality and can be found and experienced.

1. Peace is divine.

It is "the peace of God." We have no peace of our own. Before we were saved, the militant spirit of our depraved nature waged unending war against the God of all grace. But when we were subdued by the Christ of Calvary, we had peace through the blood of the cross. Man cannot give this peace. The great spring from which it flows is God Himself. Christ said, "My peace give I unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you." It is not "peace with God," but the "peace of God." His peace has never been disquieted or confused.

2. Peace is sublime.

"Which passeth all understanding." The peace that God gives transcends anything that we can conceive. It is beyond defining, describing or explaining. It defies human comprehension. It is utterly independent of human circumstances and conditions. God's peace is boundless in its application to human needs. We cannot exhaust it, and God forbid that any should exchange it for the false and fleeting peace of the world which is empty and void.

3. Peace is vigilant.

"Shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." The peace of God guards or garrisons our hearts and minds to ward off the attacks of Satan.

Such a peace is indeed worth having. Life without it is poor beyond words to express. How then may it be made the abiding possession of the heart? By receiving Christ. Trusting Him as Saviour will cause God to "fill you with all joy and peace in believing." Through complete surrender to Christ one comes into possession of perfect peace.

(Followed by "The Secret Of Contentment."--Philippians 4:11.)

THE SECRET OF CONTENTMENT

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

It is a high and blessed attainment for a believer in Christ to be able to say with the Apostle Paul: "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content."

When Paul wrote these words he was a prisoner in Nero's dungeon in Rome. He had very few of the things that most of us would think are the very minimum necessities. His friend, Epaphroditus, had just come from Philippi with the generous gift from some of his Christian friends there and he wrote to thank them. He told them of the joy their thoughtfulness brought to him, but went on to say that while he was glad to be helped, and was grateful for the love behind the gift, and while he waited and suffered lack of life's necessities, he had not been disquieted thereby. What pleased him most, about the gift, was not in the thing itself, though he was glad to have it. It was the thoughtfulness that had made this gift a golden bridge over which to carry the traffic of love. He would not have them think that he was in want or unhappy in his lot. He assured them that he was perfectly happy, even in a prison, and he had found the secret of contentment.

As he expressed his appreciation of their thoughtfulness for him and their ministry to him, in the time of his loneliness, confinement, and trial, he did not want them to misunderstand him. He said, "You will understand that these little ministries, these blessed little remembrances that you have sent for my comfort and cheer, while they do cheer me, they are not necessary to me. You will understand that I am glad for your sakes that you have done it. I want you to be partners in the rewards that are coming for this great work that we are doing for Christ." In other words, Paul was saying that he who ministers to Christ's preacher will share in the rewards that come to that preacher's work. He was making the point that the modest Christian can still be the partner of Christ's prophet, as these Philippian Christians had been with him. Paul rejoiced for their sakes, as well as for the sweetness and the pleasure that it had brought him, that they had helped him. But he went on to say, "I am not at all dependent on this. Beautiful as are your messages and your love tokens and your remembrances, I am not at all dependent on them, for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content."

This was a declaration of a great man of God and we should aspire to emulate him. It is a lesson which but few have learned, but it is of great importance to all of us. Contentment does not consist in insensibility or indifference as to our situation in life. Paul himself felt the hardships to which he was subject, and prayed to be delivered from them. He was keenly sensible of his "thorn in the flesh," and besought the Lord that it might be made to depart from him. He also felt the injuries of men towards him, and prayed to be delivered out of the hands of the wicked and unreasonable. But he considered his lot in life as the will of God; and deeming that alone to be sufficient, he was quite content.

Although Paul was in prison, with his hopes and plans suffering inevitable frustration, he rejoiced in the fact that stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage. Within his apparent narrow limits, he was aware of a great opportunity. In God's mercies he was enabled to write four prison epistles. Had he given way to murmurings and discontent, he would not have been a qualified instrument to express the lofty thoughts which those epistles contained. Christ made use of Paul, even within the narrow limits of imprisonment, because he was yielded completely to the Saviour.

As we study the meaning of the word "contentment," we discover that it means to be contained, or to be within certain limits. In this way, we speak of the contents of a book, or the contents of a house. When we use the word thus we refer to what is contained within the book or within the house. To be contented is to be willing to abide within the limits which a loving Heavenly Father has been pleased to impose upon us.

Content means to be master of the situation, or to be conqueror of circumstances because of an inward sufficiency. Paul could use any kind of circumstances and turn them into an opportunity. He was content to be where his Master put him, to bear all the hard knocks and to endure all the rough usage he had to endure in the path of duty. Paul was knocked about with rough treatment and fierce persecution, but the mainspring of his love to Jesus was not broken in his heart, and the wheels of his consecrated activity ran on undisturbed. In everything that happened he heard God's call and knew how to meet it so that it might turn to his good.

Contentment with life is a precious gift, unless it be the false contentment of the man who is satisfied with himself. In this latter sense Paul was not content. His fiery spirit was ever pressing on to fresh conquests of himself and to new achievements for Christ. But he was content in the true sense. He never quarrelled with the conditions of his life. He was never at enmity with his circumstances or fretful about the way in which life treated him.

