

How to *Learn* Contentment

Jonathan Rue

May 9, 2010

Gratitude and Contentment

Philippians 4:10-13

Have you ever noticed how you do not need to teach somebody how to be discontent? No one has to *learn how* to be discontent.

No one has to *learn how* to be discontent

We're all born with this ability. You don't have to teach a baby how to let you know when their needs are not met, when they are upset about something, when they are discontent. The universe exists to satisfy their needs and when mom or dad isn't getting that job done, they are perfectly capable of letting you know about it.

So from birth we all know how to be discontent, and some of us are simply gifted at it. We nurture it. We practice it over and over again and we grow up to be masters of discontentment. See the really low-bar, garden-variety discontentment means that when something bad happens in my life, my emotions and my moods simply mirror my circumstance. But the really gifted, the high-performers of discontentment can have something good happen in their life, and they *still* have a negative emotion or mood as a response. Do you know someone like this? Are *you* someone like this?

It's not just that we are affected by major frustrations and setbacks in life, but our mood is profoundly affected by minor inconveniences, by minor situations that can send us spiraling down into discontentment. How much does your outlook on life change if you're not able to have your coffee in the morning? Or if the barista messes up your soy, vanilla mocha by adding whipped cream on top? How much is your mood affected if there is an accident on the freeway and you sit in traffic for an extra 25 minutes on the way to work? Is your day ruined when you don't get your way? How many "bad days" have you had lately? Are they outnumbering good days, or neutral days?

Do these kinds of situations get under your skin and are your emotions controlled by these frustrations of life around you or are you able to retain a sense of inward peace and contentment in your soul?

We are not only affected personally with discontentment, but now our culture has come to glorify it. We've become connoisseurs of discontentment, whole television shows are built around characters who are fabulously discontent. I think of George Costanza, on *Seinfeld*, whose entire character is built around blowing up about minor inconveniences of life. A whole episode is built around George being upset about a big salad.

Every stand up comic has built their entire act around discontentment. Have you ever seen a comic start off by saying, “I love life, my marriage is great, I never really let things get under my skin.”? No way, nobody would laugh.

Our entire political system is built on trying to leverage discontent.

So I find it interesting that no one has to learn how to be discontent, but I find it sad that so few ever *learn how to be content*.

Few ever *learn how to be content*

And what I mean by contentment is that your mood is not altered by every minor inconvenience, that your emotions are not spiking up and plummeting down in perfect correspondence with the events going on around you. Your emotions are not determined by what is going on around you. You're not devastated by every problem and hassle in life, but you have an internal stability of soul. Contentment means that *you are continually, joyfully submitting yourself to God's will in every circumstance of life*.

Let me say that again, *contentment means that I am joyfully submitting myself to God's will in every circumstance of life*.

This is a terribly rare quality that does not come easy, it does not come quick, it doesn't come automatically when you begin following Jesus. This is a quality that must be learned over time. I've called today's talk, “How to *Learn Contentment*.” Let's pray.

Contentment is not something that comes naturally, it is counter-intuitive, it doesn't feel right, it is a skill that we have to develop in our lives, not something we're great at from birth. What feels natural is to be content when everything in life is perfect and to be discontent when everything in life is wrong.

But to learn to be content when things are wrong around us is incredibly unnatural, yet this is what Paul says is not only possible, but it is a target for us to aim at as Christians. It is a tremendously freeing way of living that we are no longer enslaved to every circumstance of life around us, controlling our every emotion, but we are free to live out of a continual inward contentment, no matter what is happening to us in life.

Paul lays out the way to get there in Philippians chapter 4 and last week Andy Saperstein did a great job of taking us through the importance of gratitude and thankfulness in verses 2-9, which are the foundational bricks of contentment. Before Paul talks about contentment he talks about thanksgiving and gratitude because if we want to become the kind of people who can be content we have to begin by saying thank you to God for what we have.

So if you want to begin to move toward contentment in our lives you have to begin with gratitude, but then in verse 10 Paul begins to talk about contentment directly. And today

we are going to look at 4 simple verses of 10-13 where Paul describes how we can learn contentment.

How to *learn* contentment

So, if you've got your bible open up to Philippians chapter 4 verse 10 where we read this...

