

Contentment: Thanksgiving In a Prison Cell

Straight Talk – Part IV

Selected Scripture

Introduction

It has occurred to me that there is an ingredient necessary to giving thanks; there is a key to unlocking the door of gratitude in our lives. Without this element pervading our minds and our spirits, thanksgiving is impossible. I want to address this ingredient today – the ingredient of contentment.

Contentment is something that is perhaps, spoken of by a few and experienced by even fewer. The way our society is geared and the way our flesh is controlled by all of its lusts and desires, we seldom experience contentment. In fact, we know little about it.

Where would we go to learn the mystery of contentment? Where would you suggest we go to study this element? Would we go to the wealthiest section in town and interview someone living there? Would we go to the poorest section in town and suppose that someone living there has experienced contentment? No.

Today, I want you to go with me to Rome. Walk with me down a stony street and we will enter a door that is well guarded by soldiers standing at attention. We will go down a hallway and perhaps, a few stairs. We will then, come to a darkened part of that which is a dungeon in Rome – controlled by Caesar himself. We will come to a door, maybe the third or fourth, or perhaps even the first, and we will find that door, unlike any other, to also be heavily guarded by soldiers on either side of the doorway. Then, if they gained us entrance, we would go in that doorway,

there in the damp darkness of that dungeon, and would see a man shackled to more soldiers, one on each side.

This man's chains are heavy and the light is flickering shadows all about the cell. We would notice that he is writing. He has made some type of makeshift desk in his lap and is leaning closely – obviously having difficulty seeing to write. If the soldiers would allow, we could walk over and, if we knew Greek, look over the shoulder of this prisoner to see what he is writing. We would discover that he is writing about contentment.

Let us take a look at what this man is writing. Philippians is one of the last Epistles that the apostle Paul writes, and he is writing from a Roman cell. We will learn, from this prisoner, principles of contentment.

Principles of Contentment

Let us look at Philippians chapter 4 together today. Before we begin, however, I looked up the word “contentment” in the dictionary. Webster defines it as, “the state of being satisfied”. That is not a lot of help, but it is a start.

Now let us read what Paul says. I will give principles of contentment with each thought.

1. The first principle is that contentment is not a personality trait; it is a pursuit, a discipline.

Look at Philippians 4:10.

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.

Evidently, the apostle Paul was in prison for some time and the church in Philippi learned of that. They sent Epaphroditus to help, perhaps with some parchment and some food. We do not know how he helped, but Epaphroditus came and helped Paul, which was a great encouragement.

Paul continues, in Philippians 4:11, to say,

Not that I speak from want; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am.

Underline the words, in your text, “I have learned”. The word “content” could be translated, “I have learned to be satisfied, independently of whatever circumstances I am in.” In other words, “I can be content in a prison cell, or with affluence, or when I am free (as he will later say). However, he says, “I have learned,” and that is the key thought in this verse, which gives us the principle.

Paul says,

. . . I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am.

From this, we discover that contentment is really a pursuit; contentment is a discipline.

There are some things that are in our way, however, as we pursue contentment. There are two deterrents that the Bible refers to, as it uses the word “contentment”.

- One deterrent to pursuing contentment is pride.

Let me draw your attention to III John. There are only a few verses in this book, yet in them, we discover one of the key problems to learning contentment. Look at III John 1:9-11.

I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first [preeminent] among them, does not accept what we say. For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied [or discontented] with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire to do so and puts them out of the church. Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God.

It is interesting that the man who is referred to as one who loves preeminence, who loves the first spot, is in fact, the one who wants the leadership. He is grasping after the authority in this little church and he *will* have it. He has gone so far as to not allow anyone else representing the apostles or the early church to come in and teach anything other than what he thinks is right.

This individual is grasping the preeminent place; he is reaching for the top. He loves the first position. He wants to call the shots.

This is a danger for anyone who will lead in ministry. It is a danger of every pastor, deacon, and teacher. It is a danger for any member who is a minister as well, because there is something in our flesh that deters us in pursuing contentment.

We cannot be content, if we are filled with ourselves. In fact, I once read that a person who is wrapped up with himself makes a very small package.

One who is so involved in themselves and wants their own way and wants their place and their position, is an individual who is not content. How can they be? Self never satisfies.

When we have our eyes on ourselves, we are filled with ourselves and lose the potential of being contented.

I will pick on the clergy for a moment, because the love for preeminence seems to creep its way into this profession more than any other. I recently read a fascinating book by Lloyd Ogilvy. He was writing a sort of autobiographical note, as he was commentating on a Psalm.

Lloyd talks about when he was younger and had just graduated from the University of Edinburgh. He writes that he was filled with an immense pride that he had had such a quality education. His church was given to the Scottish clerical garb and he tells of the way he would come in to preach wearing the collar, and the cassock, and the robe, and the hood. He said, “Even when I could get away without wearing it, I would wear the Calvin hat.”

