

Contentment

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[0 : 0 0] Well, let me say welcome to you, those of you who I've not met, especially I'd like to welcome you. Hopefully we'll get a chance to do so after the service. We have a members meeting happening after the service, and anybody's welcome to come.

And so that'll be a great time to shake some hands and maybe meet some people you haven't gotten a chance to know yet. I want to start tonight with a question, just kind of provoke some reflection, and that's this, if you think back over the course of your life, last several years, when's the last time that you can remember a span of time where you were content?

And I don't just mean a moment here or there, that moment when you were sitting next to the pool, and the drink had just been set down and the ice was still on the outside of it, kind of running down the side of the glass.

not the corona commercial moment. When's the last time you had an extended span of days, weeks, or even months where you were content? If you're anything like me, it's probably been a while.

I actually couldn't remember a single span of time in recent history, in ancient history, when that was true for me. And as I reflected on that, I began to realize that as I talk with people and meet with people and try to understand the various struggles that people are facing in their lives, much of the struggle is rooted some way in discontentment.

[1 : 3 4] It's people who struggle with contentment. Their jobs, their boyfriend, their girlfriend, the lack of a boyfriend or girlfriend, their husband, their wife, the lack of a husband or wife, where they live, where they want to live, their friends, their bodies, their faces, their weight, their clothing, their stuff, their roommates, their family situations.

There's always drama and struggle and it's rooted in discontentment, meaning essentially, I want things to be different than they are in my life in one way or another.

And we ask why? Why is that the case? Why do we say, I'm dying to get married and then I wish I had married somebody else and then I wish I could change my spouse and then I wish I could get out of my marriage?

Why do we say that about our jobs and our homes? I would love to live in the city. It's hard to live in the city. We've decided we need to leave the city. Why do we constantly face a lack of contentment?

You could blame the culture and say, well, we live in a culture that facilitates this. It's a culture of more. And you would be right. Our economy thrives off discontentment. It actually depends on us remaining discontented.

[2 : 5 8] And because economists know the less content we are, the more stuff we buy in search of contentment. But we can't put all the blame there. Philosophers have known for centuries that contentment can't be found and it can't be bought, that it's a part of human nature.

Immanuel Kant said, give a man everything he wants and at that moment he will feel that everything is not everything. Oh, this is everything I wanted?

What about that? That's human nature. So the problem is, contrary to virtually every advertisement ever made, you cannot buy or find contentment.

So next time you see somebody's Instagram feed and there's a picture of just their feet and the ocean is in the backdrop and it says hashtag blessed, hashtag content, don't believe it.

It's a lie. That's not true contentment. So Paul says in our passage today, contentment is something that has to be learned.

[4 : 07] It has to be habituated. It has to be cultivated. It's a habit of the heart. It's a discipline. It's an art. You might call it the art of contentment.

The art of being content. And it doesn't come easy. So anybody that says here are five easy steps to being content, don't buy that book.

It's a waste of money. It's hard. Paul makes snow bones about the fact that it's hard. It's a lifelong pursuit. But here in Philippians chapter 4 verses 10 to 13, Paul says the secret of lasting contentment is something that he's found over the course of his life of following Jesus.

Now we hear secret and we think, okay, here's the five easy steps. He's playing off a common sort of gnostic idea of a mystery or a secret that you could attain.

He's sort of doing a little wordplay here. He says, I've actually discovered the secret. And what is the secret? Well, it's rooted in trust. Trust. In other words, it comes through the daily, sometimes hourly, sometimes moment to moment decision to trust and to place God ways over our ways.

[5 : 27] Moment to moment to moment, deciding again and again and again to trust and to place God's ways over our ways. And we see this throughout the book of Philippians playing out in three ways.

See, he doesn't list it. You have to read the whole letter to the Philippians and you'll understand. You'll be able to draw out what Paul's talking about here. And we see three things as we look at the letter.

