

# **Covenant Love Defended**

*Rev. David Lipsy*

Scripture: Matthew 19:1–15

Text: Matthew 19:6b

As we consider God’s commandments, we should see in each of them a portrait of God. When we come to the seventh commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” we come even closer, see even clearer, the heart of God shining through. It may not be apparent right away, since in our world today this commandment is often seen through the lens of the abuse of it. But that has been the evil one’s design from the beginning, namely to take every good gift of God and twist it into something negative.

We want to begin considering the seventh commandment by starting with the highest view we can take, seeing it in its expansive glorious context, and hopefully getting a fresh glimpse of heaven itself. Our text is Matthew 19:6b, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” Under the title of “Covenant Love Defended,” we will examine this passage in three main points:

1. Covenant love with man
2. Covenant love in marriage
3. Covenant love in God

Our Lord Jesus, while upon earth, had a wonderful way of taking a conversation, even a controversy, and

turning it into a precious lesson. We're thinking now of the challenge the Pharisees confronted Him with at the start of our chapter. What a sad question they asked! "Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?" Think about that question a moment. Does God permit a man to divorce his wife for any reason whatever? Is it okay to dissolve a marriage for literally any reason? What kind of heart wants to go there in such open-ended terms?

If we were asked that question, what would we say? Perhaps nearly all of us would say what Jesus said in verse 9: "Only because of fornication." Though this is, of course, biblical and true, it is interesting that Jesus did not only cite the one exception for a divorce. He also said in verses 4–6 read, "Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." Jesus brings the conversation to God's design at the beginning, His created order before sin ever entered the picture. That is where we want to go right now in order to get the most helpful perspective on the seventh commandment with which we can start. So let us begin with God's...

### **Covenant Love with Man**

What do we mean by "covenant?" Today, covenant might mean to most people a simple contract. Some years ago various states in the U.S. tried to establish something called "marriage covenants" in order to try to make it harder to get a divorce and easier to get help with struggling marriages.

When we go back to Scripture, it becomes clear that although the idea of covenant was somewhat familiar among other nations, God's original design was something

very binding and serious. Perhaps the most graphic illustration of this is found in Genesis 15 where God made a covenant with Abram. Animals were slain and divided. Parties were to pass through the midst, emblematic of the dire consequences one calls upon himself if one or the other party violates the covenant agreement. The wonder of this covenant ritual was that the Lord assumed the responsibilities of both parties, as it were, passing through the midst while Abram slept.

So a covenant, in God's eyes, was not something to be broken, was of life and death importance, and should be taken seriously as such. More binding than an agreement, more personal than a contract, covenant involved a relationship, a durable relationship, and ideally a relationship of lasting love.

It is clear from Scripture that such a relationship existed between God and the first man, Adam. Man was made in the image of God, and was designed to reflect that image in the world. Before man sinned, God and Adam might freely communicate with one another, God walking with man in the cool of the garden. And the Lord graciously gave Adam all that he could possibly need while reminding him of His authority over man by means of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil being forbidden to man. If man would honor God's authority and command, he would live in a paradise relationship with God indefinitely. But if man refused to accept and appreciate all that God gave, he would indeed die. That has all the characteristics of a covenant relationship. Still today, many couples conclude their marriage vows with words such as, "Till death do us part," pledging a mutually binding, lifelong relationship of fellowship and love.

It was no mere contract that God established with man. It was a relationship of friendship and love with nothing standing in the way of fellowship and love since there

was no sin yet. One can readily see that this arrangement was all of God's grace. After all, He created man, created the garden, created all things. He gave life to man, created him in God's image so that man could relate to God, appreciate God, understand and love God. We could rightly say God initiated the simplest of requirements for man to remain in a loving fellowship with his Maker, God withholding nothing that man could need, while leaving a solitary reminder for Adam that he owed all to His Creator God.

But we know who broke that covenant bond. It is an enormous mistake and slight against God when we think of man's original sin as nothing more than eating a piece of fruit. That's the devil's way of framing the situation, making God look unreasonable and man's sin as being very, very small. In fact, man willfully and knowingly believed that God was not good but was instead dishonest, deceitful, stingy, and petty. Adam and Eve believed God was not interested in their good but instead was fearful that they, mere creatures, might develop into gods themselves and therefore not even need God anymore. They would be as god, the same sinful desire Satan had when he was cast out of the glory of heaven because of his own rebellion.

But what God did next is the focus of our first thought. You know how this history unfolded. Man broke this covenant bond of love and fellowship with God in the most heinous, thankless, and perverse way. But God, rather than meting out instant death, physically as well as spiritually, displayed something about Himself no one could have expected, especially considering that God is perfectly just. The Lord pursued Adam and Eve, calling them out of their delusion of thinking they could somehow hide themselves and their sin from Him.

Did God call them forth just to tell them their sins? Did He call them out of hiding in order to destroy them?

Indeed, God did show them their sin but not in order to destroy them. After giving what could only be described as a merciful though weighty chastisement, God gave them something they could not have expected or anticipated. He revealed a new covenant. It was a new covenant as far as man knew, but as we shall see later on, it wasn't a new covenant to God. It had simply not yet been revealed to man until that moment in history. Let me explain, since this is very important to understand.

God had said to man that his life of love, friendship, and fellowship with His Maker would continue if man simply honored Him with a simple obedience to the simplest of commands—don't eat from one tree while all the rest of creation, in essence, would be yours to use. If man would vilely reject God's love, God's command, God's rich provision, the stated penalty would be death. Soon enough we see that Adam and Eve's attitude toward God indeed died under the weight of sin. Yet after announcing His chastenings, which were and are substantial, God made a promise, or should I rather say, revealed a covenant, that would allow Him, the Creator, to remain perfectly just, man to become perfectly restored (and more), and both take place in such a way that fellowship and communion might be restored without God compromising His integrity and justice. How could this be? God revealed *Another* who would be born of the woman and yet be such an offspring as would conquer Satan himself. Little did Adam and Eve know that this promised son was none other than God's eternal Son. He would endure the judgment man earned through sin and man would not only find in Him forgiveness of sin but as well a permanent and eternal state of love and fellowship and communion with God!

Of course, Adam and Eve did not know all of this but we know it. Over the course of time, God unfolded His master plan of salvation: who this Son would be, what this

Son would be like, much of what that Son would experience while in this world. All of this unfolded over time in the pages of God's Word. We hold in our hands the completed copy of that master plan, at least as much of it as we need to know to be partakers of that salvation!

So already then, in the first days of the existence of creation, we clearly see covenant love defended—in this first instance, the covenant love between God and man, generally speaking. But God was not finished with His defense of covenant love. Let us turn now to something a bit closer to the seventh commandment itself, though not unrelated to what we just considered.

### **Covenant Love in Marriage**

If anyone knew it would be difficult if not impossible for man to keep all of this in mind, for his own good, it was God. So even before man fell, God made a startling statement—it is not good that man should be alone. Startling, because God had pronounced everything He had made very good, including the creation of man. Startling also because man had the fellowship of God. So we could understandably ask, “Why did God call Adam alone?” But we quickly learn what God meant by these words and it in no way reflected negatively on the rich fellowship of man's life with God. Adam had no created being like himself, none capable of sharing his life on earth or someone with whom he could share his life with God. Certain animals might make nice pets, but they cannot replace a spouse. They are of an entirely other kind than man and are incapable of relating to man like another human being can. For this reason we do not understand what God said to mean that every human being ought to be married. Instead, God is simply and clearly stating that He created us as social beings, beings not meant to live in isolation but rather in community. That is true whether we are married

or not. Some describe one of the severest punishments to be solitary confinement, that is, extended periods of forced isolation. That is what God was referring to, that it is not good for man to live in isolation from other persons. He would have life be a shared experience, including man's life with God.