He continues, “In our church services, the choir would file in, in a very formal fashion, and I would come in following the choir. I would follow the choir down the aisle, in a very formal processional, and I would parade like a peacock. I was wearing so much, I had difficulty gesturing when I preached. I was a study of black robed dignity.”

However, something happened that really marked him. He was walking down the aisle and an event occurred that changed him forever. His oldest son, whose name was Scott, had made a hero of Zorro and had the whole Zorro outfit. Lloyd wrote, "As I was walking down the aisle, all of a sudden, Scott turned and looked at me, stood up and flashed his hand, as if he had a sword, and said, 'Hey, Zorro!'"

That did it! Lloyd said – and, in fact, I think it was very graceful of him – he laughed. He was able to laugh at himself. From that moment on, he was a changed man.

The individual in these verses, evidently, was the kind of man who liked to parade into the church. He was looking for the top spot. However, right in the middle of this commentary, John says, this was a man who was discontented.

When we are wrapped up with ourselves, we can *never* be content.

- Another deterrent to pursuing contentment is jealousy.

Look at Proverbs 6:34-35.

For jealousy enrages a man . . . nor will he be satisfied [content] though you give many gifts.

This is an interesting context with the principle that if you are filled with jealousy, it is impossible to be content.

Let me distinguish between envy and jealousy. Envy is wanting things that belong to someone else or things that someone else possesses. Jealousy is allowing the things that you have to possess you. The way the scriptures use these words is very interesting. A jealous person is consumed with all the stuff he has. An envious person wants more stuff.

Jealousy is wrapping your arms around what you have and selfishly hoarding it. Solomon says that a person who is jealous, even though he receives more and more and more, can never be content.

So, if you and I want to pursue contentment, pride and jealousy stand in the way like guarding soldiers, who would keep you from pursuing it.

I think, from these passages, that it is obvious that the first principle would be that contentment is not a personality trait. We are not born contented; it is a discipline.

Go back, in fact, to the book of Philippians and notice the phrases that Paul uses. Look at Philippians 4:9.

The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace shall be with you.

In Philippians 4:11, Paul says,

Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content . . .

He has used the same word twice. The word "learned" is the word from which we get our word "disciple," or "mathetes" in the Greek. Paul is saying, "You become a disciple. You pursue; you study these things and, in that pursuit, you will find contentment."

Then, we will say to you, "Oh, from this day forward, you will be a content man or woman or young person."

No. It is something that is pursued diligently.

Paul said, "I have *learned* contentment. I have become a disciple of contentment."

Contentment is not a personality trait, men and women, it is a discipline.

2. The second principle is that contentment is not destroyed by change; it is developed by change.

Look at Philippians 4:12. Paul says,

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.

You and I have the idea that contentment would come if everything just leveled out. If the bills could all be paid, if nothing happened, if the ripples smoothed out of the lake of our experience – if that would happen, *then* I could have contentment.

Paul dashes this idea on the rocks of expectation. He says,

I know how to get along with humble means, . . .

I have written in my Bible, "the yo-yo of life." That is exactly what he is saying. Paul is defining contentment. He says, "I can be content, even though the means are very humble."

It is interesting that the word “humble,” that Paul chooses, means “brought low; leveled; brought to the bottom”.

I was talking with one of the gentlemen who work with our church teens and was thrilled to learn that they chose, as one of their teen projects, to adopt some families in our area that are needy. They reached out to individuals that one of our church members knows from her work with disabled people. The teens put together baskets of food for these families.

One of the individuals was an eighty year old woman who was totally blind and lived alone. They knocked on her door and, although she was rather hesitant at first, she finally gave them entrance. They brought her the food and she was thrilled.

Another woman was an elderly woman who had been declared legally blind. This woman’s daughter had three children and ran away, leaving the children with their legally blind grandmother to raise on her own. The teens gave her food.

These are situations of humble existence – just ten minutes away.

Now do not forget, when you think of the apostle Paul, that he was an individual who would probably today, be declared legally blind. In fact, most of his letters in the New Testament were dictated. The letter to the Romans talks about Tertius, when it says,

I, Tertius, who write this letter, greet you in the Lord. (Romans 16:22)

What does this mean? He wrote it as Paul, half blind, dictated it.

The book of Galatians, in fact, ends in an interesting fashion. Paul says,

See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. (Galatians 6:11)

Here is an individual who knows the existence of humility; who knows the existence of, perhaps, almost total blindness, as he comes near the end; near death. I can see Paul now, in that prison cell, writing on being humble, as he leans close so that he can see what he is writing.

Paul says, in Philippians 4:12, “I not only know how to live in humble means,

. . . I also know how to live in prosperity ...