Philippians 4:10-13 (TNIV)

I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. 11 I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 12 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. 13 I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

Now what Paul is doing here, is he is saying thank you to the Philippian church for giving him a gift through Epaphroditus, they have given him gifts and he's saying thank you, but he's doing it in a curious way. He's saying I am appreciative of your gifts, I rejoice greatly that you showed concern for me by giving me gifts, but I'm not saying this because I'm in desperate need. And then he launches off into how he is content no matter what the circumstance. So, he wants to thank them for their partnership in the gospel, but not indicate how indebted he is to them because they've rescued him out of his need.

So, he says *three things* here about what contentment is and how we can move toward it in our lives. The first thing that he says is that contentment is learned not something that is achieved.

Contentment is something learned, not achieved

He says this in verses 11 and 12...

Philippians 4:11-12 (TNIV)

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 12 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

Now this idea that contentment is something that we learn, not something that we achieve (as if it is just beyond our reach), is totally different than the way that we naturally think about contentment. If I asked you: "are you content with your life?", many of you would say, "Almost, but I still really wish that I had a little bit bigger of a house, I wish I had a little bit better of a car, I wish that I lived in a better neighborhood

where I could walk to places, I wish that I had a little bit more money, etc.” More, better, nicer...more.

It is interesting what people say when they are asked how much money they need to make them happy, to make them feel like they have enough. Once you make enough money to cover the basics, of food, housing, healthcare, clothes, etc., above that almost everybody in every income bracket says the same thing: *I need about 20% more to be happy*. So, once you reach the basics subsistence level where most of your needs of housing and food and things like are met. Then, everybody, no matter if you're making \$40,000, or you're making \$80,000, or you're making \$120,000. When they're asked how much money do you need to feel happy, it is always, “Just a little bit more.”

Economists refer to this tendency as the “*hedonic treadmill*”. If you're trying to put a dollar amount on contentment, economist will tell you that you're on a treadmill going nowhere. Economic theory is just catching up to where the Bible has been for thousands of years.

There was a fascinating research study done in 1978 where people age 30-44 were given a list of 24 big-ticket consumer items- things like a car, a house, international travel, a swimming pool. Then they were asked how many of these items they currently possessed, which was 2.5.

Then they were asked, “When you think of the “good life”, the life you would like to have, which of the things on this list are a part of the “good life” as far as you are personally concerned?” The average number of items they said that was needed for the “good life” was 4.3. So they had 2.5 and they said for the “good life” I need 4.3 of these items on this list.

The same people were interviewed 16 years later in 1994 and they were presented with exactly the same list. Now most people had more items on the list. They were now 45-59 yrs. Old and they had 3.2 items on average, they were closer to the good life, right? You might think that, but when they were asked again how many items on the list are needed to live the “good life?” That number shifted upward to 5.4. So after 16 years and lots of hard work accumulating more stuff, the gap between them and the “good life” actually increased!

This is the “hedonic treadmill”, which actually seem to brings us backward ever so slightly. We are running after contentment in things, in achievements. If I could only get a job promotion, if I had a bigger house, if I had a bigger income, then I would be satisfied and content in my life, but it's always just beyond my reach.

The apostle Paul tells us that is never going to get you to contentment, just like running on a treadmill is never going to get you across town, because contentment is not found in our achievements, it's not found in more—more money, more success, more anything.

In fact, if you want to learn contentment, don't reach for more, but less. There was a great English Puritan preacher in the 17th century named Jeremiah Burroughs who said...

“A Christian comes to contentment, not so much by way of addition, but by way of subtraction.” –Jeremiah Burroughs

See contentment is something that is learned and you can learn it even better if instead of trying to add things on to your life you start to remove things from your life. Because what this will do is help you understand that contentment is something *different* than more stuff. We have to break down this false idea that if I only had more then I would be content, then I would feel like by life is ok, because finally I've achieved what I want out of life.

Paul says absolutely not. Contentment is not achieved, contentment is a learned behavior of the heart. It's not a status you can achieve. We learn contentment by saying, “God, whatever portion you have you given me in my life, I will learn to live within it with joy.” Whatever the boundaries are for you that God has laid down, contentment means that you thank God for it and learn to rejoice in the life that God has given to you. What God has given you is different than what God has given the person sitting next to you. God has given us different callings, different amounts of material wealth, different levels of attractiveness, and he's given us different families. But to learn contentment we need to learn to joyfully submit to what God has given us in our lives and not to continually reach out for more than what God has given us. We will never reach contentment if that is our understanding of the way there.

Paul says something else interesting in verse 12, when he says this...