God therefore created woman, someone like Adam in some ways but different in others. At nearly the same moment God also created a unique relationship involving only two people, a man and a woman. We all know this relationship to be marriage and we can be so familiar with it that we might miss out on what God's purpose was in bringing it into being. We will not now go into God's purpose of populating the earth with image-bearers (Gen. 1:28), or of marriage providing intimate companionship (Gen. 2:18), or of moral preservation (1 Cor. 7:2). Instead, let us focus on two other matters of the utmost importance.

First, we know from Scripture that God is three unique divine persons and yet one unified Being. It is no coincidence that when He described marriage, and also when Jesus referred to it, emphasis was placed on the two becoming one flesh. That is to say this particular relationship, more than any other, is able to portray, in a creaturely way, the very being of God Himself—three-in-one and two are one.

But second, this bond between one man and one woman is not just some contract, a handshake agreement, or even one written out on paper. This is a covenantal relationship. God actually referred to it that way in Malachi 2:14 calling the woman "the wife of thy covenant." As we saw earlier, that's why the marriage oath traditionally contained the words "till death do us part," because marriage was meant to be weighty and substantial, as was the covenant God sealed with Abram. This might help us understand why, in Old Testament case law, adultery was a capital offense.

But when we think of marriage in terms of covenant and covenant in the way it is set forth by God in Scripture, it's no wonder the discipline is severe.

However, just like Adam's relationship with God was, from his side, irreparably damaged by his rebellion against God, so was Adam's relationship with his wife, Eve. No sooner did they fall in sin than they worked together to cover their sin, to hide in their sin. When called out, they blamed the other or another for their sin. Marital troubles and strife have continued ever since because two sinners say "I do" when they repeat their vows to one another and to God.

Nevertheless, the Lord had, from all eternity, something planned which not only would secure a sinner's salvation but also lift marriage far beyond a relationship that now, on account of sin, would end in death. How did God do that?

You recall that not only did God promise that an offspring of Adam and Eve would eventually conquer the evil one and his followers, but through a slain animal's skin, Adam and Eve would have their shame covered by God Himself, symbolic, of course, of the perfect covering His Son Jesus Christ would provide to sinners. But that's not the whole of it. God also revealed, over time, that He *Himself* would be the ultimate spouse, the One who would never be unfaithful, never harm His bride, and that the bride to whom He would join Himself is sinful man! We hear the echoes of this already in the Old Testament. Isaiah 54:5 reads, "For thy Maker is thine husband; the LORD of hosts is his name; and thy Redeemer the Holy One of Israel; the God of the whole earth shall he be called." In Jeremiah 3:14, God addresses His people this way: "Turn, O backsliding children, saith the LORD; for I am married unto you." In Hosea, a history that actually portrays God's love for His own, God said this, "I will betroth thee unto



me forever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies" (2:19).

In the earliest moments of the New Testament, John the Baptist drops this hint, referring to his relationship to Jesus and Jesus's relationship to His people, "He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled" (John 3:29). John recognizes Jesus as the bridegroom of His people while he is the one who is privileged to hear the bridegroom's voice. But this picture becomes even clearer as the New Testament continues to unfold.

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he addresses the church this way: "For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (11:2). After writing about marriage to the Ephesians, Paul concludes with, "This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church" (5:32). And in the grand realization of God's plan in this respect, John is given this sight of heaven itself in the book of Revelation: "I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (21:2). And again: "There came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife. And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God" (21:9-11). The Lamb's wife is not a city as we understand the word, but His church, His people.

So we come to realize that human marriage is preparatory, is symbolic of the ultimate covenant relationship God

has with His children. He doesn't just rescue them, save them, forgive their sins, and in some general way associate with them from time to time. No, our great and holy God, the only living and true God, is willing and has purposed from all eternity to be joined to His people in the most intimate and permanent relationship imaginable—marriage. And this marriage is between one man, Jesus Christ, and one bride, His church, and it will be a perfect relationship of love and fellowship, a sinless love relationship, and an eternal relationship that will grow and grow forever.

We honor His glorious design and intent when we live out our marriage relationship in as close an approximation of this as possible. This is why marriage means so much more than the happiness of two people in this life. It's all about Him, beloved! That will be our focus in our last thought.

### **Covenant Love in God**

Where did all this come from? How did this all come to be in the eternal mind of God? Why is this all so important to Him? The answer to this is the deepest, most profound reason why marriage matters to God the way it does.

There was a covenant relationship forever between God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In that remarkable, everlasting, infinitely perfect and overflowing covenant of love and joy lay embedded another covenant. God not only purposed that a creation He would make would be made so He could reveal His glory in generous display, but He would, in the midst of that overflowing kindness, allow His creation, man, to taste something of that remarkable covenant love that He enjoys within Himself in marriage. Moreover, marriage, when lived in godliness, would serve as a foretaste of that glorious covenant love and fellowship we may have with Him throughout all eternity, in glory and bliss, through Jesus Christ.

So marriage was meant to be an experience, in the bonds of love between a man and a woman, of something God eternally enjoyed within Himself. But that was meant to point our attention to that glorious, remarkable, miraculous purpose of God—to be joined to His church, His people, in a bond that truly is and ever will be indescribable, beyond our highest thoughts.

Can we begin to see, beloved, why marriage has been created by God as one of the foremost pillars of how He orders His world? It is so important to Him that He safeguards it with not one but at least three commandments. Not only are we forbidden to commit adultery (the seventh commandment), but He also tells us not to covet our neighbor's wife (the tenth commandment). Why not adultery and such coveting? Because this is not Him. This does not resemble Him. This does not honor Him or His relationship within Himself. But I said at least three commandments. What is the third? "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (the first commandment). How does that apply? God is jealous over us as His people. He would have us love Him alone. He is our rightful Lord. He is the ultimate Bridegroom. And for man to choose another god, a god of wood or stone, a god of glass and steel, an electronic god, a flesh-pleasing god, a sinful god—this cuts across all God's commandments. This is adultery of the worst kind, an infinitely egregious affront to Him. And because He is so glorious, so infinitely good, to be unfaithful to Him, to abuse His good commands which are designed for our good, may give us some idea why such a thing as hell exists.

Did you ever consider that hell exists because of love? Anyone who could choose sin over God, the God of love, hates Him. God loves His Son too much to excuse those who neglect, despise, and disbelieve Him. God loves justice too much to be unjust, loves mercy too much to see it

despised. Can you perhaps see the connection more clearly now, even just a little?

You see, sin is not just the breaking of a law, a commandment. Original sin wasn't that either, just the eating of a little fruit. Sin is a deeply personal and abusive treatment of our loving God. It is no wonder that God said in Ezekiel 6:9, "I am broken with their whorish heart, which hath departed from me, and with their eyes, which go a whoring after their idols." And again: "They are all estranged from me through their idols" (14:5). Ponder those words, beloved. Let them sink in! God repeatedly used the language of adultery and unfaithfulness to describe how His people dealt with Him through their sins. And the same is true today, except those sins be removed and our relationship restored through Jesus Christ and His blood. This is why Jesus said at the first Lord's Supper, "This cup is the new testament (covenant) in my blood, which is shed for you." He is that new and living way of restored relationships—yes, our relationship with Him but also our frayed and broken relationships with people.

We can try to bypass Jesus and His grace in seeking reconciliation, but that is not the God-honoring way, not a way for lasting peace. In all eternity, God had the way in His heart, revealed it in symbol form when He brought Adam and Eve together, preserving their marriage, and making His intentions fully known through the person, the life, the work, and especially the cross of Jesus Christ His eternal Son.