The word “prosperity” means, “when it overflows”. Paul says, “I know feasting and I know famine. I know how to live when there is *so much* and when there is so much left over.”

We have all experienced that yo-yo – times when it seems that we do not have enough and then, times when we have ample. Paul says, “I know that experience too.”

He does not want a pity party. Paul is just explaining that contentment can be found down there and up there.

Paul also says,

. . . in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled . . .

I love the word “filled” that he chooses. It is the word that is used of an animal that is being fattened; being stuffed. Paul says, “I know what it’s like to be stuffed.”

He adds,

. . . and going hungry . . .

In other words, “I also, though, know what it’s like to be without food. I know what it’s like to go hungry.”

Paul knows what it is like to have abundance and to suffer need and is content. Contentment is not destroyed by change; by the ups and downs, contentment is developed by change.

Exodus chapter 2 has a great illustration of a man who had it all, as it would seem, and then, lost it all. Moses, in this chapter, as you may remember, flees Egypt. We are told that he comes to a well and there, he helps some daughters of a priest. They go home and tell their father, in Exodus 2:19, that,

. . . An Egyptian delivered us from the hand of the shepherds, and what is more, he even drew the water for us and watered the flock.

Their father, the priest, in Exodus 2:20,

. . . said to his daughters, “Where is he then? Why is it that you have left the man behind? Invite him to have something to eat.”

Now between this verse and the next, several things happen. Moses falls in love with one of the daughters of this priest and they decide that they will live there and he will take care of the man’s sheep. Notice the next verse, Exodus 2:21, says,

Moses was willing [content] to dwell with the man . . .

The word “willing” is “yaal,” which means “a mental decision, a volitional act”. Moses made up his mind.

This is contentment. It is a discipline; it is a pursuit. It is also a mental decision to live with what God has given. For forty years, Moses tended sheep.

The interesting thing is that you and I perhaps, would like to have what Moses had. He had all of the prestige. He had Egypt at his fingertips. He lived in affluence. He was served around the clock. It is one thing to not have it and want it. It is another thing to have it and lose it. And Moses lost it. Yet, he was an individual who said, "I will be content here in humble means, serving in this fashion."

3. The third principle is that contentment is not a solo performance; it is a duet with Jesus Christ.

Turn back to Philippians and look at Philippians 4:13. Now this verse has often been used out of context, I think. We need to understand it in terms of contentment. Paul says,

I can do all things through Him [in Christ] who strengthens me.

I want to make the point that contentment is not a solo performance, it is a duet. In fact, if you are without Jesus Christ, you cannot experience contentment.

Contentment begins at the cross of Jesus Christ. When I invite Him into my life, then, through and in Him, I can experience satisfaction.

This is like the Samaritan woman who came to Jesus Christ. She was living life at full tilt, and yet, never experiencing satisfaction. Jesus Christ said to her, "You drink from the water I give you and you will be satisfied; you will be content."

It is in Christ that I experience contentment. In fact, look at Philippians 4:19.

And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

There is another verse where contentment is used. It is I Timothy 6:6, which says,

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

In other words, there is the coupling of my relationship with Jesus Christ and the development of contentment that brings tremendous gain; satisfaction.

So if you want to use this Philippians verse for getting a job or passing an exam or getting well, get

another verse. There are some other verses in the scriptures for that.

Philippians 4:13 is saying that I can do all things – I can live humbly, I can live in prosperity, I can see the ups and downs of life – and yet, I can experience contentment. How? Because I can experience it through Jesus Christ. I can do *all* things – I can do the lifestyle that is affluent and the lifestyle that is very poor – because I have the strength of Christ within me. Contentment is not a solo performance, it is a duet.

Application – A Test of Contentment

Take the test of contentment from this passage today. Ask yourself the questions:

- How do I respond to change; to ups and downs?
- How do I respond to need?
- How do I respond to affluence?
- Do these produce, in my heart, a griping before God?
- Do these bring, from my heart, gratitude to God?

Take a look in that prison cell. There was a grateful man – incredibly so. In fact, ladies and gentlemen, I believe that the greatest proof of contentment is thanksgiving.

It is impossible to be thankful without being content. The greatest proof of contentment is giving thanks to God.

If we were in that prison cell watching Paul writing these words with his face close to the parchment, perhaps he would pause and reflect on what he had just said; maybe he would check his motives and take inventory of his spirit. But in my imagination, I view Paul taking a deep breath, perhaps pausing, shackled to Roman soldiers on either side, just able to write, maybe gazing up with old, misty eyes and then, writing again. And if we could look, we would see him scribble the greatest proof that he was a contented man, in Philippians 4:20,

Now to our God and Father be the glory [honor or "doxazo"] forever and ever. Amen.

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