

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 2, 2008**

## **THE SECRET OF CONTENTMENT**

### **Philippians 4:10-23**

We live in uncertain times, don't we? In a few days, our country will elect a new president. We don't yet know who will win the election, but given the way the campaign has gone, one thing seems likely. Half of the country will be delighted with the outcome and the other half will be utterly disappointed.

The issues in this election are crucial and how the election turns out is important. But, whoever wins – John McCain or Barack Obama – should be the object of our frequent prayers for the next four years. They will deal with difficult and unprecedented problems – a recession and an ever-increasing deficit, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and diplomatic pressures in hotspots all around the world. The problems the next president will face are immense.

Over the next four years, you and I deal with our own set of problems, too. Many of us will face circumstances that we cannot change. The economic crisis will have its effect. We may face problems on the job or have heartbreaking struggles in our relationships with friends or loved ones. We may have physical disabilities, chronic pain, or poor health. Every one of us will have something that will disappoint us.

What do you do when things aren't working the way you would like them to? When things don't go the way you think they should? What do you do with your disappointments? Are you content? Or do you grumble and complain about the bad you're dealt? Or when life lets you down do you worry and fret or hold on to bitterness deep inside?

This morning, I'd like to talk to you about something God has been teaching me from His Word – how to deal with the sin of discontentment and to be content in the disappointments of life. Contentment is a concept that I wrestle with. I am not yet able to say, like the apostle Paul, "I have learned to be content." Not by a long shot!

But, ever so slowly, God is revealing to me about my sin of discontentment and how to deal with it. As we conclude our study of Philippians, I want to share with you some of what I've learned and hope that all of us can benefit by learning how Paul learned contentment.

Remember that Philippians is one of Paul's prison epistles. Paul wrote the letter while he was under house arrest, probably in Rome, chained to a Roman guard 24 hours a day. He had been arrested in Jerusalem for preaching about Jesus and brought to Rome to stand trial before Caesar. At the time he wrote the letter, the outcome of his trial is uncertain – he could be set free or he could lose his life.

Part of this ordeal, and what was typical of being a prisoner in Rome, was that Paul actually had to provide for his own upkeep. If he wanted to eat or wanted warm clothing in winter, he had to provide that himself . . . or receive some kind of support from other people. That is what has happened here.

The church at Philippi heard Paul was in jail. In an effort to help, they took an offering to support him while he was under arrest. One of their own, a man named Epaphroditus was chosen to take the money to Rome.

Paul was blown away by the generosity of the Philippians. They were not a group of well-to-do Christians, but a very poor church that gave sacrificially. They had helped before and they did it again. Paul doesn't take their giving lightly and his gratitude comes across loud and clear: He "rejoiced greatly" (v. 10). He acknowledges their partnership in the gospel (v. 15). And knows that he is amply supplied through their faithfulness to God (v. 18).

But Paul is careful to say that their gift is not what made him content. He is grateful. But having his needs met is not what brought contentment. So let's look a bit more closely at this idea.

### **WHAT IS CONTENTMENT?**

Let's first see what contentment is not. Being content is not being stoic. To be stoic is to so control your emotions that suffering and pain no longer bother you. Trying to be tough, self sufficient, pulling on the power of positive thinking to pretend that life's ups and downs will never touch you. The problem is that it is impossible to maintain and it's not what Paul is talking about here. He's not calling us to live in denial or be numb to suffering.

Also, Paul does not say that we must settle for those things in our lives that are less than they ought to be. We are not simply to resign ourselves to circumstances we know will never change and pray nothing or do nothing. When we simply settle and resign ourselves to the bad situation – and fail to learn contentment – we will hold in our hearts a smoldering discontentment. And that is sin.

Then what does he mean when he says he is content? Contentment is knowing that you are in God's plan and that He provides all you need for your circumstances. It comes when you believe as in verse 19, that God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus. Contentment comes from accepting your circumstances, knowing that they come from Him and that He knows what is best for you and that in His love, He permits only that which is best.

In 2 Corinthians 9, we find the same idea. This is a passage where Paul encourages us to give generously. Verses 6-7 say, "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

And then in verse 8, he writes: "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times," here's the word, "having all that you need" [the word literally means having contentment] "so you will abound in every good work." What Paul is saying is that we are content when we know that we have all we need for the present circumstances.

Now, go back to Philippians 4. Paul has been in prison in Rome about two years, chained to guards, and notice what he says. He says, "There are times when I have been in need and times when I have had plenty. There are times when I'm cold, times when I am hungry. I look back on my life, and I see times when I've been in plenty and times when I'm in want."

Notice he did not say: “I liked being hungry. I liked being in a cold prison cell. I liked being in difficult circumstances.” He does not at all say that. But what he's saying is this: “Though I may not like it and would give my right arm to get out of this prison and preach the gospel again, I know I have from God what it's going to take to measure up to these present circumstances. I have all that I need to deal with these circumstances.”

That's what you see him expressing in verse 13: “I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.” The idea is that God gives us the strength to live in the circumstance to which He has called us - whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

Paul learned contentment in these circumstances because he knew and believed in Jesus Christ. Real contentment is possible only for Christians who know and believe the truth of the gospel. Paul is saying, “Christ, who is in me, so thoroughly equips me so that when the disappointments of life come, I can cope with them. I can handle them. I can accept what comes my way because I know He supplies all of my needs.”

#### **FOUR REALITIES**

Paul had to learn how to be content. Even as a believer, he had to learn how to appropriate and trust what God's Word said about the realities of life. You and I need to know these same truths so that we can learn contentment, even when life is difficult.

Dr. Paul Tripp has a helpful way of understanding this. He says that there are four things that each of us will face. Four realities of the world we live in. Let me summarize what Dr. Tripp says.