That it means trusting God's purposes over our priorities. It means trusting God's providence over our preferences. And then lastly, it means trusting God's character over our circumstances.

And we're going to break each of those down a little more. So let's pray as we get into this together. Lord, we don't have to wonder about the relevance of this, whether we realize it or not.

We have hearts that are perpetually full of discontentment. Lord, St. Augustine describes hearts that are restless until they find their rest in you.

[6 : 26] And so we pray that as we are gathered here this evening through your word, we would gain a sense for how to find that rest and what that means, Lord. We pray this for our good and for your glory.

In your son's name, amen. So first of all, we're talking about contentment coming from the daily or even moment-to-moment placing of trust in God's purposes over our priorities.

So you have your priorities. God has his purposes. Which is going to be primary in your life? So let me read a couple of verses here. Philippians 4, verse 10. I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you've revived your concern for me.

It had been some time since he heard from the Philippians. He's saying, oh, you remembered me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. In other words, before now, they hadn't had a chance to send anything.

Not that I'm speaking of being in need, he says, for I've learned in whatever situation I'm to be content. So we're dropping into the middle of a letter, actually at the end of a letter, written by Paul to Christians in Philippi.

[7 : 37] And so I want to give you a little context so you know what's happening because we don't want to just drop in with no context. Paul had visited Philippi earlier in his ministry on his second missionary journey. You may remember he had some converts.

You can read about this in Acts chapter 16. Lydia, convert. The Philippian jailer, a convert. Syrophenician woman, a convert. And he began to have these converts to Christianity and built a church there.

But it's been some time since he's been able to return. And so now he is writing this letter and he's sitting in prison. So he's not in Philippi.

He's not anywhere near Philippi. He's most likely, scholars think, in Rome. And so he's writing this letter. It's been a while, maybe as much as 10 years since he's heard anything from them.

And then they finally send Epaphroditus. And Epaphroditus has brought some money to help Paul live while he's in prison. And then Epaphroditus got really sick and he almost died.

[8 : 38] But then he got better. God healed him. And so now Paul is writing a thank you letter to send with Epaphroditus back to the people in Philippi. So that's what's going on here. And so Paul takes the opportunity as he's writing this thank you letter to teach them and us what he's learned about being content.

And the secret to contentment that he refers to is something that we come to understand, as I said, by looking at the whole letter. And the first thing that jumps out when you read Philippians is that Paul is wholly committed to the purposes of God.

He is fully committed to the purposes of God, regardless of what that means about his own priorities being dashed on the rocks. So take a moment to put yourself in Paul's shoes.

Just think about him and his perspective. Here he is. He's languishing in prison. He hasn't heard from the Philippians in as many as 10 years.

It would be very easy to become bitter. And that's a long time. All I did for those Philippians.

[9 : 45] All the sacrifices I made. All of the selfless love I poured out. And now I'm here in prison and they can't so much as send me a letter. It would be easy to be bitter at God.

God, all that I've done for you. I've left everything. I've been mocked and ridiculed. I had an amazing promising career and I left it all behind to follow you. And here's what I get for all of that service.

I'm in prison. I'm rotting in here. And nobody seems to care. And yet when you read the letter, the letter is the exact opposite of that attitude. It's full of joy.

It's full of gratitude. It's full of praise. And so we have to ask, how in the world? Did he grow up in one of those kind of southern families where they say it's not okay to be mad and upset?

Oh, Paul, well, however bad you think it is, there are children starving in Africa who are a lot worse. However bad you think it is, I'm sure there's somebody who's down the street who has it worse. What right do you have to be upset?

[10 : 45] No, this isn't emotional dishonesty. He's truly filled with joy and gratitude and peace. How is that possible? Drew Halston is the founder of Dropbox.

You may have heard of that company. And he gave the commencement address at MIT back in 2013. And it's a decent talk, but one of the points that he makes I thought was kind of interesting.

