

What Contented People Do

Introduction. Contentment is a highly prized, but elusive virtue. Though it only comes through a right relationship with God and trusting in His providence, people nevertheless seek it where it cannot be found -- in money, possessions, power, prestige, jobs or freedom from difficulties. By that definition, contentment is unattainable, for it is impossible in this world to be completely free from problems. John Balguy wrote, "Contentment is a pearl of great price, and whoever procures it at the expense of ten thousand desires makes a wise and a happy purchase."

Before concluding this letter to his beloved Philippians, Paul wanted to express his deep gratitude to them. Their generosity was especially meaningful to him because it reached him during a trying time in his life. Beneath the surface of Paul's expression of thanks to the Philippians is the picture of a man utterly content in spite of severe circumstances. Five principles of contentment flow from this seemingly ordinary conclusion to Paul's letter (Philippians 4:10-19).

I. ***They Are Confident In God's Providence***

- A. Ten years had passed since Paul's work in Philippi had resulted in the founding of the church in that city.
 1. The Philippians had generously supported Paul when he left Philippi to work in the Macedonian cities of Thessalonica and Berea (Acts 17:1-3).
 2. When Paul moved south into Achaia, the Philippians continued their support as he worked in Athens and Corinth (Acts 17:14-18:18).
- B. As the years passed they had consistently been concerned about Paul, but lacked any opportunity to provide support for him. The reason for that lack is not given. It may have been due to their preoccupation with their poverty (2 Corinthians 8:1-2). Or they may have been unaware of the apostle's needs, or unable to locate him.
- C. But recently opportunity arose when Epaphroditus arrived in Rome, bringing with him a generous gift from the Philippians for which Paul rejoiced. He did so not primarily because the gift met his need, but because it gave evidence of their love for him.
- D. Paul's gracious attitude reflects his patient confidence in God's sovereign providence. He was certain that God in due time would arrange his circumstances to meet his needs.
 1. Paul was content because he knew that the times, seasons and opportunities of life are controlled by the sovereign God (Ephesians 1:11; Romans 8:28).

2. Solomon acknowledged God's providential control (Proverbs 16:9; 19:21). One can also see God's providence with Joseph and Esther (Genesis 50:20; Esther 4:14).

II. ***They Are Satisfied With Little***

- A. Though Paul's situation was extremely difficult, Paul was not discontent. It did not matter that he was a prisoner, living in a small apartment, chained to a Roman soldier and subsisting on a sparse diet.
- B. The word translated "content" is vs. 11 appears only here in the New Testament. In extra-biblical Greek it was used to speak of being self-sufficient, having enough or not being dependent on others. One ancient writer used the word in reference to a country that supplied itself and had no need of imports.
- C. True contentment comes only from God and enables Christians to be satisfied and at ease in the midst of any problem.
 1. Instead of being content, people are obsessed with delineating their needs and loudly demanding that they be met. Needs has become the number one value in our culture. Starting from the humanistic premise that God does not exist and man is therefore ultimate, the goal of life for people becomes getting their needs met.
 2. Adding to the discontent is the blurring of the distinction between needs and wants. Thus, men "need" better jobs, fancier cars and bigger homes; women "need" careers outside the home; children "need" the freedom to express themselves outside the "bondage" of parental control.
 3. Like a hamster running around and around on a wheel and going nowhere, people desperately chase contentment that is always tantalizingly just out of reach. Even the church has begun to build "ministries" around people's "felt needs."
- D. Paul knew that the chief end of man is not to have his needs met, but to glorify God. Because of that, he was satisfied with whatever God graciously granted him. He worked hard and was content to let God control the results.

III. ***They Are Independent From Circumstances***

- A. Paul had learned through experience and spiritual maturity to live above his circumstances and not to let them affect his contentment. Paul uses six terms in vs. 12 to refer to the material, earthly needs of this life, not to spiritual needs.
- B. Paul was not an "ivory tower" theologian; he had lived and worked in the "trenches." The apostle's trials are well-documented in Acts (9:22-25; 14:19; 16:22-24; 17:5-10, 13, 18-34; 18:12; 20:3; 21:26-30; 21:31-35; 27:37-44).