First, we live in a fallen world. That probably seems obvious to you. You cannot pick up the newspaper or watch the television without seeing this. Our planet is full of disease, sickness, violence and war, filled with sin and greed and corruption. Everywhere you turn, you see that somewhere, someplace the world is broken. Some of that brokenness will affect you and me.

Not only is our world fallen, but so are you and I. We are fallen sinners. You and I are not perfect. We carry inside us a deep problem called sin. That sinfulness causes me to shrink my life down to the size of my own life, to live for nothing bigger than myself. Sin causes me to want to be the center of my life and to care about my own wants and desires above everything else. Because we are fallen, we tend to see life to be no bigger than the size of our own existence. Sin causes me to serve a false god and that false god is me!

I want to clarify something here. Sometimes, the things we want can be perfectly good. We want good health, and loving relationships. We don't want to live in poverty or pain, and we naturally want the comfortable lifestyle that a well-paying job will bring. It is not wrong to desire or pray for those things. Sometimes God gives them, sometimes He does not. But, when we go without what we want and we have become gods to ourselves, we will grow discontented. And that discontentment is sin.

How do you know when you are captured by your own existence and serving yourself? Ask yourself this: How do you react when you don't get what you want, even if it is good? If you have difficulty

accepting your difficulties and believing that they come from your sovereign God, then in some way your heart is consumed by your selfishness.

Now this is something each of struggle with – you and me. Every one of us tends to react wrongly when we don't get what we want. We grumble or complain, withdraw, feel sorry for ourselves, get angry or depressed, or act in some way that shows our self-centeredness. We all do it. That's why we need the grace of God to learn contentment.

Third, not only are we sinners living in a broken world, but we also have an enemy called Satan who wants to seduce us. He wants to draw us outside of the boundaries of how God has called us to live. He tempts us to want for ourselves. He wants us to believe things are not really true – that life is about our comfort, our well-being, our personal happiness. If the devil has his way, he'd be happy to let us live thinking life was all about us.

But it is not. Life is about God! That is the fourth reality we must reckon with. We live under the plan of God. The Bible tells us that the world was created as a stage to demonstrate God glory. All of human history is ordered so that His holiness is revealed and His mercy and grace is poured out on a broken world. God's plan is about redemption, saving and sanctifying sinners like you and me for His own glory.

Acts 17:28 tells us that in Him, we live and move and have our being. God determines the exact place where I will live, the exact length of my life. He orders my circumstances or as Psalm 139:16 says His "eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in His book before one of them came to be." The stuff of life – the things we want and the things that disappoint us are ordained by a God who is wise and loving and faithful and good.

Every day we face these four realities: a broken world, personal sin, temptations from the enemy, and the sovereign plan of God.

The promise of Philippians 4:13 is that God gives us the strength through Jesus Christ to learn these and make them really become a part of our lives.

That is what Paul learned. He learned to put God in the equation of his life every single day, in every single circumstance. Even when facing the possibility of death, he could say, as he wrote in 1:20: "For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain." Paul saw that life was bigger than the circumstances that he endured. Life was about God's plan.

Paul Tripp tells the story of a kindergarten class. One of the children, named Susie, had a birthday and her mother threw a big party. It was a blowout, with cake and ice cream, balloons and paper decorations. At one table were all the presents for Susie, wrapped in bright paper and colorful bows, piled so high that Susie could barely see over the top of them.

At every other place were party favors for each of the guests – a little bag with a party hat, a whistle and some other toy, and a few pieces of candy. Little Johnnie sat down at one of those places, took a look at the party favor, glanced over at the pile of presents and . . . Well you guessed it. First, his lip

began to quiver, he crossed his arms in anger, turned beet red and began. He didn't want the cheap party favor; he wanted the presents that Susie got.

Then one mother walked over, took Johnny into her arms and said these deeply theological words: "Johnny, it's not your party."

Life is not our party. It is all about Christ – history leads up to His death and resurrection and marches ever toward His coming again. The son of God – the second person of the Trinity – came down from heaven and gave His life so that you and I might be redeemed. It is all about Jesus and not about us. As Paul wrote just a few verses over in Chapter 2, one day at the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue confess Him as Lord. It is His party, not ours. Our lives are to be bigger than our marriages and families, bigger than jobs, and vacations, and houses and retirement plans and any personal comfort. Jesus did not come to make our little kingdoms work, but to invite us to a bigger kingdom.

Paul learned this. God allowed Him to be arrested and brought to trial, chained to a Roman guard, denied his freedom and comfort so the good news of Jesus would spread across the city of Rome and hence, across the Roman Empire. Paul learned that his circumstances, as painful and difficult as they were, made up part of the Lord's awesome and wonderful story of grace.

## **CONCLUSION**

Let me ask you this. Do you see your story as part of God's story? Do you see the uncertainties and difficulties in your life as part of God's plan for you and for the world? Are you learning that God is accomplishing His plan through your difficulties? That He guarantees that you will have all you need for your present circumstances? That God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ and that He will give you strength to endure whatever He decides to bring your way?

The secret of contentment is seeing everything in your life as part of God's big plan and really believing that He provides all you need to live in it. It is found in accepting your circumstances, knowing that they come from God. It is His party. We live in a broken world and we are selfish people who, with the prodding of Satan, try our best to make life about our own wants and desires. But life is bigger than you and me.

If we are to be content, we ask God to teach us that life is about Him. Life will have its ups and downs. Sometimes it will be fun and comfortable, sometimes it will be painful and disappointing. If we are to be content, we have to learn to believe as Paul did: "To live is Christ!" That must be our desire.

We desperately need to know that life is about Him and that He can be trusted. That is the secret of contentment. Seeing everything in your life as part of God's big plan and really believing that He provides all you need to live in it.