He says, you know, everybody, you know, his advice to graduates is, everybody needs to find their tennis ball. So if you have a dog, you know that you take a tennis ball and you go outside and you throw the tennis ball, and the dog is solely focused on the tennis ball.

Right? And you can hurl that tennis ball, and the dog is just shoots off, you know, leash snaps off like a lightning bolt. And that dog will plow through snow, through mud, through water, through barbed wire, through anything to get to that ball.

It's its sole aim. It's focused on, it's obsessed with getting the tennis ball. And he says, what is your tennis ball in life? What's that chief goal, that chief aim?

[11 : 53] So if your tennis ball is starting a new company, then you will work nights, you'll work weekends, you'll eat junk food, you'll neglect your family and friends.

You'll do all of that joyfully as long as you see your company is growing. But, if your tennis ball is spending more time with your family, or eating well, or getting enough sleep, then a job like that is not going to be a source of joy, it's going to be what amounts to slave labor.

The entire difference is made by your tennis ball. In other words, your entire perception of everything in your life, the circumstances, really hinges on what that tennis ball is for you.

Whatever it is, it shapes how we perceive everything else. And so the point is, the reason that Paul can be so joyful, the reason that he can be so content in his life, is because he's found his tennis ball.

And that shapes everything else in his life. And here's his tennis ball, it's in Philippians 3, verse 8. He says, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord.

[13 : 10] I count everything as loss because I know the surpassing worth. In other words, surpassing, that's the tennis ball. It's worth more than anything else in my life.

Knowing Jesus Christ my Lord. For his sake I've suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ. It's an amazing statement.

What's he saying? I know Christ. I know I belong to Christ. And I want my whole life to be about knowing Christ more and more and more. Gaining more and more and more of a sense of the presence of Christ in my life.

Becoming more and more and more like him. Because Paul knows that God's purpose for each one of us is that we would know Christ more deeply and become more like him.

And God works tirelessly toward that end. If somebody said, you should consider becoming a Christian because you're going to be so much happier.

[14 : 08] They were deceiving you. If somebody said, hey, you should be a Christian because it's going to make your life so much more convenient. You were misled. If you thought that being a Christian would somehow solve the problems in your life, then you're really going down a rabbit trail.

God's single purpose in our life is to make us more like Christ. And everything in our lives is geared toward that end. And Paul understands this.

And that's why he's able to say in verse 12 of chapter 4, I know how to be brought low and how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I've learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.

See, he knows how to be brought low and how to abound because they both bring dangers. What's the danger of being brought low? Well, it's coming to believe that God, that Christ may have abandoned us.

Right? And so he says, I know how to be brought low and not lose my sense of Christ's presence. How? Well, he says this in verse 13. Because I remember that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.

[15 : 24] When I'm brought low, I rely on Christ because he strengthens me. But if that's the risk of being brought low, then what's the risk of the good times? The great times?

The times of celebration? Well, the risk isn't that we think God has abandoned us. The risk is that we abandon God. I don't need you. Oh, I forgot you were even there. And so he says, I know how to do that too and not lose a sense of the presence of Christ.

Verse 17. He remembers that Christ is the one who supplies all of our needs. So I know how to do both. And have both good and bad experiences in my life.

Facilitate and encourage my gaining of Christ. So think about how this would apply as many of us are discontented with our jobs.

You know, if you're sitting there and you're thinking right now, you know, I need a change. You know, if you kind of got your phone out and you're kind of like surfing the, you know, the kind of job postings.

[16 : 24] You're kind of fishing around. You know, it may be that you need to leave. It may be that that's exactly what you need to do. So I'm not challenging that on principle. But it's worth asking before you leave.

What's your tennis ball? Is your tennis ball, when it comes to your job, is your tennis ball feeling important? Making a certain amount of money? Feeling appreciated?

Or is your tennis ball, no matter what, is your tennis ball gaining Christ and becoming more like Christ? It's worth asking, how can God use these circumstances? A boss that doesn't appreciate me?