Philippians 4:12 (TNIV)

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

Now this is fascinating, this word that Paul uses, he says that contentment is not only learned, it is learning a *secret*. This is the only time in all of the New Testament that this word, secret is used; the Greek word is “Mueo.”

Mueo = to initiate into secret knowledge

And Mueo is a technical word that Paul has drawn from the mystery religions in the Mediterranean who used the word to mean *initiation into secret knowledge*. This word is *never used* in the rest of the New Testament in any other place because the Christian faith is not a faith of secret knowledge, it is not a faith for the elite or for the few or for the people that you have to know in order to get into it, no. Christianity is wide open; it is publically accessible knowledge, Jesus the son of God, came as a man and walked among us on earth. God didn't reveal himself to one person, who tells us “hey I had a

private experience with God...just believe me.” Jesus interacted with all kinds of people and perform miracles and signs in front of his disciples and his detractors. He was crucified publically on a cross for all to see, and he was resurrected and appeared to many, many people.

Then this story was written down and it was passed around all of the Mediterranean, Paul stood up and preached in open air settings, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news. That the Kingdom of God has come in the person of Jesus is open to everybody, but the one time that Paul talks about a secret in the Christian faith is in regard to contentment. He says there is a secret, there is something that isn't easy to learn, that you can come to Christ and you can find forgiveness for your sins and you can find hope for eternal life living with Christ and yet you can still not yet have found the secret of contentment and this is because we are initiated into the secret only through the highs and the lows of life. Only through clinging to Christ in our desperate need and clinging to Christ in our times of plenty and abundance. It is only going through the highs and the lows, the trials and the successes with Christ that we can learn the secret of contentment and it's not something we can learn on the day that we meet Jesus. It has to be learned in the push and pull of real life.

So, Paul says *contentment is something learned, not something achieved* and second, Paul tells us that *contentment is something internal, not external*.

Contentment is something internal, not external

And we see this is as Paul describes the circumstances in verses 11-12.

Philippians 4:11-12 (TNIV)

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 12 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

See Paul is a realist about life, he is not saying we can content all the time because life is going to be great all the time, what he's saying is that we can be content all the time, because contentment is an inward reality, not an external reality. This is not contentment of circumstances all around you, it is an inward contentment of soul. Where we are submitted to God and to his will with joy through every circumstance of life. And so Paul describes the range of circumstances by talking about the two ends of spectrum. How to be content in great need and how to be content in great abundance and I want to talk about both of these, because each one of these presents a unique, particular challenge to contentment.

Contentment in need

The first is how do we be content in *need*? When Paul says this in verse 12, “*I know what it is to be in need*,” the Greek word there literally means, “to be lowered”, or “to be humbled.” So he says “I know what it is to be humbled by my circumstances, I know

what it is to be lowered. I know what it is to be in need, to go without food, to go hungry, to be in want.” And Paul can speak with great authority to this, he is not a man who has only experienced minor trivialities, he experienced great hardship in his life. In 2 Corinthians 11, he is positioning himself over and against some false prophets who have come against the church, what Paul calls super-apostles. And he says this,

2 Corinthians 11:23-27

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. 24 Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, 26 I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own people, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. 27 I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.

And yet, despite all of that Paul can say “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every circumstance.” Even though he went through this litany of terrible circumstances of suffering, he can say, “I was content inwardly even in the midst of tremendous need, of tremendous suffering outwardly in the circumstances of his life.” See contentment is not the same thing as happiness. It’s not the same thing as fulfillment or pleasure. It is not the same things as having what you need in your life. Contentment is deeper than circumstance, it is a condition of heart where we remain soft to God, and submit to him in the midst of what we are going through.

Have you learned this? Have you learned how to submit to God in the needs in your life?

Now let me pause for just a moment and clarify what I am saying about contentment and about what I am not saying about contentment. What I am saying about contentment is that it is possible to have a surrendered heart and a submission to God’s will with joy in any and every circumstance of life. What I am not saying and what people have misunderstood contentment to be is that a Christian never tries to change their circumstances. That if you are wife that is being beaten by your husband, that you just take it. And the bible just says that you need to be content and stay in that situation. Absolutely not.

If you are being sexually harassed at work, the message of contentment is not to just take it and don’t do anything to change your circumstance. You should stand up for yourself and report that abuse.

Whenever we’re in situations of abuse, of oppression, of injustice, our faith in Christ has great resource to lift us out of those situations, however, contentment speaks about a condition of our heart where we are submitted to God in such a way where we still hope

in him, we still believe in him, we still love and trust him. We don't rail against God, we don't rage against our circumstances to God and demand that he rescue us because we deserve something so much better.

