

December 13, 2009

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

The Secret of Contentment

Philippians 4:10 – 23

This morning I want to finish out Philippians with the other side of the coin so to speak. Two weeks ago we saw that Paul was filled with a holy discontent that compelled him to pursue Christ with all his heart, soul, mind and will. His call to action was this: *I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him*, Philippians 4:8-9a Paul was not content to coast. He knew that no one drifts to heaven. He was not satisfied with just a little bit of God. He always wanted more. He had tasted the goodness of God and was simultaneously left full **and** also wanting more. He could proclaim along with the psalmist: *'In Your presence is fullness of joy'* Psalm 16:11 and also cry out: *'O God, You are my God, earnestly I seek You; my soul thirsts for You, my body longs for You, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.* Psalm 63:1 – 2

One reason I think we struggle so in our Christian walk is that we do not have this sense of holy discontent. We are too easily satisfied with just a little bit of God. We often regard Him as an airplane pilot does a parachute – good to have but hope you never need it. Our desire for Him is too small and our appetite for the things of God is too blunted by other things. That was the view of C.S. Lewis: *“Indeed if we consider the unblushing promise of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”* I believe that we are called to a **holy discontent with any current level of spiritual attainment that leaves us complacent or apathetic about pressing into Christ.** The great apostle Paul's own assessment of his life, after years of walking closely with Christ was: *Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own.* Saints, we need to press on to know Christ.

That is one side of the coin. **The other side of holy discontent is the secret of contentment.** In the Christian life there are many paradoxes – the last shall be first – we die in order to live – we lose in order to gain – give and it will be given – this is one of those. On the one hand we are called to a holy discontent with any spiritual attainment or static level of relationship with Christ. On the other hand we are called as followers of Christ to be content in our circumstances. Paul told the Philippians, *Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.* Philippians 4:11 We need to understand that it is in our circumstances and not in our relationship with Christ that we are called to be content.

Paul tells Timothy: *Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.* 1 Timothy 6:6-8 And the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says: *Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for He has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."* Hebrews 13:5 And to the Corinthians Paul wrote: *For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.* 2 Corinthians 12:10 The message of contentment is be content with the gifts that God has given you – even suffering. Be satisfied with any and every good thing and bad our Sovereign God has seen fit to bless us with; be content in your circumstances; because these things are specifically designed to help us gain Christ and know Christ and be found in Christ. **On the one hand, never be satisfied with just a little bit of Christ – develop a holy discontent. On the other hand, be satisfied in your circumstances; in all the temporary things of life – don't let there be a discontent there.**

In all his situations and circumstances Paul was content. Whether he had money or was penniless, he was content. Whether he was free or imprisoned, he was content. Whether he was beaten or embraced, he was content. But he was never content with any current level of knowing Christ – he always wanted more. He had an insatiable appetite for knowing God and he pressed on to know Him.

In verse 12 Paul says that contentment is a secret: *I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.* Philippians 4:12 When he says, '**I have learned the secret**', Paul uses a word that means '**initiated into the mystery**'. And it is a mystery. Most people are not content in their circumstances. There always seems to be a level of simmering discontent just below the surface – sometimes not so below. And it comes out in our pursuit of stuff, or position or money or whatever.

A good business to get into I've been told, is the storage unit business. Two and three car garages are no longer enough. We need one or two storage units to go along with those garages. Never mind the fact that we never park our cars in our garages. They're too full of stuff. And people are making money off our discontent. Our discontent comes out in our grumbling and complaining. **If we were content in whatever situation we found ourselves – we would be strangers to grumbling.** C.H. Spurgeon noted that contentment was not a natural state for men, but rather discontent: *'Ill weeds grow apace; covetousness, discontent, and murmuring, are as natural to man as thorns are to the soil. You have no need to sow thistles and brambles; they come up naturally enough, because they are indigenous to earth, upon which rests the curse; so you have no need to teach men to complain, they complain fast enough without any education'*. So we need to learn the secret – to be initiated into the mystery of contentment. And there are at least four key ingredients to our contentment. **Being Confident in God – Being Satisfied in God – Being Sustained by God – Being Supplied by God.**

Confident in God

First of all, we cannot be content in whatever circumstances we find ourselves unless we are confident God. **That is we are supremely convinced and confident in His providence.** Listen to what Paul tells the Philippians: *I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.* Philippians 4:10-11 Let me give you a little context for this first.

