

Gratitude Goes Both Ways

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Date: 08 January 2023

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[0 : 00] The thing I find most difficult and challenging about preaching is frequently there are themes that I have to speak on and there are themes that I find so personally difficult and challenging myself. And I often find myself, who am I to stand up and talk about this particular subject when it's something that I find myself caught up with and wrestling so deeply and so personally.

And I want to start this morning by saying if ever there was a time when I actually feel like that, it's right now. Because I'm going to ask a question in just a moment and I almost didn't put this bit in but I decided to do so.

And the reason why I found it's a difficult question to ask is because it's so deeply challenging. It's quite personal and quite confrontational to the extent that it could even cause offence.

But I'm going to include it anyway. I'm not going to ask you to talk to anyone else about it. This is just for your heart and mind only to take away.

But if it helps, both the question and everything else that follows is targeted at myself as much as it is anybody else.

[1 : 23] Here's the question. If you were asked what stands between you and happiness and joy, what would it be?

Look, let me phrase it a different way. If you had to fill in the gap in this following sentence, I will be happy when... What would you put in that gap?

Now just think about that for a moment. That's not actually the difficult question. The sting is in the next one. I will be happy when...

I'm going to give you a few moments to think about that. It might be something to do with relationships. It might be to do with health, either your own or somebody else's.

Perhaps it might be to do with financial security. Promotion at work. I'll be happy when... What would it be?

[2 : 35] Now here's the sting. I want to ask you this question. If that thing that you've just thought about, that thing you're thinking about right now, if that never happens, if that ship never comes in, could you ever be happy?

I want to suggest that if our answer to that question is no or we're not sure, then to some extent we're living in the jaws of discontentment.

And it's to that place that these words of Paul are addressed. Paul says, I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.

Now if what I've just said sounds quite harsh, let's just break down what Paul says. Firstly, he says that he's learned to be content in all circumstances.

He's talking out of that own experience in all circumstances, including those where disappointment would seem to have the upper hand. That's the context.

[3 : 58] That's the place that he's talking about. But secondly, notice that he said that he's had to learn to be content.

It's not something that has just come easily. It's something that in fact, very often, most of the time, is counterintuitive.

Sometimes we've got to dig really deep to find out what it is to be content. It's something that we have to wrestle with and we have to work on to learn to be content.

That was certainly Paul's reality and I suggest it's probably ours too. Certainly, it was the reality for somebody called Doug McKnight.

Doug was 32 years old when he was diagnosed with a degenerative disease. Over the next 16 years, that condition cost him his career, his mobility and eventually his life.

[5 : 03] And in that time, he gradually weakened to the extent that he could neither walk nor feed himself. He battled with depression profoundly.

Towards the end of his life, he was asked by some friends from church, could you compile a list of prayer points for us? He thought about it and he then gave them a list of 24 points.

On that list, 18 of them were blessings that he wanted others to join with him in giving thanks for. Six were concerns.

The first thing that came to his mind were those three times as many things that he knew he had to be thankful for. He was learning to be content.

Learning to be content was also the experience that was described by a missionary in Tobago many years ago or rather after they came back from that experience of working in Tobago among a community of people with leprosy.

[6 : 16] And they were describing how one day they were leading an act of worship at a church. Most of the people in the congregation had leprosy. And a part in the service they said, would anybody like to choose a song what we're going to sing next?

Somebody put up their hand. They were so deformed from leprosy they had no ears no nose and no lips. The arm that they raised had a hand but it had no fingers on it.

They said, can we sing count your blessings? As the missionary was telling this story years later to a friend the friend said I suppose you'll never be able to sing that song again.

The missionary said oh, I'll sing it again and again but just never in quite the same way. Learning ever so hard though it can be learning to be content whatever the circumstances is the challenge that we face.

It's not something that is readily encouraged in western culture. How often do you buy a product? And maybe let's say it's something that's a fairly expensive thing and so you do your research.

[7 : 40] You want to make sure that you're making the right decision. You kind of go online maybe and you work out or maybe it's based on recommendation or whatever but you're pretty satisfied that the thing that you're about to buy is going to service every single requirement that you need it to.

And everything you read about it certainly the person trying to sell it to you, the company trying to sell it to you, reassures you that this is the very best of the best of the best. So you buy it. What pops up as soon as you click on that purchase?

To complement your purchase, you might also like sometimes the email comes a week later and says that others who bought this also bought that.

Hang on, a moment ago you were telling me that this item would meet every single need. You see it's not helped perhaps by the way in which when we look around and we compare ourselves with others and we see what they have and we see what we don't have.

