

“The Illusiveness of Contentment”

Baccalaureate Sermon

Philippians 4:10-20

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“If we are not content with what we have, we will never be content with what we want.”

But what does it mean to be content? And what is the nature of contentment? Does it mean that Christians must be passive, and accept – as their duty to God and individuals – whatever lot that comes their way? Is contentment the same as fatalism? Does biblical contentment imply a lack of ambition, desire for advancement, or vision of increased leadership responsibilities in a new or old work assignment?

To the graduating class of 2004, those who will be returning to work assignments next week, and traditional program graduates, who most likely will enter the work force or graduate schools following the MVNU commencement, I choose to speak to you in this baccalaureate sermon on “the Illusiveness of Contentment.”

If I could give each of you a graduation gift, I would give you the gift of biblical contentment, contentment as affirmed by the Apostle Paul in Philippians chapter four. It is illusive, but not impossible to experience!

This critical Pauline theme of contentment will emerge as pivotal and transformative to you - I can promise you – if it has not already.

It will hold you steady when you want to run – or simply walk away!

There is the reality of biblical contentment – and I fear that many of us have yet to truly experience this grace gift.

And why? Because it is so illusive.

Paul stated, “I have learned to be content, whatever the circumstance. I know what it means to be in need, and I know what it means 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.”

Bill Gothard stated this biblical truth another way, “If we are not content with what we have, we will never be content with what we want!”

Biblical contentment is so illusive because of the 1) irony of contentment; 2) the barriers to contentment, and 3) the secret of contentment. Let me explain.

The Irony of Contentment

The irony is this: We tend to think that we know what is best for our lives, and we ask God for it (and if God grants our prayers, we will be content!)

The text reminds us that God can give us inward peace in whatever situation He places us!

Paul wrote these words on contentment while in prison.

The previous two years he had been in another prison near Jerusalem, insulted by the Roman governor of the area, shipwrecked on his way to Rome, without food for fourteen days, and then placed in jail when he arrived in Rome!

And these seemingly disastrous experiences follow his great teaching and preaching, and his three missionary journeys as recorded in the book of Acts.

But did Paul moan? Complain? Whine? Blame others for his predicament? Engage in a “pity party?”

This is fascinating. In Rome, while in prison, he did not focus on what he could do if he had more resources, were in another location, if he worked for a different boss, or had Christian co-workers.

He did not focus on “why?”, “why me?” or “what if?”

Instead, while in chains in prison in Rome, Paul wrote what we know as the Prison Epistles – Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon!

He “bloomed” where he was planted!” – And, according to Philippians 4:7, God gave to Paul contentment and an inner peace.

It’s amazingly ironic how tomorrow takes care of itself when we give our best to the workplace and ministry God has given to us today.

You may not work at the place you prefer, earn the money you desire to earn, have the boss and co-workers you believe you need --- but in these very situations, ironically, as difficult, unfair, and challenging as they may seem and be, you can experience a contentment which defies understanding.

Remember: “If we are not content with what we have; we will never be content with what we want.

Biblical contentment is illusive because of the irony of contentment. God’s ways are not our ways.

Contentment is illusive, secondly because of:

The Barriers to Contentment

One of the greatest barriers to biblical contentment is *comparison*.

I have come to see that comparison is the enemy of contentment.

Comparison is pervasive – in our education institutions, positions at work, regarding the money we earn, the places we live, even the cars we drive. We can be grateful and thankful for the gifts God has given to us . . . until we compare our gifts from God to His gifts to others!

Too often we express in thought, word or deed, “I may have more than you, but I don’t have as much as another!”

Paul starts at a different point: “I know what it means to be in need . . . or to have plenty; to be well fed or hungry. And he challenges us to do the same and to affirm the appropriate parallels in our lives.”

Comparison, I have come to realize, is the root of inferiority.

I can feel good about myself until I compare myself to another.

Remember: “If we are not content with what we have, we will never be content with what we want.”

Another barrier to contentment is our *circumstances*.

Paul could have said, “Why am I in prison?” “Why didn’t I listen to friends?” (His friends in the cities of Tyre and Caesarea begged Paul not to continue his journey to Jerusalem knowing that he would face persecution and prison).

You and I have these continual temptations:

“*If I had just listened to . . .*”

“*Life is greener on the other side.*”

“*If I were there, I could . . .*”

“*If I had this . . . or that . . .*”

Paul’s response to his friends in Acts 21:14, who begged Paul not to continue to Jerusalem was clear: “I will do God’s will.” And Paul proceeded to Jerusalem, and he was at peace.

Yet another barrier to contentment is *people*.

