

The Leadership Gift Of Biblical Contentment

Seminary of the Americas, (SENDAS)

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"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."

Philippians 4:12

Introduction

Posted in the kitchen in our home are challenging words regarding contentment. "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 biblical contentment mean that Christian pastors must be passive? Are we required to accept whatever comes our way?

How does sanctified ambition relate to contentment? Should pastors cast a vision that pushes the congregation out of their comfort zones? What about God-inspired goals for the future? How do these goals relate to biblical contentment?

To this graduating class, I choose to speak on the subject of "The Leadership Gift of Biblical Contentment." Modeling biblical contentment in the midst of your ministry challenges will either confirm or disconfirm the Gospel you preach in the lives of both those with whom you live and those you lead.

This critical Pauline theme of contentment transforms our pastoral ministry. Biblical contentment is similar to the Hebrew word *shalom*. This great Hebrew word means living in peace with God, ourselves and others around us. It will hold us steady when we are tempted to run away from our ministry assignment! Being at peace with God

and ourselves can easily slip from us in our consuming and sometimes draining efforts to care for others.

As you continue your ministry, I pray that you will experience the grace and blessing of *Shalom*. Living and leading in peace and contentment with God, others, and ourselves. It is often elusive and challenging. There is the irony of contentment. And, there are barriers to contentment. Moreover, there is the **reality** of biblical contentment and *Shalom* that you can understand and experience. Let me explain.

I. 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 the passage on contentment in Philippians 4:10-20 while under house arrest. In the previous two years, he had been in 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!

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

This is fascinating. In Rome, while in prison, Paul did not focus on what he could do **if** he had more resources; pastored in another location; worked for a different boss; or had more Christian co-workers. He did not focus on "why?" "why me?" or "what if?" Instead, while in chains in Rome, Paul wrote letters. Letters 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 inner peace.

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. In these very situations, however, as difficult, unfair, and challenging as they may seem and be, you can experience a contentment that defies understanding!

The irony of Biblical contentment is this: God's ways are not our ways. And we so often want **our** ways!

This leadership gift of *Shalom*, peace with God, others and ourselves, is elusive and challenging because of:

II. The Barriers to Contentment

One of the greatest barriers to biblical contentment is comparison. Comparing the gifts God has given to me with the gifts He has given to others.

Comparison is the enemy of contentment. Comparison is pervasive – in our education institutions, positions at work, 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!

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 find similarities in our lives.

Comparison is at the root of our feelings of inferiority. I can feel good about myself until I compare myself to another.

In addition to comparison, 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 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.

A third barrier to contentment can be people.

I have come to see that in any situation, there will be people! With the people we work will come 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, and Colossae and to Philemon. Paul encourages us to focus on the possibilities of our circumstances; not on our problems with the people with whom we live, worship, and work. Remember: "If we are not content with what we have, we will never be content with what we want."

Again, this "leadership gift" of *Shalom*, peace with God, self, and ourselves, is elusive and challenging because of the irony of contentment and the barriers to contentment. Now, let me share with you the *biblical* understanding of contentment!

III. The Secret of Contentment

Biblical contentment is slippery, and we can miss it. However, it is not impossible to understand and experience. In fact, it is a blessing and gift for every Christian leader who wants to serve God for his or her entire life.

The secret of contentment is grounded neither in the people who disappoint us, the circumstances that distract us, nor even the 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.

Listen 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? *“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. All that we are and all that we have are grace gifts from the Father’s Hand. A life of biblical contentment is holiness of heart lived out daily in the life of a Christian leader.

This God-centered character of gratitude is anchored in an unshakeable trust that there is a God who is sovereign and whose providential care guides His People. **Contentment does not make us grateful; rather, it is gratitude that makes us contented.**

Things go wrong. People disappoint us. Congregations and friends will misunderstand us. At times there will be seemingly irreconcilable differences within the faith community between good and godly people. In all of these times, we can **choose** to believe in the sovereignty of God. We can trust Him with our lives and with the situations before us. In the midst of unrest within the congregation, we can **choose** to believe in His watchful care over our lives in the midst of every doubt, question, conflict, and even persecution. He is God, and I choose to trust God supremely. He is enough! God is big enough to handle **any** situation we encounter.

In the sometimes humanly miserable situations we encounter, we can **choose** to believe that *“In His time, In His time, He makes all things beautiful, In His time.”* We can **choose** to believe that God does just what He says, *In His time!* We can choose to believe that *God **will** make a way when there seems to be no way!*

This convictional affirmation is grounded in a 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.

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

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to remind you to be thankful in the midst of stress, pressure, and perhaps misunderstanding. God is teaching you and me 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 still spoke assurance and direction to Paul's life. This is Christian faith modeled and expressed in the everyday experiences of the Christian leader.

Remember, contentment does not make us grateful. Rather, it is gratitude that makes us contented. Peace with God, ourselves, and others wherever and to whomever God chooses to send us. "Teach me - teach us - O God, especially these graduates, to find our contentment in you."