Co-workers that seem against me? A glass ceiling that seems to prevent me from climbing the ladder that I want to climb? Now, those aren't necessarily good things, but it's worth asking, how can God use this to form Christ in me?

Have I been open to that as a possibility or not? How can I bloom where God has planted me before I will so quickly uproot myself to go somewhere else?

[17 : 25] It's worth asking. Likewise, in marriage, some of you are really struggling. That's okay. That's marriage. If you're a tennis ball, or if you want to get married, whether you're married or you want to get married, if your tennis ball is getting married so that you won't be lonely anymore, so that you will be more fulfilled, so that you will be more satisfied, so that all of your sexual needs will be met, if that's your tennis ball, then marriage is not for you.

You're not going to find any of those things. That's a recipe for discontentment. If your tennis ball is becoming more like Christ, then marriage is a great way to do that. Because then you see, if your tennis ball is happiness, and every time you fight, you're going to say, man, maybe I married the wrong person.

If your tennis ball is holiness, then everything, sometimes especially the fights, are ways that we become more like Christ.

So do we trust God's purposes in our life over and above whatever our priorities might be? What's your tennis ball? That's the first aspect of contentment.

The second aspect pushes it a little more, that we need to trust God's providence over our preferences. You know what God's providence is? When we talk about God's providence, his sovereignty, that's God's ability to work in and orchestrate and control the flow of events in history.

[18 : 53] So if you read Acts chapter 16, about Paul's time in Philippi, you know that not only were there miraculous conversions, but Paul actually got imprisoned in Philippi.

And do you remember what happened? He's sitting there, they're singing around midnight. God sends an earthquake, rattles the prison, and all the doors fly open, the chains just drop off their arms.

Incredible, miraculous liberation. So here Paul is, 10 years later, writing a letter to the Philippian church while he's in prison.

Can you imagine what he's thinking? I don't want to put words in his mouth. I'll tell you what I'd be thinking. Hey God, I saw you do that in Philippi. I saw you liberate me. I saw the miracle happen.

That was amazing. We gave thanks to you, and I've been thankful ever since. It meant a lot to me that you did that. Can you do it again? I saw you do it then. Why don't you do it again?

[19 : 59] Would you not be thinking that? Come on, God. What did we do differently? Was it because we were singing? Do you want me to sing? I'll sing. Just send the earthquake.

And you can imagine, this is how we think. This is how we think. It's funny, but I know a lot of these examples are not funny. You know, God, you miraculously heal all those people in the Bible.

And I read all these stories of you miraculously healing other people. Why didn't you heal my family member? Why did you let him die? Why did you let her go on suffering? You know, God, you miraculously found spouses for all my friends.

You know, Jacob got two spouses. And he met them in a well. You know? You can't send me one? Is that too much?

God, the Bible is full of places where you miraculously make women pregnant. Why not us? Why are we going to the fertility clinic? Why can't it be miraculous?

[20 : 58] And yet, look at what Paul says in Philippians 1, verse 12. He says this, I want you to know, brothers, he's talking about his imprisonment here, I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

What's he saying here? He's saying this, I assume that God is in control. I assume that the fact that I'm in prison is a part of God's plan.

It's a part of his unfolding providence. I'm assuming, that's my ground level assumption. And because he assumes that, he's able to see how God is using this experience, even though it's nothing like what he would prefer.

He doesn't want to be in prison. He's not excited about it. But because he assumes God's providence. He says, you know, I'm able to see that even though I'm suffering, God is using this.

And I wouldn't prefer this, and I don't want it. But he has eyes to see the good that God is bringing from it. Because God is sovereign, he's in control, he's at work.

[22 : 12] And so knowing and trusting God's providence over his own preferences enables Paul to be content, even in prison. I'll put it another way. Whenever you're trying to make sense of your life and the circumstances that you're in, it is always God's providence, never God's negligence.