The Bible gives us the resource and even tells us to ask God for things that we need. Jesus *tells us* to do that. The book of Psalms has lots of examples of crying out to God, bringing complaints to God, petitioning God. But, the danger is when an inward sense of entitlement creeps into our heart, and we start thinking that God owes me something, that I deserve more than I'm getting and I'm angry at God because he's not fulfilling his end of the bargain. That inward attitude of heart will turn legitimate complaint into what the Bible calls *grumbling*.

Now watch out for false contentment which can creep in if we are in a difficult circumstance and we are putting up with hardship, we are paying our dues, and we can take it as long as it is a downpayment on future prosperity and success. So you're in college full-time, and working two jobs and taking care of your child, and you're saying "I'm ok, I'm not grumbling, this is terrifically hard but I can make it through...but there better be a big fat cushy job on the other end of all of the GOD! I'm doing my part, but you had better come through for me later!

That's not contentment. That is a transaction where you feel God owes you. And any time we feel that God owes us something, we have completely misunderstood who we are and who God is. When we put God on our level and treat him like an equal, we miss the truth that God is above us, way above us and anything that we have is a pure gift from his hand. What we deserve and what we are able to get for ourselves is nothing. Everything is from God. So when we feel owed something by God, that becomes grumbling.

In one of the greatest examples of grumbling against God are the children of Israel after God has miraculously rescued them out of slavery in Egypt, he brings them into the desert and conditions are difficult. They have to eat the same bland food of manna, some bread-like substance, every day. And they're grumbling against God about the food they wish they could be eating and how uncomfortable life is and how they wish that they had never come out into the desert in the first place because it was better to be back in slavery, where we could eat leeks and garlic. Grumbling against God, and that made God angry, so angry that he finally hit a limit to it and the people never got to experience the pleasure of entering the Promised Land, their children entered it.

So the challenge of being in great need and being in suffering, in pain and finding contentment is knowing how to cry out to God without grumbling to God. Without coming to God with a sense of entitlement saying I should be treated better, I deserve more, this is unfair. And that is what puts to death any sense of contentment in our life; we will never experience the freedom of contentment if we are continually swimming in the pool of discontent.

Now I want to say one more thing, to those of you that are hearing me talk about contentment and you heard Andy Saperstein last week talk about gratitude and yet, you wake up with a cloud over you. You are struggling through depression, you might have some chemical imbalances in your body or you might be going through some sort of spiritual oppression, but if you are struggling with some sort of mood-altering depression and you would say, Jonathan, I'm hearing you talk about contentment and I agree that sounds like a good idea, but I am starting at a deficit.

Contentment in Abundance

So Paul talks about the challenge of needs on one end of the spectrum, but on the other end of the spectrum, he says, I've learned to be content in abundance, I've learned to be content while having plenty. And this is just as difficult of a challenge to try to learn contentment in a season of plenty as it is in a season of need. Because when things are going well in our life, when we have plenty of money, plenty of food, plenty of friends, life is cruising along great, it is so hard to remain content and not continually lust for more. *Because we as human beings always look around at other people around us and compare ourselves with them.*

There was a study done involving faculty, staff and students at Harvard University where the participants were asked to choose between a job earning \$50,000 per year while everyone earned \$25,000 or a job where they would earn \$100,000 per year where everyone else made \$200,000 per year. They were told the prices of goods and services would be the same, so that a higher salary would really mean being able to buy a nicer home, own a nicer car and do whatever else they wanted with the extra money, but these things mattered little to most people because 56% of them chose the first option. They said I would rather have a 50% pay cut if it meant that everyone else was making less than I did. I would rather have \$50,000 less dollars per year if it meant that other people had less than I have, rather than me having less than other people have.

The challenge of contentment with plenty is that we look around and want to know, do other people have more than I do or less than I do? And I can't feel content unless I have more than other people. And Paul recognizes this as a challenge and it's why he says that contentment has to be something internal, not external, because there will always be people that have more than you. Even though you have plenty, you've got a nice salary, you've got a big house, there's always going to be people who are making more money than you who have a bigger house than you do. So, if you want to hit bedrock of contentment in your life you have to look inward. You can't look outward both to needs that you have or the abundance and plenty that you have. So, contentment is learned not achieved, contentment is internal, not external. Lastly, contentment is something God-dependent, not something self-sufficient.

