“The Secret of Contentment,” Philippians 4:10-23 (Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 25, 2024)

**10**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. **13**I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

**14**Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. **15**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. **19**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.

**21**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. **23**The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

***“This is the Word of the Lord.” “Thanks be to God!”***

Today we finish our series on the book of Philippians. Next week we start a new series on the book of Isaiah. We’ve never taught on Isaiah at Grace Bible Church, so I’m excited about that.

But today, as we will finish our study on Philippians, we will look at the subject of contentment. Paul says, “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.” With some of the Scriptures we talk about on Sunday morning, I feel a lot of pressure to use my introduction to demonstrate to you why you should listen to the rest of the sermon to prove this subject is relevant to you. But I don’t think I have to with the subject is learning how to be content. I don’t think I need to list surveys, studies, and Gallup polls to convince you that Americans are the most discontented group of people on the planet.

You already know that. You know it personally, how hard it is to not constantly be dissatisfied with your life: with how you look, with how your clothes fit, with how much money you have, with how your career is going or how your kids are doing or how your marriage is doing.

But Paul has an answer. In fact, he writes that he has learned “the secret” of contentment. Wouldn’t you want to know that?

We will study what Paul says about contentment under three headings: *first, the promise of contentment.*  *Second, the practice of contentment.*  *Third, the power that comes with contentment.*

First, the promise of contentment. Paul says God’s people can be content in any circumstance you might find yourself in life.

*First, we’re promised contentment in need and abundance.* Philippians 4:11: **11**Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.” Philippians 4:12b: “I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.”

The first promise is that even in times of material deprivation, when we go without, even to the point when we go hungry, we can nevertheless find contentment.

Now, that’s a wonderful promise, because there is such a thing as real hunger in Lafayette County. It’s easy to live in Oxford and think there no one really goes hungry here, and to think that only happens in poorer areas of the Delta or the inner-city of some major metropolitan area, but more than once it’s been the case that people have approached us in need of food.

I want to be very clear about this: if anyone in this church is hungry, we have the resources in this church to put a stop to that today. Talk to me or one of the elders after the service and we will help you.

But I wouldn’t be surprised if you’re in this room and you’ve never been in a position to find out whether or not you can actually be content in hunger, because you’ve never experienced hunger. If you get hungry, you just go to Kroger or get a Door Dash.

Therefore, it’s important to note that Paul doesn’t ***only*** say, “I have learned the secret of facing hunger and need.” No, he says, “I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.” ***In fact, he lists the need for contentment in plenty first, before hunger.***

Now, how can plenty and abundance lead to discontentment? Here’s how: even though we have so much (especially when compared to most of the people who have ever lived in the history of the world!), we face the constant temptation to look around at all the things other people have that we don’t, and it leaves us feeling tremendously discontent. Other people’s houses, cars, families, vacations, or friends. ***And social media has made this phenomenon exponentially worse.*** There are all these graphs that show a correlation between the advent of the iPhone in 2008 and its use across society and the increase of anxiety and depression in all people, especially teenagers, at the same time.

We have this tendency to beat ourselves up over our discontentment, and say things like, “I hate the way I can’t be happy. I have so much. I’ve been given so much that so many people don’t have. I’ve gone on mission trips and seen how little kids who have nothing yet they seem so much happier than I am. Why am I such a baby about this?”

Friends, you need to know that as wonderful as the United States of America is, it is nevertheless a psychologically very taxing place to live. There are stresses that we face that people nowhere else on the planet face, or at least not in the degree we face. And it’s been this way a long time. In the very famous book, *Democracy in America*, written in 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville has a chapter called “Why the Americans Are Often So Restless in the Midst of Their Prosperity.” Tocqueville, who was from France, saw even 190 years ago how much better off financially the average American was from the average European, let alone the average Asian or African. But it comes with a problem. He wrote, “When all prerogatives of birth and fortune have been abolished, when every [career path] is open to everyone … an ambitious [person] may think it is easy to launch himself on a great career and feel that he has been called to no common destiny. ***But this is a delusion which experience quickly corrects.*** When inequality is the general rule in society [like in Europe, where then at least you had nobles living high on the hog, and the peasants who made it all possible], the greatest inequalities attract no attention. But when everything is more or less level, the slightest variation is noticed … That is the reason for the strange [sadness] often haunting inhabitants of [the United States] in the midst of abundance and [for] that disgust with life sometimes gripping them even in calm and easy circumstances.” Quoted in *Status Anxiety*, by Alain de Botton, p. 33.