It's always God's providence. It is never God's negligence. So you say, well, does this mean that God wants us to suffer? Is that what you're saying? That God says, hey, in my providence, you're going to have a really hard year.

No. It doesn't delight God that we suffer. Why do you think it broke God's heart in Genesis 3 when we rebelled against him? See, from God's perspective, that was like us dropping a giant, muddy stone into a perfectly still pond.

And all of the ripples of suffering and death that came out of that broke God's heart. He says, what have you done? And yet, because he is sovereign, he's able to direct the flow of those ripples in some way that goes beyond our ability to understand.

He's able to, in other words, redeem them so that they become a part of his good purposes. Don't ask me to explain how that happens. I don't know.

- [23 : 34] Nobody knows. But he's able to direct the flow of all of those implications and ripples so that eventually they become a part of his good purposes.

Ravi Zacharias shares this great Middle Eastern sort of proverb that tries to explore how God does this. He tells the story of a man who has a horse. You may have heard him talk about this, those of you who know Ravi Zacharias.

A man who has a horse, and the horse runs away. And a neighbor comes and says, oh, it's such bad luck. Your horse ran away. And the man says, what do I know about these things?

Good luck, bad luck. A few days later, the horse comes back and brings 20 wild horses with it. Same neighbor comes and says, what good luck? Look, your horse that ran away brought all these horses back.

The man says, what do I know about these things? Good luck, bad luck. A few days later, the man's son tries to break one of these wild horses and gets his own leg broken, gets kicked by the horse. Neighbor comes by and says, wow, bad luck.

- [24 : 36] If you didn't have those horses, that wouldn't happen to your son. The man says, what do I know about these things? Good luck, bad luck. A few days later, a band of thugs comes through the village recruiting able-bodied young men to come and be a part of their gang.

They almost recruit this man's son, and they realize he has a broken leg, and they don't want the dead weight. So they pass him over. The neighbor comes and says, what good luck? Because his leg was broken, he didn't get kidnapped.

The man says, what do I know about these things? The point is obvious. What do we know about good luck versus bad luck? Who are we to think that we can assign what is fortune and what is misfortune, what is blessing and what is curse?

The point we tried to make on Ash Wednesday, for those of you who are here, is sometimes it is precisely the best, greatest, most celebratory things in our lives that are spiritual attack. And sometimes it is the hard things, the struggles, the times of dryness and tooth and nail existence, sometimes those are the greatest blessing.

The point is, who are we to decide? It's certainly above my pay grade. One of the best examples of this is the story of Joseph in Genesis.

- [25 : 52] Such an amazing story. Brothers are jealous of him. They sell him into slavery. They tell his father that he's dead. He gets mistreated. He gets sent off to Egypt.

He gets falsely accused of rape. He gets thrown in prison. And yet, through it all, God's plan is unfolding. And eventually, he becomes the second most powerful man in Egypt, second only to the Pharaoh.

And then what happens? A famine comes. Joseph's entire family is on the brink of death. So they all go to Egypt. They have no idea that Joseph is still alive. And they come.

And who is the person in the position to make the decision about whether they live or die? It's Joseph. And so Joseph embraces them. And he says, as for you, you meant evil against me.

But look what God did. God meant it for good. To bring it about that many people should be kept alive. Joseph is saying, who am I to say what is good luck and bad luck?

- [26 : 54] But look what God has done! Cultivating contentment means trusting God's purposes over our priorities.

And it means trusting his providence over our preferences. And listen, God is more concerned with his providential plan than he is with our preferences.

And that is the best news we could possibly hear. Because there are times that God loves us so much that he says yes to what we ask him. There are times that God loves us so much that he says no.

But all of this and the whole case that I'm trying to make sort of hinges on one final thing. We're not going to be convinced of any of this.

You're not going to be convinced. I'm not going to be convinced unless we actually trust God's character. Unless you actually believe that this kind of providential, powerful God is actually trustworthy.