There's a really old story about a boy who all he wanted for his birthday was this Swiss army knife. It was the latest one. It had all the get every single blade attachment you could possibly imagine on this Swiss army knife.

[8 : 52] He desperately wanted it and his parents knew it and they got it for him. He loved it. He just took it with him everywhere. He was never to be seen without this tool.

He was always bringing it out and any excuse to use one of the attachments, he was there with it. He just loved this thing. Several months later his mum found him and he was in floods of tears.

She couldn't get out of him what was wrong. He said, something happened at school? No.

Something happened at home? No. She said, what is it? Then she noticed he didn't seem to have his knife right by his side.

She said, has something happened to your pen knife? Is it something to do with that? He said, well, yes. She said, well, have you lost it?

He said, no. Have you broken it? No. Eventually the truth came out. He'd been with his friend who'd also just had a birthday, who'd also just been given what was almost exactly the same Swiss army knife.

[9 : 58] Say almost, because it had one extra attachment. And that Swiss army knife principle, if I may refer to it, is something that actually subconsciously can stay with us throughout our whole lives.

We look to see not so much what we have, but what others have, or rather what we don't have. And we draw those comparisons. And rather than reflecting and focusing on the things that we do have

that make us feel good and positive about life, actually we see that gap.

Comparisons never, ever help. So what does contentment look like practically? Well, two things come to mind. First, I think contentment has to have something to do with knowing and loving what we've already got.

Again, there's a story that goes back quite a few years ago. There was a man who was thinking about moving house, putting his house on the market. He had a number of different reasons, but this was the days before right move.

So he walked into his estate agent, explained to him that he wanted to move, and they said, oh, that's great, we can help you there. We'd like you to do two things. Firstly, we'll arrange for someone to come around, take some photos of the house, and we'll take details and everything.

[11:14] That happened. He said, secondly, we'd like you to go home and actually fill out this form and make a list of everything that would go to make up a perfect house where you want to live. Location, number of rooms, garden, everything.

Just try and be as detailed as you possibly can. So the man went home and did this. He got quite excited as he wrote an extensive list. He more than filled out the form. He needed extra bits of paper to write down everything that he was looking for that would make the perfect home.

Put it in an envelope, took it into the estate agent. When he went to the estate agent, it was a different person serving him this time. He handed over his envelope and the estate agent took the envelope out, had a quick look at it and said, actually, I've got something that I think you might be interested in.

He went to get a file. He said it matches the description pretty well. He said, I'll tell you what, take this home with you. I was really quite excited to have found what possibly might be the answer to everything he was looking for.

He got home, he opened up the envelope, read the description of this place that was just about to come onto the market. There were no photos yet. Didn't even say the address, but he thought, this is absolutely amazing.

[12:27] Gone on the phone, phoned, you can see what's coming, can't you? Phoned the estate agent and yes, they said, it's your house. Perhaps the most important things to us are things that are already there, and yet we just don't see it.

Perhaps learning to be content involves seeing the obvious, which perhaps is not always obvious. But the other thing, and I think this is at the core of the challenge facing us as followers of Jesus, is that the daily challenge of learning to be content means knowing, really knowing that Jesus is enough.

The late John Stott, that great evangelical Anglican theologian, wrote this, contentment is the secret of inward peace.

It remembers the stark truth that we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. Life, in fact, is a pilgrimage from one moment of nakedness to another.

So we should travel light and live simply. Our battle cry is not nothing, but enough. Paul wrote, I can do everything through Christ who strengthens me.

[14:05] Now when Paul said that, that you can do anything through Christ, he's not talking about some kind of mystical, magical powers that when you become a believer you suddenly have. It's not like you believe in Jesus and suddenly you can teach cows how to milk themselves or make things explode by wiggling your eyebrows.

It doesn't work like that. simply means that Jesus is enough. Jesus is enough.

Contentment has learned and is about learning that Jesus is enough. if you know Jesus, you have a God who hears you.

You have the power of love behind you. You have the Holy Spirit within you and you have all of heaven ahead of you. If you have Jesus, you have grace for every sin.

You have direction for every turn. You have a candle for every corner and an anchor for everything you need. Let's learn to be content.

[15:25] Let's pray. In our prayers, let's just revisit that question that started with.

Where we were each invited to just bring to our minds and to our hearts. that thing that we feel would bring us happiness. Lord, you know those things that we pursue, those things that mean so much to us.

And those things that would stand, we think, stand between us and happiness. Lord, reality may tell a different story.

help us, whether we have much or whether we have little. Whether we reach those things and receive those things that we've thought of.

Help us, regardless or not, to know that with you that is enough. Help us in that daily challenge to learn to be content.

[16 : 37] and so to respond with lives of gratitude. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Amen.