Ten years have passed since the last Philippian gift was sent to him, ten years since he arrived in Philippi, ten years since he preached the gospel there, ten years since he was thrown in jail, ten years since the earthquake released all the prisoners, ten years since the Philippian jailer was converted to Christ and all of his household, ten years since he moved from there to Thessalonica and the Philippians gave him some support, ten years since he left Macedonia for Achaia, the cities of Athens and Corinth and the Philippians sent him another gift after he had left. Ten years since the last expression of their love. He was the founder of their church, they had a love bond but for ten years there had been no support.

And now he was rejoicing that the Philippians had renewed their concern for him. And that was alright with Paul because he was confident in God's providence. He says, *You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity.* Literally the word means '**season**'. **It implies that to everything there is a season.** We know from this letter and others that the Philippians had been partnering with Paul in the gospel mainly through their giving. But for ten years nothing had happened. We are not told why there was this hiatus – merely that there had been and Paul's estimation of that lack was that it was not the season for them. But now the season had arrived and their concern revived.

So what's the point? **The point is that Paul had an unshakeable confidence in the providence of God.** He wasn't waiting on the Philippians – he was waiting on God who changes times and epochs and gives the seasons in their course. He knew that all things were in God's capable hands and when it was time – the Philippians would renew their concern and he could rejoice. He knew that in due time God would order the circumstances so that his need would be met. He didn't send out notices that funds were getting low or things were getting tight – so remember me in your end of the year giving. He just waited for the season to change. The reason he was content was that he knew that the times and the seasons and opportunities of life were controlled by a sovereign God.

And until we learn that we will never be content. We need to understand experientially that God is sovereign and He is working all things after the counsel of His will for our good and His glory. That is, he orchestrates everything to accomplish His purpose. His primary motivation is not our satisfaction but His. This is His universe, not ours. He controls all things, we don't. Our discontent stems from the fact that we want to control stuff and we will nurture our discontent until we relent and acknowledge His sovereign control. If we believe that God orders all our circumstances to accomplish His will in this world, then we can be content in whatever situation we find ourselves. **Contentment requires that we are confident in God.**

Satisfied in God

Paul was not only confident in God, **he was satisfied in God**: *I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.* Philippians 4:12 Paul's content came from an overwhelming satisfaction in God. **Not that he was satisfied that he had all of God that he needed but rather that God Himself was enough.** Notice the contrasts – he knew how to be brought low and how to abound. When everyone honors us it is easy to be content. But what about when our reputation is smeared? What about when we see others reap the honors that are rightfully ours?

What about when we are passed over in favor of others who are less qualified? Are we content then? If our contentment consists of things instead of God – we cannot help but be discontent. Do we really understand that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him? Are we willing to be brought low that Christ might be exalted? Paul was speaking out of the reality of his experience here – he was in prison on trumped up charges, chained to a Roman soldier, other Christian leaders were speaking badly about him, and he was truly brought low – **yet he was satisfied in God.**

In some respects it is easier for us to be content when we are brought low than it is for us to be content when we abound. The word means to have more than enough, to have an abundance; and if there is a more deadly killer of satisfaction in God than to have more than enough, I don't know what it is. Over and over in the Scriptures we see that when God's people experience the blessings of God and the fatness of His provision, their appetite for God is dulled and their hearts grow heavy with things and they wander away from Him. As Spurgeon once wrote: *'They are full and forget God; satisfied with earth they are content to do without heaven.'* The writer of Proverbs recognized this problem: *Two things I ask of You; deny them not to me before I die: Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny You and say, "Who is the LORD?" or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.* Let this be the test of our satisfaction in God: if everything we held dear in this life went away tomorrow – would God Himself be enough? **The secret of contentment is to be satisfied in God.**