- C. In 2 Corinthians 11:23-33, Paul summed up his arduous, difficult and painful life. In all Paul's unique and constant sufferings, he had learned the secret of rising above them. In the midst of all his trials, he kept his focus on heavenly realities (Colossians 3:1-2; 2 Corinthians 4:17).

IV. ***They Are Strengthened By Divine Power***

- A. No matter how difficult his struggles may have been, Paul had a spiritual undergirding, an invisible means of support because of his being crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:20).
- B. When Paul wrote "I can do all things" he had in mind physical, not spiritual matters. "I can do" means "to be strong, to have power or to have resources." It is translated as "prevailed" (Acts 19:16, 20) and "availeth" (James 5:16).
- C. The Greek text emphasizes the word translated "all things" (a reference to physical needs; cf. vs 11-12) by placing it first in the sentence. Paul was strong enough to endure anything because Christ had strengthened him (1 Timothy 1:12; 2 Timothy 4:17).
1. The apostles does not, of course, mean that he could physically survive indefinitely without food, water, sleep or shelter.
 2. What he is saying is that when he reached the limit of his resources and strength, even to the point of death, he was infused with the strength of Christ. He could overcome the most dire physical difficulties because of the inner, spiritual strength God had given him (Isaiah 40:29-31).
 3. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this truth in Paul's life comes from 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. In one sense, one can say that contentment is a by-product of distress.
- D. It is important to note that only those who obey God can count on His power to sustain them. Those whose continued sin has led them into the pit of despair cannot expect God to bring them contentment from their circumstances. They can only be truly content if they have lived righteously; there is no quick fix or shortcut.

V. ***They Are Preoccupied With The Well-Being Of Others***

- A. A final strand in the tapestry of contentment woven by Paul is concern for others.
1. Those who live only for themselves will never be content, because contentment for them can come only when their circumstances are exactly as they want them to be. And that will never happen.
 2. Only those who unselfishly put others' well-being above their own will find contentment. If Christ would have looked out only for His

- own interests, He would never have left heaven to sacrifice Himself for sinful people (Philippians 2:3-5).
- B. To make certain that the Philippians did not misunderstand him, Paul hastened to reassure them that they had done well when they shared with him in his affliction. Their generosity, along with Paul's own hard work, allowed him to work free of charge in Thessalonica and Corinth (1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:8; Acts 18:5; 2 Corinthians 11:8).
 - C. Their gift brought Paul joy, not because of its personal material benefit to him, but because of its spiritual benefit to them. The principle that those who give generously will be blessed is taught repeatedly in the Bible (Proverbs 11:24-25; 19:17; 22:9; 28:27; Luke 6:38; Acts 20:35; 2 Corinthians 9:6).
 - D. Using sacrificial language from the Old Testament, Paul described the Philippians' gift as an "odor of sweet smell" (cf. Genesis 8:20-21; Exodus 29:18; Leviticus 1:9, 13, 17; Numbers 15:3), a "sacrifice acceptable" (cf. Leviticus 19:5; 22:29; Isaiah 56:7) and "well-pleasing to God" (cf. Psalm 51:19).
 - 1. Paul saw the Philippians' gift as a sacrificial act of worship to God. Such spiritual sacrifices are required of Christians instead of the animal sacrifices of the Old Covenant (Romans 12:1-2; Hebrews 13:15-16; 1 Peter 2:5).
 - 2. The Philippians had sacrificially given of their earthly possessions to support God's servant, Paul (cf. 2 Corinthians 8:1-3). In return, God would amply supply their needs; He would not be in their debt (Proverbs 3:9-10).
 - E. Paul reveals the extent to which God would supply the Philippians' needs. His giving to them would be relative to the immensity of His eternal wealth; that is, as generously as is consistent with "His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (1 Corinthians 1:4-5; Ephesians 1:3, 23; Colossians 1:19; 2:3, 9; 2 Peter 1:3).

Conclusion. A contented mind is a great blessing. Contentment removes anxiety (Philippians 4:6). Socrates said, "Contentment is natural wealth, luxury is artificial poverty." Take each day of what future God gives us and be at peace with God, having the peace that passes all understanding. Most of all, obey Christ today and be at peace (Romans 5:1-2).