May the Lord give us strength to take this all in and take it to heart. God's purposes are so great, His thoughts so high, but what a wonder that He lets us see and know something of them in His Word! This is what marriage is all about. This is why God safeguards it the way He does, redeems it the way He does, honors it the way He does, even through the very first miracle His Son performed on

earth, that is, at a wedding feast. Jesus wasn't just being kind to a newly-wedded couple. This is why He came to earth—to seek a bride for Himself!

So the next time you are tempted to look with contempt at your spouse, the next time the thought crosses your mind, “It’s over between us,” think of what you’ve read in this sermon. Look much higher than him or her. Look through the Word into the face of the triune God, seen alone in Jesus Christ, and realize that much more is at stake than the happiness of two people.

May each and every one of us one day be part of that blessed body of Christ, wedded to Him by free and sovereign grace and love, never to know anything but eternal joy, eternal peace, eternal security in the loving embrace of our infinitely good and gracious God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.



# **Fighting Unbelief**

*Dr. Joel R. Beeke*

Scripture: Mark 9

Text: Mark 9:24

It is unfortunate that the inexpressible wonder of Christ's incarnation often gets attention only once per year on Christmas. We can hardly comprehend that great change of scene which took place when Jesus Christ willingly left crown, throne, and glory in heaven above, and came into this sin-sick world to live in the presence of sinners and in the smoke of sin by assuming our human nature out of the virgin Mary. God's people will spend eternity glorying in that wonder of wonders.

Indeed, the Christmas story is not the only place where the Bible displays for us the wonder of that great change of scene from heavenly glory to earthly darkness. In Mark 9 we find Jesus's transition from the mount of His transfiguration and glory to the plain of human distress and confusion.

What a blessed time it must have been for Christ on the mountain of transfiguration. On that mountain He experienced the fullness, communion, and approval of His Father in an inexpressible degree. On that mountain also, Peter, James, and John must have had a blessed experience, even though they did not yet understand its full

significance. Peter, for one, wanted to remain there, and desired that a tabernacle be built there for the Lord Jesus.

What a blessing, however, that that tabernacle was not built. Jesus did not stay on that mountain. If He had, salvation would have been lost forever. Then He never would have given His life as a ransom for His people. If Peter got his wish for a tabernacle to be built, although the church would have been one step from heaven, she never would have gotten into heaven.

The time soon came when Jesus had to go back down to fulfil His mission. He had to return to the earthly confusion. The people gathered on the plain below did not come up the mountain. Rather, Jesus went down, which illustrates the effect of man's deep fall from paradise. Man is not able to take one step toward his salvation or toward God, but the great and the needed blessing is the coming of Jesus.

The first blessing was that Jesus came, the second was that He came down, and the third was that He came down just in time. And so it is always when He comes with salvation. He does not come when His people think they are ready, but He comes to them just in time, namely when it is hopeless and cut-off from their side. He comes when He is absolutely needed.

And how needed He was when He came down from the mount of transfiguration! What an awful scene met His eyes! Here was a physically agonized boy, a deeply distressed father, a band of nine baffled disciples who were unable to give relief, and a group of mocking scribes, who were trying to convince the gathered crowd that the inability of the disciples implied the inability of their Master.

What an awful contrast between the mountain and the plains! What a great change of scene Jesus now experienced! He came from the voice and presence of God above to the work and presence of the devil below. He came from



heavenly glory to earthly misery—from quietude to agony, from heavenly tranquility to earthly confusion, from holiness to sinfulness.

Yet, how things changed when He came! What a difference it makes if Jesus comes. What an eternal difference—a difference of salvation—it made as He came to Bethlehem’s stable for His people, and what a difference it made when He came to this plain.

His presence came as a great surprise. Scripture says, “All the people...were greatly amazed” (Mark 9:15). They were amazed, in the first place, *that* He came, when it seemed as if He were nowhere to be found, and they were amazed, in the second place, *how* He came, showing forth His Divine authority as the exceeding brightness of the transfiguration still lingered upon His countenance, as it did when Moses came down the mountain with the law in his hands. And so it is, spiritually speaking, for God’s people. We are amazed when Jesus comes—amazed that He comes to such wretches as we are, and amazed how He comes with His salvation in spite of our sinfulness.

What a blessing that may be! There may be moments when some believers experience Jesus placing them on the mount, granting them a foretaste of heaven and a vision of glory. But such times are often brief and infrequent. As a rule, more time is spent by Jesus preparing believers for glory than in their experiencing that glory. More time is often spent in the plain—in the midst of weakness, struggles, conflict, and sorrow. They must return time and again to a struggling faith here below. In our efforts to pursue holiness by the Spirit’s grace, let us consider how to overcome our unbelief through a distressed father’s struggling cry of faith in Mark 9:24: “And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief.”

**When Jesus Helps Us See the Deeper Issue**

The father in Mark 9 had a son who was in a very pitiful condition. In the first place, his son had epilepsy. All the conditions of epilepsy were present, as can be gathered from Matthew, Mark, and Luke together, including seizures, convulsions, falling to the ground, foaming at the mouth, grinding teeth, and rigidity. But to this we must immediately add that this was not simply an ordinary case of epilepsy. Second, this son was also a deaf-mute: he could not speak and he could not hear. Third, and worst of all, this child was a demoniac: he was possessed by an evil spirit, which knocked him down time and again. He was not only influenced by that evil spirit, but he was in its possession.

This father had no doubt tried everything possible to cure his son. Like the woman with the bloody issue, he must have gone from physician to physician. He must have tried all kinds of suggested remedies, but no remedy, no person, nothing, could help. All physicians were of no value in this case.

Not even the disciples of Jesus Christ could heal his son. This father might have heard of other occasions when Jesus had worked miracles also by means of His disciples. But now, coming to Christ's disciples, he found their healing energy depleted in the case of his son. The disciples tried to cast out the evil spirit in vain.

What a trial for the father! It is difficult to imagine the struggle that must have waged within him in those moments. Surely it must have been a struggle for him in the first place to come to the disciples in front of a large number of people. Wouldn't the people just mock him and say, "Your son has been in such a condition since he was a small boy; his case is hopeless."

Yet, the father came. Hoping against hope, fighting the battle of reason versus faith; he brought his son,

and the outcome was clear: there was still no relief. The disciples were unable. The devil was rejoicing. Inside the father the voice of the evil one whispered: "I told you so. You were foolish to bring your son in the first place. You have only made a fool of yourself."

As the father now stood in his helplessness, there was nothing left for him to do but to return home, and yet he could not. Even though it was only logical to conclude there was no hope, and that even if Jesus Christ were present, He could not heal His son since His own disciples could not; yet this father, seeing no solution, could not leave. He could not return home and he could scarcely stay. He was at his wits end. It became a cut-off and lost matter for him and his son.

And now Jesus came! Perhaps we would say, "Why didn't He come sooner? Why did He let His disciples become so ridiculed? Why did He permit the father's agony to escalate to such a seemingly hopeless point?"

The answer can be put simply: Jesus is all-knowing. He knew, moment by moment, exactly what was happening in the plain below. He waited until everything else was eliminated as a source of help outside of Himself. Jesus had great and deep lessons to teach this father. He did not come only to heal the physical infirmity of the son, but above all, the spiritual infirmity of the father. In such a way, He also teaches all His people. He leads them to that place where everything is cut off—even the very disciples of Jesus. In other words, everyone—self, God's people, including ministers—must be completely lost as a cure for their deadly spiritual disease. Has that ever taken place in a spiritual sense in our lives? Have we ever stood in that father's place?