Sustained by God

Paul's contentment is fueled by confidence in God and satisfaction in God, and in the fact that **he is sustained by God**. *I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.* Philippians 4:13 The decisive factor in our doing ought to be Christ Himself. Very often this verse is violently wrenched out of context to give the impression that if we wanted to, we could invent cold fusion or walk on water or feed five thousand people with a single ham sandwich. But the *'all things'* in this verse is limited by the context. And the context is that in whatever circumstances he finds himself, whether highly acclaimed or roundly criticized, whether free to move about the country or behind bars, he has learned that Christ is his sustainer and he is content with that. That is, he can do all things – he can do hunger, he can do plenty, he can do humble and he can do abundance – **he can do all that God assigns him to do through the One who gives him strength.**

Supplied by God

Finally, Paul's contentment springs from the knowledge that **God will supply every need he will ever have** – fully and completely. And he gets to that point through talking about giving. On the one hand he is saying 'I am walking through this thing in the strength that Christ supplies – whether or not the Philippians ever come through'. On the other hand, he is commending them for partnering with Christ in this ministry. *Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble [tribulation].* Philippians 4:14 **The gift the Philippians sent through Ephaphroditus was considered by Paul a sharing in his tribulations.** When we talk about sharing in the gospel, we talk about going and sending. There are those who are called by God to at-home direct involvement ministries that proclaim the gospel in domestic settings; and there are those who are called to leave their homes for cross-cultural missions in the world. And there are those who are called not to go but to send – and all of them, the goers and the senders are sharers in the ministry of the gospel.

Because Paul goes on to say: *And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again.* Philippians 4:16-17 He doesn't mention the ten-year gap in their sending **because during those ten years God was faithful to supply.** God wasn't waiting on the Philippians and neither was Paul because God was his supply. But he also wanted to make it clear that the money was not the issue, but there was the eternal perspective to consider: *Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.* Philippians 4:17

On the one hand Paul was thankful for their gift but he knew that God was the one who met his need. And it was God who was keeping accounts and not Paul. I believe that the fruit he was talking about were those that came to Christ on account of Paul's preaching, and because the Philippians partnered with him in the gospel, that fruit was put toward their account in heaven. That is a short course in heavenly economics – **The Philippians give, Paul preaches, people are saved, their account grows.**

But as for Paul he says: *I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.* Philippians 4:18 Our giving so that others may go is actually sweet-smelling offering to God. Paul calls it an acceptable sacrifice that is pleasing to God. He is saying that they didn't give to him but to God and that God was pleased. It pleases God when we give sacrificially for His purpose in the world. **And the promise of God to our obedient giving is this: And my God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.** Philippians 4:19

I believe Paul is saying here: 'Philippians, I know the depth of your poverty and out of the wealth of your poverty you have given sacrificially and probably left yourselves in need as a result. But know this, God will never be in your debt because what you gave will result in not only in fruit from the ministry and increase in your heavenly account but will be given back to you, pressed down, shaken together and running over even as His word has said.' I am reminded of what Paul told the Corinthians: *The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. As it is written, "He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God.* 2 Corinthians 9:6-12

We need to understand that God will supply all our needs because it is His purposes that are at stake. Notice that the supply is directly related to His purpose – not your needs or comfort or wants. He makes grace abound to us – **so that we will abound in good works.** He supplies seed to the sower and bread for food – **so that our gospel efforts will bring forth fruit.** He enriches us in every way – **so that we can be generous in every way.** As we have heard many times, **God prospers me, not to raise my standard of living, but to raise my standard of giving. Our contentment is rooted in the sure knowledge that God is our supply.**

To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen. Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Philippians 4:20-23

*Our gracious God and loving Father,
Grant that we would know the secret of contentment. Give us we pray a strong confidence in your providence and your power. Fill us with a supreme satisfaction in You alone. Sustain us by the power that works all things for our good and Your glory and help us to stand on Your unfailing promise of supply for our every need. O Lord by the truth of Your word and the power of Your Spirit and the ministry of Your body, build men and women and children and families here at Summit who don't love the world more than God, who don't care if they have much or little, who don't expect that life should be comfortable and easy, who don't grumble, whine or complain when circumstances seem overwhelming and life is hard. But Lord we ask for hearts that are ablaze for God and a people who are love You more than life. A people who are joyfully and patiently enduring in the face of life's trials – who are stunned into humility by the riches of Your grace – who are content with what they have and trusting in the promises of God – who are delighting in You through Jesus Christ and spreading His joy through the gospel to all people, in the precious and powerful name of Jesus we pray, Amen.*