

# THE SECRET TO CONTENTMENT

SERIES: TENACIOUS TOGETHER



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*Philippians 4:10–23*

## Searching for Cars and Contentment

I was 20 years old when I bought my first car. Up until that point, I had gotten by with borrowing a car from my parents and friends, and my wife for two years. But at some point we decided we needed a second car, so I started the search.

A car was going to be the biggest purchase that I had ever made, and so I wanted to make sure I got just the right one. I made a list of what was important to me: Good gas mileage, above average reliability, low mileage, newish but not new, zero to sixty in at least thirty seconds. You can tell where my priorities lay.

After compiling all of these qualifications, I began to do my research. I found all of the cars that met my qualifications. I began to read reviews. I narrowed down the list. I did a few test drives. Eventually, I settled on the car I wanted: a 2012 Mazda3 Hatchback i Touring with a moonroof.

It had to be a Mazda3 because it had the best combination of reliability, fuel efficiency, and pep.

It had to be 2012 because Mazda redesigned the engine that year and it was four MPG more efficient than the 2011, but the 2013 was out of my price range.

It had to be a hatchback because I was convinced I needed the extra cubic foot of trunk space.

It had to be the i Touring model because that was the lowest trim level, so I didn't have to pay for any features that I didn't really want.

It had to have a moonroof because, you've gotta live a little!

Now to find just the right car. I scoured the internet. I visited dealerships. I combed through Craigslist. Eventually, about three months into this process, I found the one car that I was convinced was going to make me happy. It had everything I wanted! And I bought it. For

months, I drove that car around like I owned the world. I had found exactly what I was looking for: contentment.

But then something unexpected happened a few months later. A friend of mine got a new car. Their car was also very reliable. It was also fuel efficient. It was even a hatchback as well. But it was a Lexus instead of a Mazda. That's a nice looking car, I thought. As I watched my friend drive her new Lexus, my sense of contentment in my Mazda began to fade. Sure, it gets the job done. But that's really the car I want now. And my contentment was snatched from me.

How do we find true contentment? That's a hard question for many people to answer.

It has been said that "contentment is what each and every human being is searching for, but most can't seem to find it." Does that ring true for you? To some degree, I am sure that it does.

We are all looking for contentment, and we look for contentment in many different places.

If I could get to this point in my career, then I'd be content. If I just made this much more money, then I'd be content. If I was married; if I wasn't married; if I was married to someone else, then I would be content. We look everywhere for things that will make us content.

And yet, for many of us, true contentment remains elusive. It's not that we don't achieve any of the goals we set or acquire any of the goods that we seek. Instead, when we do get these things, they fail to make us content in the way we had hoped.

Today, we are concluding our study of Philippians by looking at the last 14 verses of the book, Philippians 4:10-23. Early on in this passage, Paul makes the claim that he has found the secret to being content in any and every situation. That's astounding! How could that be true? How might that become true for us? This morning, we are going to look at this remarkable claim that Paul makes. As we do, we will find three principles for how we can find true contentment as well.

## Philippians 4: 10-12:

**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. 11 Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. 12 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.**

It seems that, for a time, Paul was running low on financial resources. When the Philippians heard about this, out of concern for Paul and his welfare, they sent Epaphroditus with a gift.

Here, Paul expresses gratitude for this gift, but he wants to make it clear that his contentment was unwavering throughout the whole process. When he was hungry, he was content. When he had plenty, he was content. When he was in need, he was content. When he had more than he needed, he was content. In whatever situation he found himself, he was content.

This is not normal, right? This is not how most of us experience life. For most of us, we are content when we have what we want. Perhaps we aspire to be content when we only have what we need rather than what we want. But to be content when we lack the things that we need? This is not normal.

How does Paul do it? What is his secret to contentment? A couple of options might come to mind.

First, we could lower our expectations. The key to having high self-esteem is having exceedingly low expectations of yourself. If the bar is low enough, you are sure to clear it! That's probably not what Paul has in mind.

A more likely answer that would have come to mind for the Philippians is that we find content by becoming self-sufficient.

The word that Paul uses for contentment was a well-known virtue in the Greco-Roman world. In the Stoic philosophy of the day, the idea of contentment was that of self-sufficiency and independence from external pressures. If I could make myself completely self-sufficient—if I could distance myself from the need to rely on anyone or anything these—then I could be

content in whatever situation I find myself in, because I have the ability within myself to right whatever wrong I may find myself in.