The contented mind proceeds from a conviction that God's will is always best. Life is a great mystery, and it is never easy to explain its strange inequalities; but if we believe that each man's life is a plan of God we must arrive at the conclusion that God's plan is always best for the individual and that any other plan would work out to a man's disadvantage. We may not be able to understand why others should have more than we possess, but if we believe in the greatness and love of God, we can rest assured that He is ordering the circumstances as He sees best for each of His children.

When we brood over what we have suffered and what we have lost; when we think too much of what we do not have, and too little of what we have, discontent possesses us. An old man was relating his own experience when he said: "I had an attack of the blues once; but it was not long before it 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 the cold weather came. It worried me day and night. But one day I met a poor man who had no feet. That cured me, and when I am tempted to complain of my lot I try to think how many blessings I have which are denied to others."

In one of Ian MacLaren's books he tells of a little blind girl. She was the happiest person in the village. One day, someone asked her what made her so cheerful and 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."

It need not be argued that, from a human point of view, it is always extremely difficult to be content with our lot if we are physically disabled. It is not easy to be content when it is impossible for us to fulfill our dreams on which our hearts are set. And yet, if we allow a spirit of discontent to possess us, all the life-giving waters will become bitter, and our life will end in the darkness of a great eclipse.

Discontent arises from a feeling that we are entitled to more spacious limits. We look upon others, and are tempted to envy their lot. They seem to have more than they can use, while we are compelled to dwell in straitened circumstances. The discontented man is always eagerly seeking to enlarge his boundaries, and increase the limits of his circumstances. There are times and seasons when this is justifiable, but the tendency needs to be watched lest ambition turn to fretful envy and the normal life of Christian contentment degenerates into carnal discontent.

As to envy, in Milton's poem "Comus" is a magic potion which has the power of perverting the senses of the person who drinks it. Nothing is correctly apprehended. Sight and sound and taste and feeling are all alike disordered and the victim is totally unconscious of the confusion. Envy is like this fabled potion. It perverts every moral and spiritual sense. The envious man cannot see the object of his envy as he is. Everything he says and does is misconstrued. It was envy that caused Cain to slay Abel. It was envy that sold Joseph into Egypt. It was envy that poisoned the mind of Saul against David and of Ahab against Naboth. It was for envy that they delivered Jesus to be crucified.

As to covetousness, Jesus said "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for a man's life consisteth not of the abundance of things which he possesseth." If we study the discontented and unhappy people about us we will discover that it is usually covetousness that has made them so. Before contentment can be ours we must cast out the demon of covetousness.

Contentment is one of the difficult lessons of life to learn. It must be learned, but it is possible to really learn it. Contentment is a state of mind that is not acquired suddenly or all at once. It requires thought, effort, watchfulness, self-discipline, and above all, divine grace, to produce it. There has never been any system besides that of Christianity which has succeeded in producing effectively the virtue of contentment.

Christian contentment is the cheerful acquiescence of the soul to the will of God in all conditions and under all weathers. It is the habit of the mind just as faith is the habit of the healthy Christian and benevolence is the habit of a philanthropist. Like faith it grows by practice and is matured by experience. Paul learned it from Jesus, in a pretty severe and costly school.

A contented mind is an essential element in human happiness. To be able to say that we have learned to be contented in whatsoever state we are does not imply indifference in reference to our condition. There are those who do not seem to care how things go. They will never put forth any active effort to better their situation. They will never seek to direct their life to useful and worthy ends. They are content to let matters drift as they are and to accept the results no matter what they may be. This, however, is not Christian contentment, but rather it is culpable insensibility to the great meaning of the correct duties of life.

A contented mind will also help us to reconcile ourselves to our lot when trials and difficulties come our way. It will teach us to reflect that matters might be much worse than they are. Discontentment comes largely from the tendency to contrast and to compare our lot with that of those who seem to be more highly favored than we are ourselves. By fixing our thoughts habitually upon the things we have for which to be thankful, we shall be far less inclined to dissatisfaction with our lot in life.

We may not acquire contentment all in a moment. It has to be learned, and learning is a process, but it can be learned, and once it has been, we shall bear misfortune and hardships with patience, dignity, good cheer, and without complaining. If you would learn the secret of contentment, you must do two things.

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. So, constantly look on life's good things, rather than its trying experiences, and you will be much more content with your lot.

When one of the Bishops in an early church was asked to tell how it was that he was always of a contented mind, he said, "It consists in the right use of the eyes. I first look up in heaven and remember that my first business is to get there. Then I look down upon the earth, and call to mind what a small place I shall occupy when I am dead. Then I look out on the world and think of the vast multitudes who are not as blessed as am I. And so I am content."

2. Make the most of the Saviour.

To one of his friends the Roman philosopher, Seneca, said: "Never complain of your lot so long as Caesar is your friend." In a similar way the author of Hebrews reminds us of such a foundation of spiritual peace. He said, "Be content with such things as ye have: for He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee."

"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-by.'"

Our pathway may be rugged,
And strewed 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!'"

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Paul said, "To me to live is Christ." You can put such a man in prison, but you cannot rob him of Christ. The Lord Jesus was everything to Paul. Trust and delight in Him made Paul independent of circumstances. The only way anybody can truly win is through Christ. With Him as Saviour, Helper, Friend and Guide, what more do we need for real satisfaction?

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