I have come to see, in my twenty-five years in of higher education administration, that in any situation, there will be people, and with the people we work will be problems and possibilities.

Will we focus on the problems?

Or will we focus on the possibilities and potential?

In the situation where Paul found himself, he witnessed to many in jail! He wrote letters to the young churches at Philippi, Ephesus, Colossae and to Philemon. Paul encourages us to focus on the possibilities of our circumstances and not exclusively or morbidly on our problems with the people with whom we live, worship, and work.

Remember the quote: “If we are not content with what we have, we will never be content with what we want.”

Biblical contentment is illusive because of the irony of contentment and the barriers to contentment.

Now, let me share with you:

The Secret of Contentment:

Biblical contentment is illusiveness, but it is not impossible to experience. The secret of contentment is not grounded in the people who disappoint us, circumstances that distract us, or problems that overwhelm us.

The secret of biblical contentment is grounded in gratitude.

Contentment is rooted in a focus on God and His mercy and grace, not in a preoccupation with people and problems.

The foremost quality of a contented person is gratefulness.

Let me paraphrase a familiar chorus:

*Give thanks with a grateful heart; Give thanks to the Holy One;
Give thanks because He’s given Jesus Christ, His Son.
And now let the “discontented,” say “I have peace,
Let the dissatisfied say, “I have rest,”
Because of what the Lord has done for us.
Give thanks.*

(Original words and music by Henry Smith, 1978)

Listen again to Philippians 4:5-6.

“Let your gentleness be evident to all. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, **with thanksgiving**, present your request to God.”

And what is the result? Paul tells us: “And the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Gratitude – thanksgiving – arises out of our acceptance that all of life is grace – as an underserved and unearned gift – a grace gift – from the Father’s Hand.

This theocentric or God-centered character of gratitude is anchored in ruthless trust that there is a God who is sovereign and whose providential care guides His People.

I am slowly coming to see, very slowly, that contentment does not make us grateful. Rather it is gratitude that makes us contented.

When things go wrong, when people disappoint us, when our colleagues don't understand us, and when it appears that irreconcilable differences exist within the faith community between good and godly people,
we can choose to believe in the sovereignty of God.

In the midst of inner unrest, we can choose to believe in His watchful care over our lives in the midst of doubts, questions, conflicts, and persecution.

In these sometimes humanly miserable situations, we can choose to believe that

*“In His time, In His time, He
makes all things beautiful, In
His time.*

*Lord, please show me everyday
As your teaching me your way,
that you do just what you say, In
your time!*

Often, this is a convictional affirmation, based alone in radical trust in a Sovereign God. When emotions and circumstances do not suggest this affirmation of faith, we can choose to believe in the Holy God of grace and mercy to see us through.

We often quote by memory Paul's great statement in Philippians 4:13:

“I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.”

It is a great verse to remind us to be strong and take courage because our faith is in Christ . . . not ourselves or others.

But this great verse is given to us by Paul in the context of his discussion of contentment:

I can do all things, whether in need and hungry, or with plenty and well fed---

In either set of circumstances--- I can do everything God wants me to do through Christ who gives me strength.

***Whatever the circumstance, or conditions, and regardless of the people –
their attitudes and their treatment of us,***

Be grateful for the Christ who dwells within you and me and gives us contentment in the midst of these difficult situations and circumstances.

Be grateful – thankful – that, in the midst of stress, pressure, and perhaps misunderstanding, God is teaching us things about ourselves, others, life, faith and trust, that we would not – could not – have learned **without** these experiences!

Contentment is grounded in a heart filled with gratitude. Even in prison, the Triune God was still in control of Paul's life.

Gratitude, for Paul, was not conditioned in good circumstances, understanding employees, pleasant co-workers or that great salary. Rather his gratitude was rooted in a ruthless TRUST in the Sovereign God of Grace and Mercy.

Paul challenges us to “give thanks with a grateful heart” – he teaches us that gratitude is not grounded in murmuring, grumbling, faultfinding, or complaining.

Rather the secret of contentment – for Paul, and for us – is in the conviction that God is big enough to handle any situation we encounter.

In conclusion, I want us to sing an old chorus to summarize this baccalaureate address from the Philippians challenge:

*“Faith in God can move a mighty mountain,
Faith can calm the troubled sea,
Faith can make the desert like a fountain,
Faith can bring the victory!”*

Gratitude to God, a radical trust in the Holy One, is the antidote to the illusiveness of contentment! Be encouraged that . . . “the One who feeds the sparrows is the one who cares for you and me” . . . and be content.

“If we are not content in what we have, we will never be content in what we want.”

“Teach me – teach us - O God, especially these graduates, to find our contentment in You.”
Amen.