Jesus came when the father could not leave and yet could not believe or see how his son could possibly be healed. Then He came—just as He also comes to His

people at that time when they cannot leave the Lord alone, even though they cannot believe or see how the Lord will or can have mercy on such a sinful and helpless case as they are. They also come to realize that they are afflicted with an incurable disease, a deadly disease, and yet they cannot leave the Lord. He is their only hope, though it only be a faint one.

How surprised that father must have been when Jesus suddenly came! Could the father then immediately believe? No. Even though Jesus rebuked them all—including the crowd, the scribes, the disciples, and the father himself—by saying, “Oh faithless generation,” yet the father could not fully believe.

At most, he received a little encouragement, a little hope, when Jesus commanded, “Bring him to me.” The father poured out his heart and spread out his case before Jesus, and now Jesus answered, “Bring him to me.” “Oh, perhaps,” the agonized father must have thought, “perhaps something can yet be done.”

And yet, his son would not yet be healed. It was one thing to bring him to Jesus and quite another if he was healed by Jesus. Such is also the experience of believers. When they may be brought closer to Jesus Christ and when they may receive some encouragement from Him such as in a text of Scripture, an answered prayer, an application under the preaching of the Word, or a remarkable incident in God’s providence—then they may receive a little hope. But yet, to be brought near to God and to feel a deep love for Him and His mercy is not necessarily being healed by Him yet. Did we ever feel that difference experientially—that to be brought to Jesus is not yet to be healed by Jesus?

The situation had to become even more hopeless. Perhaps you will ask, “How is that possible? Was it not hopeless already?” Yes, it was. But it had to become hopeless to

the superlative degree. We may have experienced this as Christians, that often when we think our situation is hopeless—when we've reached the proverbial "bottom of the barrel"—the Lord often lets our trials go to even greater depths before He intervenes.

Mark 9:20 says, "And they brought him unto him [that is, Jesus]: and when he saw him, straightway the spirit tare him; and he fell on the ground, and wallowed foaming." While the child was being brought to Jesus things got worse, not better! In those last moments before healing, Satan unleashed all his power with fury to prevent the work of Jesus.

The trial for that man went to even greater depths. First the disciples could not heal him, and now it seemed as if Jesus could not heal him.

Jesus's question did not help either. He asked the father, "How long is it ago since this came unto him?" (v. 21). Once more the father was reminded of the hopelessness of the whole situation. The hopelessness was overwhelming.

"Oh," the father cried out, "If thou canst do anything, have compassion on us, and help us" (v. 22). The father was saying, as it were, "You can see for yourself the impossibility of the circumstances. It is hopeless. But if there is anything you can do—oh, even if you can make my son half better—if there is anything at all, then please help and have compassion."

After the father cried "If thou canst," "Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth." In the original Greek Jesus literally says, "As to that 'if thou canst,' all things are possible to him that believeth" (v. 23).

Jesus turned the father's attention from his child to himself. It was as if He said to that man, "You say, 'if I

can,' but I tell you in response to your 'if thou canst' that anything is possible with me. Do you believe that?"

Why did Jesus say this? Did He say this to get this father to exercise his free will? Did He mean by this that faith is the condition of healing? Did He mean to say that the healing of his son was really dependent on the father's faith?

Rather, Jesus said this to show this father where the fault really laid. The father had implied it was the disciples' fault and even the fault of the Lord Jesus by saying "if," but now he had to see that the fault was in himself. He had to see not only the awful condition of his son, but above all, the awful condition of his own heart. He had to become a sinner. He had to see that he was an unbeliever within himself.

### **The Needy Cry for Faith unto Christ**

So the Lord Jesus took the focus off of the son and placed it on the father. He took it off the physical infirmity of the child and placed it on the spiritual infirmity of the father.

What a change these few words brought! The Lord Jesus spoke these words with divine power to the soul of that father. In those moments he saw that the valley was full of confusion not only because of his son, but now he saw the valley of sin and confusion in his own heart. Immediately, suddenly, irresistibly the Lord Jesus showed the father his need, and the fruit of it was the father's expression of this great need when he cried with tears, "Lord, help Thou mine unbelief" (v. 24). A needy cry for faith came from the heart of this father unto Christ. In one moment this father was drawn from his self-made darkness into God's marvelous light, which made him see his sin—"mine unbelief"—for the first time in his life.

Initially, the father cried "help my child," but now, his greatest need became, "help my unbelief." The father saw

himself as an even greater problem than his child. The circumstances were no longer the greatest problem, but he himself was. In those moments he became a needy, unbelieving sinner in himself, and therefore his hard heart became a greater problem than the epileptic body of his son.

Can we say the same thing of ourselves? Has our hard heart ever become our greatest problem in life—a problem greater than all external circumstances and afflictions? Has it ever been our cry, “Lord, help Thou my unbelief?”

In a moment the father was led deeply by the Lord Jesus. He was not only led to see his sins of commission but also of omission. He was led to the mother sin—the sin of unbelief. The Holy Spirit uncovered that father unto himself. He showed him his sin and his unbelief, and that immediately became an unbearable burden by grace, “Lord, help Thou mine unbelief.”

If we are honest with ourselves, we may think of a time in our lives when we cried unto the Lord, “O God, give me true, saving faith. Work irresistibly so that I must believe. Lord, help Thou mine unbelief.”

For God’s people unbelief becomes their great problem. They cannot rest in historical, temporary, or miraculous faith. They cannot rest in unbelief. Can we rest without a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and Him crucified worked in our hearts by the Holy Spirit? Can we live without saving faith? Is it enough for us to come to church, to hear the Word of God, and to believe it with our minds?

Historical faith is necessary but it is insufficient by itself. We need true, saving faith; if we can rest without it, then the devil is also resting by us. If we are strangers to that struggling cry, “Lord, help Thou mine unbelief,” then we are on good terms with Satan, for we live as if there is no God and as if there is no devil, too.

But if, on the other hand, we have come into that good fight of faith, then we also know something of Satan and his attacks. God's people find out that he is both an attacker as well as an angel of light who will not give them rest night or day as long as they by grace refuse to rest without true faith. As long as we must cry out, "Lord, help Thou mine unbelief," Satan will also be at our side trying to persuade us that it is a foolish request which will never be granted us anyhow, or alternatively that we already have it, and do not have to struggle anymore for faith.

For the father in Mark 9, faith became a necessity, and he could no longer blame anyone else for his lack of faith anymore; he owned his transgression—*mine* unbelief—for himself.

Has that also taken place with us? Has faith become a necessity? Has faith cost us tears? Have we ever owned our unbelief before the Lord? Have we ever taken full blame?

True Christians are led to see that the fault of unbelief lies at their own door—not God's, not Adam's, not man's, nor anyone else's. At moments in their life they must own it for themselves. They begin to see unbelief in everything they do, say, and think. They can trace every sin back to it. Unbelief is the cause of their leaning on false foundations and the cause of their anxiety over materialistic, earthly things that are of no value. Unbelief is the reason their religious duties are so poor, the reason their prayers are so haphazard and halfhearted, and the reason that they are so impatient to wait upon the Lord for mercy. The great problem of who they are—is all traceable back to *unbelief*.

Unbelief becomes their great problem. It spoils their religious activities. It hinders their praying, reading, and worship—private worship, family worship, and public worship. It gives more power to Satan's temptations, for faith is the soul's greatest shield against temptation (Eph. 4:16).



And above all, it becomes unbearable because it is such a great dishonor to God who is Truth itself and cannot lie.