Contentment is something God-dependent, not self-sufficient

And we see this in verse 13, Paul starts in verse 12 saying...

Philippians 4:12-13 (TNIV)

I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. 13 I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

Now comes the major shift from the dominant philosophies of Paul's day, see up until verse 13 all the rest of what Paul just said sounds almost identical to what the stoic philosophers believed in Paul's day. Some of his contemporaries were guys like Seneca, who said this...

"The happy man is content with his present lot, no matter what it is, and is reconciled to his circumstances."—Seneca

So Seneca is basically saying you just need to come to terms, reconcile yourself to your circumstance and that is going to find you contentment. No matter what your circumstance is, you just need to accept it and Epictetus says this...

"The wise man is sufficient unto himself for a happy existence."—Epictetus

So the stoic philosophers were saying the exact same things that Paul was saying in verse 11 & 12, except what they said, your contentment is not linked to your circumstances you are self-sufficient and as long as you come to terms with your circumstances you have contentment in yourself. And then Paul says something in verse 13, that reveals that what he is saying about contentment in every circumstance is night and day different than the stoic philosophers. Because he is not telling us that you need to find sufficiency in yourself for contentment, he says the only place to find contentment is in God, by being dependent on God who gives us what we need. Now there's been an unfortunate mis-reading of verse 13, however, and many people have taken it to mean in fact the opposite of what Paul means by it. But look at what he says...

Philippians 4:13 (TNIV)

I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

This is a great translation in the TNIV; many translations say I can do all things through him that gives me strength, while the Greek can allow either one of those readings. The context, of which all meaning is context dependent, the context of the passage is very clear that Paul means all these things. Let me tell you what the difference is. Many people take this verse out of context and quote it to say, "I can do all things through him who gives me strength." Meaning if I trust in Christ he will give me everything that I want and need and that is exactly what Paul is not saying here. What Paul is saying is even when I'm in desperate, dire need, I have Christ. And Christ strengthens me with everything that I need to get through times in my life of suffering, of pain, of desperate need. But it's not that God just gives me everything that I want materially, but that God inwardly gives me the strength, the power to endure any and every circumstance. Big difference between the two of those things, so Paul is saying I can do all of this, I can be content in any and every circumstance, I can be in want, in need, I can be humbled and

brought low or I can be in abundance, I can be in plenty, I can be well-fed and I am content in any and every circumstance because I can do all this through him who gives me strength. And none of this would work without verse 13. Without Paul saying...

Philippians 4:13 (TNIV)

I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

Contentment would not be possible, verses 11 & 12 would not be possible without verse 13. Because it is only because of Jesus Christ that we can find contentment in every circumstance. This is fleshing out of what Paul has already said in Philippians 1:21, he said...

Philippians 1:21 (TNIV)

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

When we come to know Jesus it so radically transforms everything else in life that everything is relativized in life, of the absolute wonder of knowing Jesus. And so Paul says in Philippians 3:7...

Philippians 3:7-9 (TNIV)

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 8 What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him

See this is the only way I could stand up before you, before thousands of people with thousands of needs, some of you have lost family members recently,, some of you are going through desperate financial hardship, losing homes, losing jobs, some of you have been diagnosed with devastating illnesses. How could I stand up in front of you today and say contentment is possible for you. The only way I could say this is because of Jesus Christ. Because knowing Christ is better than anything else in life, so much so that everything else in life could go away if we cling to Christ. Jesus is our contentment, and because we have Jesus we can find contentment in every other circumstance of life and there is such great encouragement and confidence in knowing that we can grab a hold of contentment and we can grab a hold of Jesus and that he will never let us go. As Paul says in Romans 8...

Romans 8:35-39 (TNIV)

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ...37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And that love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord is available to you today. You too could say with Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:10, “I have nothing, but I possess everything.” No matter what you are going through, no matter if you are in a situation that you are off of the scale of need. That you are in such desperate need in your life that you don’t even have words to describe the torment that you’re in, Jesus Christ is enough for you. If you’re on the other end of the spectrum, if you’re sitting here in your fancy clothes and you drove here in your expensive car, life is going well, you just got a promotion, you’re feeling great about your life. Jesus Christ is enough for you. Let’s pray.

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Philippians 4:10-13

No one has to *learn* how to be discontent

Few ever *learn* how to be content

How to *learn* contentment:

Contentment is something learned, not achieved (verses 11-12)

Contentment is something internal, not external (verses 11-12)

Contentment is something God-dependent, not self-sufficient (verse 13)