De Tocqueville was saying that in Europe, where he was from, people couldn’t improve their economic status. You were either born rich or born poor, and that was it. ***But in America, where success is available to you if you work harder or smarter, or where you see there’s an opportunity out there for it, it is that much more difficult to be content.***

Our culture tells us a lie. The lie is *the secret of contentment is having plenty*. It’s not true, because it’s not hard to meet people in Oxford who seem to have everything yet they hate themselves. Paul says contentment is for those in want ***and in plenty***, in need ***and abundance***.

*Second, we’re promised contentment when we are humiliated.* That’s verse 12: **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.” “Brought low” is a good translation of the Greek word there, because Paul here is promising contentment not just in poverty (as some translations have it), but when we are brought low in ways that have nothing to do with money. The old King James Version translates it as “abased,” “I know both how to be abased,” which is also helpful. You could also translate it as “humiliation.”

In Acts 16, we read how the church at Philippi, to whom the book of Philippians is written, got started. Paul and Silas were in Philippi, they were attacked by a crowd, hauled before the Roman magistrates in the city, stripped of their clothes, beaten with rods, then thrown in jail. That’s humiliation!

But what do we read Paul and Silas doing later that night? Are they complaining bitterly about the injustice of what had happened to them? No. Acts 16:25: “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them ...” How could they sing at a time like that? ***They knew the secret of contentment.*** They knew how to be brought low, yet still abound.

Few, if any, of us has experienced humiliated like that. But we know what it means to be humiliated. Say you are in line to check out at the grocery store, and your two-year-old is with you in the grocery cart. He sees some piece of candy and you won’t give it, and then, all the sudden, he goes from being your child to being the Tasmanian devil. He’s kicking, biting, hitting, screaming. The checking out stops, everyone’s stares at you, and you know what they’re thinking (at least, the parents). “Thank God it’s not my kid.”

And you know that it’s just part of life and you know that it happens to everyone, but in that moment, how do you feel? Humiliated. It’s humiliating to get laid off from your job and have to tell everyone why you don’t work there anymore. It’s always hard to lose a pregnancy, but especially humiliating after you’ve announced it. People come up to you, congratulating you, and you have to say, “No, no, it didn’t work out.” You didn’t do anything wrong, but you’ve been brought low. But the promise is that even in those circumstances, you can be content.

Second, the practice of contentment. Paul says three things must be practiced for there to be contentment.

*First, contentment only comes from being “in Christ.”* Verse 13: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” Years ago, I read an article titled, “Never Read a Bible Verse.” The author’s point was that it’s so easy to take single verses out of context and completely abuse their intent that you really shouldn’t just read one verse. You need to read a paragraph at least to make sure you’re not making the verse say something it’s not saying.

Philippians 4:13 could be a poster-verse for this danger. Many well-meaning, Christian, high school football coaches have posted this verse in their weight rooms: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” as if Paul’s point was that if you’re a Christian, then the sky’s the limit on your bench press.

Is that what Paul is teaching here? No, because the context is not physical strength, but contentment in the face of adversity. ***The focus is not on what we can lift but what we can face if we are in Christ.***

And that’s the key: being “in Christ.” The Greek preposition is the word “in.” It is “in Christ,” Paul says, that we can face anything.

But what does it mean to be “in Christ”? Alec Moyter in his wonderful little paperback commentary on the book of Philippians does a really good job of explaining it.