Oh, that cursed unbelief! How many tears it costs God's people. How many times they have wished they could cast it out of their heart, that they could trample it to death, that they could stamp it out forever. But they must find out that, try what they might, the root of sin and unbelief remains. They must lose all strength from their side to fight it and depend on Christ alone: "Help *Thou* mine unbelief."

The father saw his self-inability and the hopelessness from his side, and he saw that the cause of it was himself. Therefore, he did not say, "Lord, help me to help my unbelief." Nor did he say, "Lord, I will try to do my part if you will do the rest." No, but rather, in that one word, "Thou"—"Lord, help *Thou* mine unbelief" the father confessed death upon all self-help. At the same time that he realized his great problem of unbelief, he also realized God's great exclusivity as the only one who could help.

And why was it so necessary for that father to have faith? Did he cry "Help my unbelief" because he saw faith as being of merit or worthiness or the condition of God's acceptance? No, faith itself can never save us, but Christ Himself saves us through the instrument or means of true faith which lays hold of Christ. Salvation is applied by faith. Jesus Christ and Him crucified is the object of faith for which God's people are ultimately seeking. Faith is like the pitcher with which the sinner draws the living water; faith is the only way through which we are made partakers of salvation. Faith is the hand of the beggar reaching for alms.

To that end we need faith—faith to believe in Him, faith to trust upon Him, faith to lean on Him, faith to give over to Him, faith to see Him in His Person and

benefits. Therefore, we cry, “Lord, help Thou mine unbelief, because I cannot help myself and yet I must be saved.”

The Lord will never deny such a cry, for that cry of true need itself reveals His own work, proving that the principle of faith is already planted in the heart by the Holy Spirit. Mourning over unbelief is a sign of true faith, and if we have never mourned then we may be assured that we are still missing faith. The two cannot be separated. The needy cry is a cry of confession at the same time.

### **The Confessing Cry of Faith in Christ**

This father received a great blessing. He not only said through tears, “Help Thou mine unbelief,” but also through tears, “Lord, I believe.” Through tears of sorrow and tears of joy he cried out, “Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief.”

Truly, it was a God-given confession that came from the heart of the father in the midst of trial. Against all odds, all common sense, and all natural reason he cried out, “Lord, I believe.” In spite of the fact that the disciples were unable, that his son had this disease for years, and that even as he confessed it his son was crying out, foaming at the mouth, being torn by the devil, and getting worse instead of better at Jesus’s feet—yet the father cried, “Lord, I believe.”

The confession of the father “Lord I believe” was a gift from above, from the God who graciously gives us all that He demands of us. Faith is always the gift of God, whether it be the first time or by renewal, worked by the Holy Spirit, as Ephesians 2:8 teaches us.

Through that Spirit-worked, Christ-applied, God-given faith this father triumphed over all difficulties and impossibilities. He could say even before his son was healed, “Lord, I believe.”

And what did he believe? Did he only believe that his son would be healed or that all things are possible with Christ? No. These things are included, but ultimately he believed in Jesus Christ Himself in those moments. It was as if he said, “Lord, I believe not in myself, nor in any other man, but I believe in Thee. Lord, Thou art the object of my faith. Lord, I believe in Thee!”

What a great and inexpressible blessing this father received to believe in Jesus Himself. With this confession he gave himself over unconditionally to the Lord Jesus. All self-trust had sunken away. He could not even trust his own faith: “help mine unbelief.” In short, there was only one thing that this father could truly believe in anymore, and that was Jesus Christ: “Lord, I believe in Thee.” It was as if in one word he confessed his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. “Lord, I believe in Thy ability. I believe in Thy willingness. I believe in Thy benefits and in Thy Person. Lord, I believe in Thee.”

Oh, to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ—has this ever become our portion? Could we ever confess, “Lord, I believe?” Did Jesus’s imperative ever become reality in our soul—“Ye believe in God, believe also in me” (John 14:1)? Was He Himself ever the only One that we could truly believe in?

By nature, we are strangers to this confession. Inside us, it is just the opposite of “Lord, I believe,” for we will believe in everything and everybody but Jesus—and above all we tend to believe in self.

What is it that we believe in? What do we trust and lean upon? What are we placing above Jesus Christ? Are we believing in ourselves, or our possessions, or our fellow man? Are we leaning upon our religion—our tears, our prayers, our humility, and our repentance?

Anything we believe in as a foundation for salvation outside of Jesus Christ is entirely wrong, false, and futile.

Our religion and our experiences can never save us. Blessed are they who lose all such foundations, and who may know this simple, tearful confession, "Lord, I believe in Thee."

When a poor and afflicted people may be allowed to believe in that Savior for the first time or by renewal so that this confession—"Lord, I believe"—may come from their heart, then it cannot but be tearful. Tears are not, and can never be, a ground of our faith or our salvation, but one thing is sure—confession cannot go without tears either. When that living way is now opened before a dying people who are given grace to believe in Jesus alone for salvation, how can there not be tears? Oh, that precious, deep joy in believing in Him! Do you know that joy by experience—that joy that produces tears of joy?

Mark 9:24 says, "And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe." That father's joy was so great that it brought tears—not only because of whom he was allowed to believe in, but also because that faith was made personal. Those two realities coalesced in his heart with profound joy.

"I believe"—that same *I* who is so sinful, so corrupt, so unbelieving—I believe. "O Lord, I cannot comprehend it, but yet I cannot deny it. In spite of what I am, in spite of who I am, yet I, by grace, believe."

Do you know that same confession? Have you experienced the wonder of crying out, "Lord, I believe. In spite of myself, I believe. Thou hast made me believe. Thou hast shown me that the righteousness of Jesus Christ even goes beyond my sinfulness. Lord, I cannot but believe. I believe that Thy power goes beyond my unbelief. Lord, I believe."

What a great blessing when we may be personally made believers. We have come to see that others personally believe. Seeing that is a blessing in itself. But now, it is a greater blessing when the Lord may show us that it

also possible for us to be saved in spite of our monstrous sinfulness and unbelief. Then the Lord reveals to His people that through Christ “He is able to save to the uttermost” (Heb. 7:25). It is that word “uttermost” which is so precious to our souls. He is not only able to save, but to save to the uttermost. How low that comes! That reaches to the bottom of a pile of sinners—to the uttermost. Then we may also become those who make that confession, “Lord, I believe.”

### **The Victorious Cry through Faith by Christ**

The tearful confession of the father in our text is not only a needy and a confessing cry; it is also the cry of victory through faith by Christ.

Modern Christendom would not see this as a victorious cry at all. If this man were brought into the counseling rooms after today’s evangelistic messages to the masses, then he would be told that his faith was too weak. He would be rejected because of his unbelief. He would be told, “You must believe. You must accept. You must overcome unbelief in your own power, by your force of decision, and then you will be saved. You must allow Jesus to come in.”

Scripture makes plain that the struggle of faith versus unbelief remains in the life of the God’s people until their death. A faith that never doubts and struggles is not true faith. It may be historical or temporary or miraculous faith. True faith is often called to holy war. Many believers feel like their faith is more often fighting in the plain than rejoicing on the mountain.

And yet, whether faith is in the plain or on the mountain, true faith is and remains true faith. Therefore, the father’s cry is a cry of victory—because it is the cry of true saving faith, which can never be taken away. As long as that principle of faith is there, though it be small, the

principle of victory is also there. In the activity of faith itself there is no doubt. That is impossible. The very nature of faith excludes doubt. Certainty cannot be separated from faith.

And therefore, by Christ, through this true faith, the cry of faith versus unbelief is a victorious cry. The apostle John writes "Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith" (1 John 5:4).