Is this the answer? Do we find true contentment by becoming self-sufficient and taking our future into our own hands? Not according to Paul. Paul finds his contentment, not in self-sufficiency, but in Christ-sufficiency.

## Develop Christ-sufficiency

### Philippians 4: 13-14:

**13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me. 14 Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble.**

Paul affirms again that he is thankful for the financial gift of the Philippians (“it was kind of you to share in my trouble”). And yet he is clear that his contentment neither comes from the gift itself nor the strength within. His strength comes from Christ.

Verse 13 is one of the most well-known and often-quoted verses in the book. As someone who played a lot of sports growing up, I can say with confidence that this verse is the poster-child for Christian athletes. We put it on tee-shirts. We quote it before games. If we are losing at halftime, we claim it with even more confidence. I can do all things through him who strengthens me!

When I was 13 years old, I started running cross country. I wasn't very fast, but I enjoyed it well enough. Around that time, my dad, who was a runner, asked me if I wanted to run a 10-mile race with him. Ten miles sounded like a long way, but why not? I figured.

After finishing that race, I decided that one day I wanted to run a marathon. After all, I can do all things through him who strengthens me, right? Years went by, and it never seemed like quite the right time.

But then, at the beginning of this year, I thought, I've got a toddler at home, and my wife is pregnant with our second. What could be a better time to train for a marathon? So I signed up for one and started training. Yesterday, for the first time, I ran those 26.2 long miles and crossed "marathon" off my bucket list.

Was I able to do that because the power of God was in me?

I don't want to deny the power of God. Every breath I take is a gift from God. Every step I take is by God's grace. If God removes his sustaining power from my life, I end.

But I didn't finish a marathon yesterday by relying on the power of God. Do you want to know how I did it? Do you want to know the secret of training for a marathon? You run. And you run. And you run. When you feel tired, you keep going. When you want to stop, you don't. You just run. And eventually, you run 26.2 miles.

What Paul is talking about is something much, much harder than training for a marathon. You don't train for contentment by just being content. If the grocery store is out of your favorite flavor of ice cream? Just be content. If your husband gets home late from work and the kids are driving you crazy? Just be content. If your co-worker gets the promotion that you've been working so hard for? Just be content. If you get that terrible phone call from the doctor that you hoped would never come? Just be content. That is not how it works. You can't just train for contentment. You can't just work harder until you get there. You can't find the strength in yourself to be content in every situation.

The only way to be truly content is to develop Christ-sufficiency. We have to give up our hope of self-sufficiency and develop Christ-sufficiency. We have to learn to rely on the strength of God.

Think about the story of Job. How do you be content when everything that you care about is taken from you? When you got from having everything to having nothing? How do you find contentment there?

By relying on the power of Christ. By believing that he is all that you truly need. By realizing that if all you have left in life is Jesus, then you have enough.

Do you believe that? Do you practice that? The road to contentment must start with turning from self-sufficiency to Christ-sufficiency. But this is not all that Paul has to say.

## Nurture kingdom priorities

### Philippians 4:15-18:

**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. 16 Even in Thessalonica you**

**sent me help for my needs once and again. 17 Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. 18 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.**

In these verses, we learn about the priorities of Paul and the Philippians.

First, we see that the Philippians prioritized ministry over money. They heard that Paul had a financial need, and they wanted to meet that need so that he could continue in his work of ministry.

When Paul was faced with this need, the Philippians were the only church that supported Paul financially. We might imagine that this was because they were quite wealthy. But actually, that was not the case at all!

Read what Paul says about the situation of the Philippian church.

### 2 Corinthians 8:1-4:

**We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 2 for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. 3 For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, 4 begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—**

Their abundance of joy and extreme poverty resulted in a wealth of generosity. They gave, not out of their excess, but sacrificially. Perhaps they even ventured into territory that we would call fiscally unwise.

But they did so because they prioritized supporting the ministry of Paul over their financial security and comfort.

We also see that Paul prioritized ministry over money as well.

He says that he seeks the fruit that comes from the gift rather than the gift itself. He is not so excited about the money he received, which would have allowed him to buy food and clothes and other essentials that you

needed to survive in a Roman prison. Instead, he is excited about the fruit—or the ministry opportunities—that he will have as a result of that gift.