He says imagine that you were part of ancient Israel when they were slaves in Egypt, and you’ve lived through the first nine plagues and seen how they’ve brought tremendous destruction on the Egyptians around you. But then you hear from Moses that a tenth plague is coming, more terrible than the first nine combined. An angel of death is coming, but he won’t just visit the Egyptians. This angel will visit every house in Egypt, both Israelite and Egyptian, unless the people in that house follow very careful instructions. If anyone would kill a lamb, roast it, eat it with their family, and take its blood and brush it onto their doorposts, if anyone will “take shelter under the blood of the lamb,” then the destroyer will pass over their house.

Anyone who obeyed and put the blood on their doorposts was, for that night at least, “in the lamb.” They were in vital, personal contact with the lamb and with all the blessings and advantages they received from its death.

So, picture it. You’re an Israelite. You can hear the screams of the Egyptians around your house as they find their firstborn sons dead. But you and your family are safe in your house because of the blood of the lamb on the doorposts. Even on that horrible night you can rest.

What does that look like for us? ***The Israelites looked to the blood of the lamb on the doorposts, but we look to the blood of the one John the Baptist called “the Lamb of God.” We look to Jesus Christ, on the cross, and we see the depth of God’s love for us.***

We deserve to have the death angel come down on us and drag us to hell. That’s what it means to be a sinner, one deserving God’s judgment. We’ve done nothing to merit anything else. All we have any right to expect from a holy, righteous God is his wrath.

But then we look to the cross. And we see that God, instead of bringing judgment, out of love and by sheer grace bore judgment in himself in the person of Jesus on the cross to reconcile us to God. To make us children of God.

The promise of contentment is that when we see with spiritual eyes what Jesus did for us, then no matter how difficult our circumstances are, we believe that God is good and he is in control, *and we can find peace*. Not only does it prove God loves and accepts us, it also helps us to trust that God will not abandon us to our discontent because ***if God can work through the death of his Son, then he certainly an in the painful circumstances of our lives.*** “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Romans 8:28. Contentment comes only from being “in Christ.”

*Second, contentment “in Christ” means “considering” Christ.*  That first Passover night, the Israelites did not just eat the lamb at supper time, glance up at the blood on the doorframe, then go in the living room and watch a football game. No, all night, while the screams of the Egyptians rose around them, they stared in hope at the blood over their doorposts.

We will never find contentment simply by glancing at the cross once in a while: going to church a few times a month, occasionally picking up our Bible, praying a few times a week. No, moment by moment we must fix our eyes on Jesus. Hebrews 12:3 says, “Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.” And that word translated as “consider” is the Greek word *analogizomai*, it comes from two Greek words: *ana*, which means to repeat, and *logizomai*, which means to think.

To “consider” doesn’t just mean to give something passing thought, but it means “to reckon, to count, accurately and distinctly again and again and again.” Over and over, consider him who endured the cross so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Here’s the question: how often do you “consider,” according to that definition of the word, all the stuff you’re worried about? How often do you consider your relationship with your significant other (or your lack of a significant other)? How often do you consider school? Your money? Your career? Your kids? Your appearance? Certainly daily, and probably hourly (or more often), right?

***At least as often as you consider those things, you must consider Christ if you want contentment.*** This means regular, weekly church attendance, it means a small group you meet with often (like a community group), it means prayer every day (or better yet multiple times every day, every time you struggle with contentment). It means Bible reading every day, maybe listening to other downloaded sermons a few times a week. It means coffee or breakfast with a Christian friend regularly. But through these habits you must train your heart to always look to the cross and find trust and contentment.

Believe or not it’s not always easy to know when you’re discontent. We are capable of such self-deception on the subject. It’s easy to project contentment when really you’re not. But you always tip your hand with your mouth, for it is out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.