Through faith, by Christ, God's people have victory. And what a blessing it is when they realize the victory of their faith. Just as Israel shouted with joyous faith before the walls of Jericho fell, so they may cry out by faith like the father of our text did before his son was healed: "Lord, I believe."

What a great blessing—in all their poverty victory is yet sure in the great Victor who came to bruise the head of the serpent! Victory is assured to them through faith by King Jesus. He will not fail. We see it also in this case. Jesus calmly, quickly, miraculously, and powerfully cured this child in one moment. "Thou deaf and dumb spirit, I charge thee, come out of him, and enter no more into him" (Mark 9:25). That is, Jesus commanded the demon to come out of the boy and stay out.

In that moment, the victorious cry "Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief" found its fulfillment. The devil was cast out of the child. What a divine power! A father came with his diseased child, and Jesus healed them both.

How full of joy that father must now have been when he returned home with his healed son. Now he could talk with his son, and his son could talk back. Oh, how he must have talked with his son about Jesus Christ along the way; about the unspeakable victory of Jesus Christ! He must have told his son about how he was possessed with an evil spirit for so many years, about how he took him

from place to place and physician to physician, and that Jesus Christ was the only one who had absolute power over Satan. What inexpressible joy—the joy of victory through faith by Christ—must have filled the heart of that father as he told of the wonderful deeds of Christ to his son. What a blessing that that father was privileged to share it with his own son. Parents, do you know such times when you could talk from your heart to your children of such things? Have you had occasion to tell your children of your hope that the victory you cherish would become their victory as well?

### **The Day-to-Day Cry Against Remaining Unbelief**

On that journey home there was one thing we can be sure that the father forgot about: his unbelief. If he had looked for it then, he surely would not have been able to find it. Perhaps he even thought to himself—like many of us do—that he would never have to pray that petition again, “Help Thou mine unbelief.” Like him we may have thought in such moments, “How could we ever possibly doubt again?”

And yet we are mistaken. Although unbelief hides, it will come back. You can read that so beautifully described in Bunyan’s *Holy War*. Unbelief sometimes could not be found in the city of Mansoul, but he never could be killed either. Unbelief is that plaguing and recurring sin that God’s people cannot rid themselves of completely in this life no matter how hard they fight the good fight of faith. Unbelief is that captain that they desire to see trodden down and killed in the gates of the city of their soul.

Later, the father must have experienced that a warfare with unbelief remained within. He found out why the disciples themselves had to pray, “Lord, increase our faith.” He would have had to come back to that needy, confessing, victorious cry time and again in his life, “Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief.”

And so it goes in the life of God's people. When they may look upon Christ then they may say with the father, "Lord, I believe," but when they look upon themselves and their circumstances, then they must also cry with that same father, "Help Thou mine unbelief."

Therefore, that Christianity which says that the children of God go beyond unbelief and that this man's faith here was so weak is a religion which God's true people do not find in their souls. Time and again they cry out, "Help Thou mine unbelief."

We often find out, like the disciples, how little faith we have. How often we feel included in Jesus's words, "O faithless and perverse generation." If only we could be delivered from that faithlessness and perverseness inside. If only we could believe once and for all. We wish that we could always say in triumph, "Lord, I believe," and we long for the day when we will not have to add, "help Thou mine unbelief."

But we must also be honest with ourselves. We need daily grace to believe. Although we were delivered from the state of unbelief forever in the moment of regeneration, yet time and again we can slip into the condition of unbelief, which, we confess, is always our own fault. The gates of heaven are never shut because of Jesus Christ's merited righteousness, but we are too often shutting them from our side.

Believers often feel they are people of "little faith." When John Newton preached about growth in grace, relating it to three different stages—first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear—he later received a letter from a person who wrote that he felt he was in the last mature stage of faith. Newton wrote back that there was one thing he forgot to say in his sermon, and that was that those who are in the last stage of being the full corn in the ear seldom realize it!



In other words, God's people do not think so highly of their own faith. They do not think that they are souls that have great faith. Many people today think they are led so far and have so much faith, but then it is only "great faith in a little God" whereas God's people may have that better portion of a "little faith in a great God."

"But isn't doubt sin?" we may ask. Yes, it is. It is bitter sin and it costs us bitter tears. Yet, at the same time it is an inevitable sin because of our own corrupt hearts. Unbelief so quickly arises from within. It begins the moment we think we are independent from the Lord. The moment we think we can begin to make it on our own and don't need the Lord so much in daily life also—then unbelief rears its ugly head. Unbelief begins when self begins. Like Israel, puffed up with fall of Jericho, we are ready to say to ourselves, "Do not weary all the people there, for the people of Ai are few"—feeling we need God little even after receiving grace (Joshua 7:3).

Thus, God's people live a paradoxical life. On the one hand, they are learning "without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5), and on the other hand, they find out they still too often try to help themselves on earth and leave Christ in heaven. In short, the more they may believe, the more they may also see the power of unbelief.

Unbelief is an awful sin. And yet we must say that those who can always believe *and* those who can never believe are both wrong. Unbelief remains, but it must become our great grief that we need the Lord so much yet believe in Him so little. God's people cannot deny faith altogether, yet they often feel weak in faith. They experience that they not only crucified the Lord Jesus on Calvary's cross with their sins, but that they are also rending Him afresh by needing Him so little even after receiving grace.

This becomes their deepest sorrow. “O Lord,” they must cry, “Help me to truly need Thee more, to believe in Thee more, to be exercised with Thee more.”

### **Continuing with Christ From Where We Are**

Where do you stand with respect to that needy, confessing, victorious, and persistent cry, “Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief?” Where do you stand with respect to faith and unbelief?

#### *Open Unbelievers*

Are you an *open unbeliever*? Do you openly reject God’s Word? Do you have no desire to believe in Christ? Perhaps you do not even want to hear His Word. Do you come to God’s house out of custom, or, even worse, out of obligation?

Then you are truly in a sad condition, and how awful it would be if you had to die that way. Did you ever think about it—what it means to die as an unbeliever? It means that you will ultimately be forced to believe when it is forever too late. Then you will discover that awful fulfillment of God’s own Word: “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on Him” (John 3:36). How awful it will be to fall into the hands of a living God! Oh, that God might stop you upon your unbelieving way, and enlighten your mind. Do you ever think about Him and eternity? Do you ever realize that nothing is so sure in this life as death? Ecclesiastes 3 speaks of a time to be born, and a time to die: nothing separates the two but a comma, and so is our life—nothing but a short comma which is soon passed by and then comes the meeting with our Maker for a never-ending eternity. Are we prepared to meet Him?

*Historical Believers*

Are you a *historical believer* only? Perhaps you will say, “I am not an open unbeliever. I believe that I am a sinner. I believe that Jesus Christ came into the world for His people. I believe the Word of God.”

Is that all you believe—in a Christ outside of you but not within you? Is it only a head-belief and not a heart-belief? I hope that we all realize that the Word of God which we profess we believe thoroughly condemns us. Historical faith is necessary but it is insufficient. We must not only have faith *concerning* the triune God, but we must believe *in* Him. The Lord must make that faith a reality in our souls so that it shall be well for time and eternity.

*Doubting Believers*

Are you a *doubting believer*? Must you confess, “I do not know if I am a true believer or not. Sometimes I have a hope that the Lord is beginning with me, but at other times it seems absolutely impossible to even consider it. I don’t think I could ever say yet, ‘Lord, I believe,’ as that father did, but I think I know something of his cry from the depths, ‘Have mercy and compassion on us.’”

Is this truly your condition? Do you really desire to know if you have true faith or not? Then you may find five marks in the confession of our text by which you may examine yourself.