We know that Paul's ministry was indeed fruitful while in prison. The Gospel was going forth, and the kingdom of God was advancing. Later in this chapter, we learn that the Gospel had made its way into the household of Caesar, the highest echelon of society (Philippians 4:22). Paul's passion is the Gospel. Paul's passion is ministry. Paul views money as an opportunity to engage in more fruitful ministry.

In addition to ministry, Paul and the Philippians prioritized worship.

Paul refers to the gift from the Philippians as a fragrant offering and a sacrifice pleasing to God. He views this gift as an act of worship to the Lord. Worship is about bringing glory to God, and both Paul and the Philippians were passionate about bringing glory to God and using their material resources to do that.

Prioritizing ministry and worship allowed Paul to find true contentment. If we are to find true contentment, we must also nurture kingdom priorities.

We should not expect to find true contentment if we prioritize money over ministry. Our first priority ought to be seeing the kingdom of God advance.

Sinclair Ferguson, a Scottish theologian, has said this about contentment:

*Christian contentment, therefore, is the direct fruit of having no higher ambition than to belong to the Lord and to be totally at His disposal.*<sup>1</sup>

If that is our highest ambition, no change in circumstances can take that from us. As long as we give ourselves to God to be used by him, we can be truly content.

Nurturing kingdom priorities also means we must nurture a heart of worship. Our lives are to be about bringing glory to God.

I have some friends who had achieved what many think of as the American Dream. They had a huge house in the hills of northern Virginia on a large plot of land. They had a good school to send their kids to. They had jobs that they loved.

But ten years ago, they felt the Lord asking them to sell their house, give away their belongings, and move to Bolivia as missionaries. Now, they rent a small house, homeschool their kids, and spend the majority of their time spreading the Gospel through word and deed. Their lives are almost exclusively about ministering to others and bringing glory to God in worship.

With such a drastic change in lifestyle, you might expect that these friends of mine are significantly less content now than they were ten years ago when they still had so many of the things that promise to make us happy. But that is not the case. This family is far more content now than they ever were.

If we want to experience true contentment, we also need to learn to nurture kingdom priorities by making our lives about ministry and worship.

After talking about his kingdom priorities, Paul gives an encouragement to the Philippians about their financial situation.

## Trust the promises of God

### Philippians 4:19-20:

**And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. 20 To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.**

Paul is confident that God will supply every need of the Philippians according to his riches.

When the Philippians gave to Paul, they gave out of their poverty for the glory and kingdom of God. Because of this, they now had a great need themselves.

Paul encourages them that God will meet this need out of his riches in glory. He redirects them from their circumstances back to God, who is able to supply.

How does Paul know that God will do this? How can he have such high confidence that the Lord will provide? It's because he knows and trusts the promises of God.

If we want to find true contentment, we must trust the promises of God.

But what does God really promise us? We often have very specific ideas of what it would mean for God to be faithful in a particular situation, for what it would

look like for God to follow through on his promises to us. We might think that God would have to give us that promotion at work that we feel we deserve. We might think that God would have to help us resolve the conflict in our marriage. We might think that God would have to get us into that house that we really want.

But those are not the things that God promises. Instead, he promises never to leave or forsake. He promises to love us no matter what we do. He promises to give us the strength to endure whatever situation he sees fit to put us in. He promises to provide for us, but not always in the way we had hoped or expected.

In order to trust the promises of God, we need to readjust our expectations to be in line with what God promises.

## Setting our eyes on Jesus

So the secret to contentment lies in developing Christ-sufficiency, nurturing kingdom priorities, and trusting the promises of God. There is one big idea that holds all three of these points together. If we are going to find true, lasting contentment, we must take our eyes off of ourselves and put them on Jesus. We must find our hope and strength in him. We must learn to love him above all else, trust him above all else, and value him above all else. As we learn to do this, we will be able to say, along with Paul, that we have learned the secret to being content in any and every circumstance.

Paul wraps up his letter to the Philippians with a few more short words.

### **Philippians 4:21-23:**

**Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. 22 All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.**

With those words, we will conclude our study of Philippians. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson, *In Christ Alone: Living the Gospel Centered Life* (Place, Reformation Trust Publishing, 2017), 190, quoted in "Quote of the Day: Contentment," *Scripture Zealot Blog*, 2009. <http://www.scripturezealot.com/2009/06/08/quote-of-the-day-contentment/>