

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.

Man's life is a constant struggle to lift his earning power up to his yearning power. In most cases, the more he has the more he wants. But there are exceptions, and Paul was a notable one. It was while Paul was in prison that he wrote this striking text. This is a very remarkable declaration to be made by anybody.

When Paul dictated or wrote these words he was not residing in a luxurious suite in the palace of the emperor, nor was he being entertained in some unusual Christian household, the members of which were noted for their outstanding piety. Rather, Paul was a prisoner in Rome, where he had very few of the things that most of us would consider the very minimum necessities of life.

When Paul's friends in the church at Philippi learned that he was a prisoner, they promptly sent him a generous gift by his trustworthy and personal friend, Epaphroditus. The Apostle was delighted with their gift, which to him was a real token of their genuine love and devotion. Paul was very anxious to thank them for their thoughtfulness and generosity. He was equally anxious, if not more so, to convince them that he had not been waiting impatiently for this expression of their kind interest, and still more that he was not dependent on them.

As an expression of his genuine appreciation, Paul wrote to the Philippians in terms of warm thankfulness for the gift and of 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. Paul informed his friends that he had learned to be content in all circumstances where his Lord had placed him. He was so superior to outward circumstances that abundance or abasement made little difference to him. Unjustly imprisoned, cut off from his work which he enjoyed so much, deprived of Christian fellowship and of the comforts of life, and facing the possibility of death, Paul was living the life of real joy in Christ. Having learned the secret of contentment, he found life interesting and profitable.

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 to 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.

Paul did not mean that, seeing how evil and sad is the world, with its oppressions and its vices, its horrible wars and cruelties, its selfishness and its godlessness, it would be right and proper to look at all this without strong recoil and moral discontent. It is the prerogative of true men to rise in angry protest against all forms of evil. History tells us that not till some great and noble nature has risen in rebellion against the established order of things have aged wrongs been plucked up by the roots.

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 so is right and commendable.

Ambition is the sign of a healthy mind, especially when rightly conceived and fruitfully directed. Here is a lad who is athirst for knowledge. He is poor and friendless; by hard effort he saves enough money to enable him to go to college that he may have the benefit of an education. He has to endure many privations; his food is coarse and scanty; his room is squalid; his bed is hard; his clothes are threadbare. It is a trying life. But is he discontented? Why, every day is a joy to him, because his mental horizon is widening; he is sowing his seed, and he knows that by-and-by he will reap his harvest of learning. He is contented because he is absorbed by an overmastering purpose, which he is slowly but surely realizing.

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, 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 unfailing 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-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'.