In the first place, faith made the father’s heart melt and become tender. It made him cry out with tears. And why? Because he could not remain cold under the thought of free grace to such a vile creature as he was. Do you know something of such tenderness and melting-of-heart before the Lord?

Second, faith gave him a deep sense of his remaining unbelief. “Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief.” Is it

so also with you? Are you a stranger to unbelief? Then you are also a stranger to faith.

Third, faith brought him into a holy war. Faith was pulling at one end and unbelief at the other. Do you also know that struggle and that pulling within? Do you know that cry of Paul, “O wretched man that I am,” since the things he wanted to do he found himself not doing, and those things he had no desire for he found himself doing (cf. Rom. 7:14–25)?

Fourth, faith made him hunger and thirst after more faith. It made the disciples cry out, “Lord, increase our faith.” Is that also your desire and your prayer?

Finally, faith brought him to Christ with prayers and with cries. That is the question which you must ask yourself above all. If there is true faith within, where does it bring me? Does it bring me to that only foundation, Jesus Christ? Does it make Christ more necessary, more suitable, more precious to me? Does it lead me away from Him or does it bring me closer to Him? True faith takes away every foundation of hope outside of Christ. Do we know that work of the Holy Spirit in our life to cut off all other “helps” and “hopes” but Him?

If we know something of these marks, then we may be encouraged, for the Lord will not break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax. True faith is saving faith be it small or great. True faith can never be taken away, since it is the Lord’s own work.

### *Hoping Believers*

Are you a *hoping believer*? God’s people are hoping believers. “By hope ye are saved.” They find out that their hope often goes in the reverse of what they imagine. They expect things to get better with their faith, to grow daily in faith—and now they have to find out that to grow in faith means also to become less and less about self. In means

that self-hope must be stripped away more thoroughly and more frequently so that divine-hope would be more valued and more precious. God's people remain "hoppers against hope" all their lives.

The dynamics of the believer's struggle with unbelief mirrors his struggle for sanctification. Growing in holiness so often involves going backward in order to progress forward: knowing more deeply our unbelief before being able to say afresh "I believe"; coming more and more to feel our unholiness as God helps us grow in holiness. As faith grows, holiness grows; but this growth is often attended by shocking realizations of how full we are of unbelief and unholiness. Growth of faith is attended by an increase of awareness of our own unbelief; growth in holiness is accompanied by an increasing sense of our unholiness. Growth in faith and growth in holiness are not genuine if not attended by new discoveries of our deep poverty of both.

Do we know something of this true faith? God's people find out that all true faith is from God, and all unbelief is always from themselves. The Lord is faithful. He gives them no cause to distrust Him. In spite of their unfaithfulness He will be faithful to His hoping people even unto the end, fulfilling their desires by bringing them one day to those mansions he has prepared for them—even for those who are so weak in themselves that they had to pray all their life long, "Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief," and yet who, in that glorious day, will be made perfect in holiness forever in Christ Jesus! Amen.



# Thankful Contentment

*Dr. Maarten Kuivenhoven*

Scripture: Philippians 4

*But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at the last your care of me hath flourished again; wherein ye were also careful, but ye lacked opportunity. Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.*

—Philippians 4:10–13

Thanksgiving Day is not only about being thankful for the blessings that God has showered us with. Thanksgiving Day is not only about getting together with family and friends and enjoying the bountiful harvest. These are all good things that God has created for us to enjoy. Ecclesiastes 2:24 backs up this truth, “There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God.” Our enjoyment of the things we have received must be done with God at the center. This gets us closer to the heart of thanksgiving and contentment. And that is something we need to cultivate in an age of plenty. Contentment and thankfulness are

twins that operate together in the heart of believers. Both thanksgiving and contentment face the reality of being crowded out in an age of plenty where the temptation is to forget the Giver of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17). Thanksgiving Day causes us to reflect not just on things, but on the attitude or condition of our heart because true thanksgiving arises from a heart of contentment. Thankfulness and contentment are not merely paying lip service to God, but they are acts and attitudes rooted in the gospel. Let's dig a little deeper into perhaps one of the most famous and misquoted passages in the New Testament that teaches us about the relationship between thanksgiving and contentment. Our theme is "Thankful Contentment": 1) The struggle for contentment; 2) The satisfaction of contentment.

### **The Struggle for Thankful Contentment**

The struggle for thankful contentment is real. It faces us every day in different ways. Paul writes of this struggle. You might ask where that struggle takes place for the apostle? I thought he wrote that he had learned to be content in whatever state he was in? And that's where the answer lies to the struggle. Notice that Paul says in verse 11, "For I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content." Listen carefully to what he says: "I have learned." Paul is not saying that he has arrived. He is not saying that he is perfect. What he is saying is that he has learned more fully to be thankfully content in every situation that he finds himself in. Learning begins with knowledge. Learning is application of knowledge. Learning is reminding ourselves of the truths that have a bearing on our lives and hearts. Learning is making mistakes and relearning. Learning is a lifelong process. Learning in Christ's school of contentment includes all of these things. And so when Paul says that he has learned



to be content, he is indicating that learning thankful contentment can be a struggle. Why can it be difficult to learn? Because we are people who naturally look to the circumstances and the things of life to find contentment. And this native disposition only becomes more difficult to fight against in the day and age in which we live.

This struggle, this learning, of thankful contentment, is a struggle *in a materialistic culture*. For most of us, thankful contentment is hard to come by because life in a materialistic culture always demands more. Even when we have more than enough, there's always an appeal to have more, to discard the old, to have the latest. This becomes the tune that we hear every day—in the grocery store, in the shopping mall, in online advertising, on highway billboards. Thankful contentment becomes a struggle in such an environment. Paul knew this too. He knew times of great abundance. In verse 12 he writes, “I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound...I am instructed [in all things] both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.” It is within the context of abundance that he learned contentment. And so, too, the good news is that thankful contentment in a materialistic culture is not out of reach. Thankful contentment is a very real possibility for believers in spite of the struggle against the fleshly desires that well up and tell us that what we think we need is not really a need after all, but simply an unfulfilled desire that is waiting to be satisfied.

It is a struggle *with a me-centered heart*. The struggle for thankful contentment is affected not only by forces and influences outside of us, but it is chiefly a heart issue, isn't it? Where does Paul's learning of contentment take place? It begins in the heart, “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.” The struggle for this thankful contentment takes place on the turf of our hearts. This affects how we think, and feel, and shop, and

trust, and believe, and learn. If our contentment is tied to outside circumstances, then our hearts will be yanked to and fro, always tossed about by our own desires, but when our hearts are steadied in the Lord, then we can grow into learning thankful contentment. Paul writes that he has learned to be content. The word for “content” is an interesting word and on the face of it, a puzzling word. It is a word that Paul borrows directly from Greek philosophical thought and it has the meaning of self-sufficiency. What Paul is doing is taking this word and turning it on its head and injecting it with gospel meaning as we will see later. By doing this, Paul is addressing the common human attitude that destroys thankful contentment—self-sufficiency. When our idea of contentment is driven by self-sufficiency and what I can give to myself, and how I can satisfy my own desires, this only heightens the struggle for true thankful contentment. And so it is over against the self-sufficiency of our own hearts that we must struggle for thankful contentment.