[27 : 55] So really the core of contentment means cultivating in our hearts the ability to trust God's character over our circumstances.

What I mean is that you look at your life and your situation and then you look at God's character and you decide which one has more credence. Which one is going to be the lens through which you view your potential future?

Is it this or is it this? Paul says in verse 13 when he says, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

You know, I used to read this and I used to kind of interpret it like Jesus was some kind of like supernatural Red Bull. You know, that like I'm tired and Jesus kind of zaps me.

And I was like, I always think that would be really cool, you know. At like 2 o'clock in the morning I'm exhausted, my kids won't go to sleep. And I say, Jesus, I need a hit. And Jesus is like, bam! And I'm like, you know, ready to go.

[28 : 57] And that's not what Paul's talking about. What Paul's actually talking about is he says, when I look at Jesus, when I consider who he is, what he's done, that strengthens my faith and trust in God.

So throughout his life, Jesus continually put his Father's purposes over his own priorities. And throughout his life, Jesus trusted the providence of his Father over his own preferences.

And you see all this come to a head in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus literally sweats drops of blood, and he literally says, if there's any way that I don't have to do this, if there's any way that the crucifixion can be avoided, let it be so.

So, he's saying my preferences and my priorities, anything but this. Anything but this.

I'll do anything. But then what does he say? But not my will, but your will be done. That's the placing of God's ways, God the Father's ways, over his own.

[30 : 05] You forget the humanness of Jesus, the dread that he felt. And of course, if we really want to see the character of God on display, look at the cross itself.

If we are ever tempted to doubt God's purposes, if we're ever tempted to doubt his providence, which is his ability and desire to redeem all things for our good, just look at the cross.

Because the cross, Jesus' death, was simultaneously the most horrendous defeat and the most glorious victory that ever happened. It was an utter defeat.

It was a seeming triumph of evil over Jesus. And yet, that very defeat was Jesus' means of gaining victory. By taking the sin of the world on himself and dying, Jesus actually liberates the world from sin and defeats death.

This is the great mystery of the gospel. Jesus says, my victory is going to come when I let my enemies have their way with me. How amazing is that? So this is really the core of the secret of contentment, is the cross itself.

[31 : 13] Every time we're tempted to doubt or to demote God's ways, look at the cross. So every time we look at the cross, it reminds us why we can and should trust God's purposes and his priorities and ultimately his character over anything in our lives.

So the point is this, if you are struggling, which I know many of us are right now, if you are struggling with discontentment, if you're massively unhappy in your life, if there are things that you would change in a heartbeat, the first thing we need to do is to look at the cross.

That's what this season is all about, by the way, the season of Lent. It's about looking and contemplating the reality of the cross. If God's the kind of God who's able to interweave his purposes from the earliest days of humanity through countless generations, through centuries of history and nations converging, all leading to this magnificent triumph on the cross, if he's the kind of God who can do that through thousands of years of history, then surely he can be trusted to handle your life.

If God is the kind of God whose providence is able to bring the greatest victory out of the greatest defeat, then surely he can redeem whatever suffering you're dealing with.

And if God is the kind of God who would do all of this for us, even though we don't deserve it, but purely because he loves us, then surely his character is one that you can trust. Even if it doesn't make sense.

[32 : 45] Even if it won't make sense. Until the day comes when Jesus wipes away every tear. Let's pray. Our Lord in heaven, these are mysteries greatly beyond us.

There is no formula, no way that we can make it all fit, no spreadsheet that will make sense of what we're talking about. It is the great mystery of a cosmic creator God who has entered into history.

And Lord, we can only trust that what we see happening on the cross, that you is the God behind that master plan, that master work, that masterpiece, that that is the same God who is at work in our lives.

We pray that we would, as Paul says, ever seek to gain Christ, to know the value of what it means to belong to him.

We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. Amen.