This past week I had a couple of days where I was really busy, I was stressed about various things, and I didn’t spend the time considering Christ I needed to. And I found myself in conversations with my wife and in conversations my friends saying superficially confident, yet critical, self-justifying things. Unusually critical of other people and wanting affirmation that my choices, my actions, were correct. I’ve learned that, for me, that’s always a sign my heart is not at rest. It was anxiety and stress masquerading as contentment.

*Third, contentment only comes by learning “the secret.”* Philippians 4:12b: “I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.” The Greek word translated as “secret” is a technical term Paul borrowed from Greek pagan philosophy that means “to be initiated.”

If you join a fraternity or sorority, you go through a probationary period, where you are learning what it means to be a member of that Greek organization. But it’s only after you’ve “learned the secrets” of the organization at initiation that you are accepted into full membership and achieve the benefits of being a part of it.

Now, no one “pledges” Christianity in that sense. The moment we see our need for Jesus Christ and turn to him, he immediately he accepts us. There is no probationary period for Christianity, *but there is a probationary period for contentment.* ***No one places believes that Jesus Christ died for their sins one day and then finds contentment the next.***You have to learn the secret.

Notice that Paul doesn’t say, “I’ve learned the secrets of contentment.” There are no “secrets” in Christianity that you have to master before you can be content. That’s what cults do. That’s what Scientology and Masons and Mormons do. There’s no separate Bible you must master before you can be content. Everything we need to know is right there in the Scriptures.

When Paul says, “I’ve learned the secret,” he means, “I’ve learned and mastered as best anyone can on earth the practices that lead to contentment.” Paul had been a Christian some 25 years before he wrote the book of Philippians. He had to learn to do these things. The other day I told someone, “I’ve learned the secret to losing weight at my age: it’s not exercise, it’s diet.” That’s not a secret, in the sense of someone saying, “I would have never guessed that. How did you figure that out?” I meant it as if I was saying, “I’ve learned the ***trick*** to losing weight.”

So, if some of you have been a Christian, as best you can tell, for a few years, and you hear this sermon and you think, “I am nowhere near contentment,” then take heart. It must be learned. It’s not supposed to come all at once. It’s takes years of experience, of practice, and of learning more and more about the God who saved you and about the fleeting worth of worldly things.

Third, the power that comes with contentment. This whole passage is really a thank you note from Paul to the Philippians for a financial gift they gave him. That’s the “concern” they showed Paul in verse 10, and it’s how the Philippians “shared in Paul’s trouble” in verse 14. In fact, we read this about how the Philippians generosity in 2 Corinthians 8:3-4: “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…”

Now, I’ve been in not-for-profit world for a while, which means I help lead an organization entirely dependent on the charity of others, and I’ve rarely met anyone giving “beyond their means,” and then begging for the opportunity of giving more. How could the Philippians do it? *Because they had experienced the power of God-given contentment.*

Contentment isn’t just something that God gives a person for their benefit; contentment is also a way God empowers us for ministry. Why? How? Philippians 4:19: “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” When you are content you know that verse is true, you feel you can afford to be generous with others *because God has been so generous with you.*

Discontented people are worried about themselves, so they hoard because they fear they won’t have what they need. They cannot take their minds off their circumstances.

Now discontented people can give. For example, they can tithe and give away ten percent of their income to the church, to other charities, and the poor. But do you know what a discontented tither says in his heart? “I’ve done my part; the other ninety percent is mine. Do not bother me anymore. I’ve pulled my weight and now it’s someone else’s turn.”

Discontented people have a *hoarding spirit.* But a contented person has a *generous spirit.* He still gives some of his money away, but about even the rest of it he says, “Lord, this is yours, too. It’s all yours. If you show me another way to give, I’ll do it. After all, you will supply every need of mine according to the glorious riches in Christ Jesus.”

Friends, do you truly want to be a generous person? I don’t just mean to the church or to charities or to the poor, just with your money, but with your time and energy? Do you want to have a more generous spirit with your spouse, with your roommate, your children, more willing to serve them and make them happy? *Only contentment brings that power.*

Paul says, “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” If that’s true, if we believed that, how could we fail to be content? PRAY