We struggle for contentment *in a miserable creation*. The struggle for contentment does not just come in the realm of material possessions, the stuff that we crave and covet. No, the struggle for contentment often comes in the midst of the trials of life—of life in a fallen, groaning creation. The struggle for contentment was real for Paul. Think of all that he suffered in this life: physical suffering, persecution, whipping, hunger, despairing of life, opposition from the Jews, imprisonment, just to name a few. Paul knew how to be abased and brought low through the circumstances of life. That’s where many of us find ourselves this morning, struggling for contentment in the circumstances of life. Some of us suffer with long-term debilitating illness and pain—how much more of this can I tolerate? Some of us struggle with our body image—why did God make me this way? Some of us do

struggle financially—why do we never have enough? Some of us face cancer and its effects—when will this be over? Some of us face fear in all its forms—will I ever know joy again? Some of us face crippling doubt—why can't I just rest in Jesus? It's in the midst of these things that we are being brought low and the struggle for contentment evidences itself.

But it is in the midst of all these things that believers are called to contentment. The learning can be difficult, yet there is an end goal to this learning—it is thankful contentment. Paul writes in verses 11–12, “Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.” Paul learned and was instructed. The struggle for contentment is one that diminishes as we learn to tie our contentment lessons to our circumstances and more to Christ. Christ is the hinge upon which the door of our heart swings between thankless discontent and thankful contentment. How do we get there though? That is still the burning question. We get to contentment in Christ by looking for Christ in all our circumstances. This is how Paul turns the whole Greek philosophical idea of self-sufficiency on its head. The sufficiency that a believer finds in themselves is not their own, but is actually Christ dwelling in us by His Spirit. That is what we see in our second thought.

### **The Satisfaction of Thankful Contentment**

How do we develop the satisfaction of thankful contentment? There are several ways that our text speaks to us in practically developing this mindset of thankful contentment.

*By rejoicing in Christ's provision.* As we have already stated, Paul's reason for contentment is not in his circumstances, but in Christ. And this teaches us that Christ will provide for us in every circumstance. This provision for contentment is found in every circumstance, "For I have learned in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content." Paul recognizes, and you and I must recognize, that contentment comes in spite of the circumstances of life. He is able to rest in Christ's provision, recognizing that the times of lack are from Christ. The times of abundance are from Christ. The fullness is from Christ. The hunger is from Christ. His sufficiency comes not from the circumstances that are brought by Christ's loving hand, but from Christ Himself in the midst of those circumstances.

The key to thankful contentment is not simply an embrace of the circumstances of life. Sometimes we reduce life to the cup half full/half empty principle. But that does not factor Christ into the equation. That expression says, "What will you make of life?" How will you be sufficient for yourself? No, our sufficiency ought to be in Christ. He is the One who brings these circumstances into our lives. He is Wisdom. He knows what we need, and this enables us to look beyond the circumstances to see that Christ is at work in our lives. This helps us cultivate thankful contentment. You don't need to be tossed about by the circumstances, because Christ is bringing it about. That knowledge alone should help us learn and helps us be satisfied. Our faith is not tied to what we have or don't have, or to wanting more of what we already have, but we know that Christ is doing these things for our good and His glory.

*By reveling in Christ's people.* One of the main reasons that Paul is writing his thank-you note at the end of the letter to the Philippians is because of their generosity towards him. This is clear from verse 10, where Paul recounts

how they wanted to send him a gift to sustain him in his ministry of the gospel: “I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at the last your care of me hath flourished again; wherein ye were also careful, but ye lacked opportunity.” Paul acknowledges their generosity. He also acknowledges that they lack the opportunity to get that gift to him. What is Paul doing here? He is not discounting their generosity. He is not refusing their gift as some would read this passage. He is revelling in Christ’s people, in His fellow believers. He commends them for “communicating with his affliction” for coming alongside him in his need. He takes delight in their love and care for him as we read in verse 18. Epaphroditus carried this gift to Paul and Paul calls it “an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, wellpleasing to God.” Some criticize Paul for seemingly downplaying this gift by speaking about his own contentment in plenty and want and thus showing that he doesn’t really need the gift. But we need to understand that, at this point, Paul is so full of Christ that he wants the Philippians to know the same contentment in Christ. He revels in their generosity, but points them to the true supply of all things in Christ when he says in verse 19, “But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.”

There’s a lesson in here for us. When we receive gifts from others, are we grateful only for the gift or for those who give it? You see, the principle of seeing God behind everything we receive is applied to the Christian life and Christ’s people. When another believer gives out of their generosity, is this something we are grateful for and seek to mutually encourage them with the overflowing provision of Christ? That’s what Paul does. He is thankful for Christ’s people and sees them as instruments of Christ’s kindness for his work in the gospel. But again he reminds them and us that our sufficiency is not found in Christ’s

people, but in Christ alone. That is the secret to Paul's thankful contentment. That should be the secret to ours.

*By resting in Christ's presence.* It is interesting how Paul begins his thank-you letter. He begins, "But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at the last your care of me hath flourished." You would think that Paul would say that he rejoiced in the Philippians [by saying], "I rejoiced to see your generosity." But no, it seems that the needle is stuck on this one song that Paul is content to sing, and that is Christ. He rejoices in the Lord. He sees behind the gift and the generosity of the Philippians and he rejoices in the Lord's provision and His presence. This was the one constant that Paul had learned in all the vicissitudes of life, all the ups and downs. The Lord was always there. The Lord was also in the generosity of the Philippians. He had his hand in that. So whether the Philippians were generous or not, Paul could always rejoice in the Lord greatly. He would remain unaffected in the inner man as it were by the circumstances around him. Isn't this what the writer to the Hebrews also writes about in chapter 13: "Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me" (vv. 5–6). This is what Paul is emphasizing as he writes to the Philippians. His hope is not in man. His hope is not in changing circumstances. His hope is not in lack. His hope is not in abundance. His hope is in Christ and thus he teaches us the key to thankful contentment—rejoicing in the Lord's presence with him in all these circumstances.

What a powerful encouragement for us to give thanks today. Rejoicing in the Lord's presence in all the ups and downs of life. All the changing circumstances in our lives are enough to cast us down, make us hopeless, take away

the eternal perspective. But here we have the secret to thankful contentment—rejoicing in the Lord’s presence with us. He’s never asleep at the wheel. He is the one constant in life. On the one hand, we can be dependent on people. This dependency is often valuable and helpful in the Christian life. But people will fail us at some point; Christ never will. What causes you to rejoice? The generosity of people, or the Lord’s presence? The gifts, or the Giver Himself? Christ is the constant amid life’s changing circumstances. This is the key to thankful contentment. When your circumstances change, remind yourself that Christ is the same today, yesterday, and forever. He will not forsake you. When mother and father forsake, the Lord will take me up.

*By running in Christ’s power.* Another ingredient to the secret of thankful contentment is Christ’s power. Paul concludes our text in verse 13 with this statement, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.” Another translation could read this way, “In all things, I am strong through Christ, the one empowering me.” What is Paul saying here? That he can do anything he wants because Christ is empowering him? Not really, even though this verse is often taken to mean that anyone can do anything they want—a sort of spiritual superman. Some quote this verse before an exam. Some quote this verse before a major life change. But what this verse is saying is that in whatever circumstances we face, we are strengthened by Christ because He is the one empowering us. So whether we are living in plenty, or in want, or whether we abound, or are abased, it is Christ who is empowering us. He is teaching us thankful contentment. This is how Paul takes the word self-sufficiency and turns it inside out in the words of one commentator. He shows that the engine of his life is not

running on his own power, but internally he is running on Christ's power. Christ is enough for Paul.

Is Christ enough for you? Is He strengthening you in every situation? Is He your contentment in the ups and downs of life? He is the key to thankful contentment. What is powering the engine of your life in terms of thankful contentment? Your own ability to affect your circumstances? Or is it Christ? As we learn more of this Christ-centered and Christ-empowered contentment, we utter with amazement, "Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift" of Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 9:15)! Amen.