

# Thankful Contentment

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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.