

October 4, 2009
Pentecost 18
Philippians Sermon Series

“The Secret of Contentment”

PHILIPPIANS 4:10-13

Rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹ I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³ I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

I am holding in my hands a small devotional book with the title, “You Can Live Above Your Circumstances.” In this book, the devotional writer Herman Gockel, tells the story of an old cobbler or shoemaker who once lived in a small seaside village in England. One day a customer came in, looked around at the crowded shelves and cramped working conditions with the smell of leather, dye and glue. He asked the man if he ever grew weary of working under such confining conditions. The old man smiled and said, “Come with me.” He opened the back door and sunlight streamed in. There in the back was a small garden resplendent with flowers, bushes, a small pond, and dozens of birds singing. He said, “Here is where I go to find contentment and peace when my work gets too tiring and exhausting.”

Wouldn't it be nice if you had such a place in your life where you could go to find greater peace and contentment? This morning I am privileged to remind you that such a place does exist in your life and it is very real. The special place is found in God's unfailing love for you, brought out to you by God himself on the pages of the Holy Bible. The Apostle Paul was a prisoner in Rome, but nothing could separate him from the love of God that he had in Christ Jesus his Lord.

No peace living under our circumstances

There will be no peace and contentment in your life and mine if we let the circumstances of life so dominate our every day existence that we fail to see the love that Jesus has for us. Paul was able to rise above his circumstances as he writes to his dear friends in Philippi, “I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me.” Paul does not just rejoice in the Lord, he greatly rejoices in the Lord.

How easy it would have been for him to focus on his circumstances and complain every day about living under house arrest in Rome, or complain about the food he was receiving, or complain about the heathen prison guards who were watching him around the clock, or even complain about not being able to travel around doing mission work. Instead, Paul

rejoices in the Lord. It was Paul who wrote to the Philippians, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." It was Paul who wrote to Christians in Rome, "Whether we live, we live unto the Lord, and whether we die, we die unto the Lord, whether we live therefore or die, we are the Lord's."

If we don't have much, it is possible to get totally taken up with how little we have so that we lose sight of how much we have in the Lord. Or if suddenly we are given a tremendous infusion of blessings, it is so easy to let these changing circumstances the focus of our life instead of the love we have come to know in Jesus. Listen to how Solomon looks back at his life when he was dragged around by the wealth and pleasure that came into his life. "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." Then he writes, "But that also proved meaningless." In the book of Proverbs, Solomon wrote, "Will you set your eyes on that which is not? For riches certainly make themselves wings; They fly away like an eagle toward heaven." It was Martin Luther who wrote, "When things come flowing in, boredom soon takes over, if they do not flow in, there is an insatiable desire to have then and there is no peace." The church father, Augustine, wrote, "Thou hast commanded Lord, that man who is not content with what he has, receive a restless heart as punishment."

In the pocket of a rich man who had just committed suicide was found \$30,000 and this note which read in part "I have discovered during my life that piles of money do not bring happiness. I am taking my life because I can no longer stand the solitude and boredom. When I was an ordinary workman in New York, I was happy. Now that I possess millions I am infinitely sad and prefer death."

Having you ever seen a puppet show where the puppets are controlled by strings? When we live under our circumstances, we will never reach a high level of contentment and peace, because our changing circumstances always control our lives. Life is always a series of ups and downs. An unexpected bonus and our spirits soar, a notice that our job may be eliminated because of downsizing and we go into a tailspin. Ask someone how they feel, and you may hear the response, "Not too bad considering the circumstances."

It is not just money or no money, health or no health that can cause us discontent. We suffer some of our lowest moments in life when we don't have enough people around us who love us and care about us. Paul knew what it was like to be forgotten by people. He also knew how to rejoice when people were there for him. He rejoiced that the people in Philippi had renewed their concern for him when they found out how lonely he was. People will always disappoint us in this life, because their love and kindness are far from being perfect. See the bumper sticker behind the truck that reads, "The more I work with people, the more I want to be home with my dog." The man or woman you married does not always live up to your hopes and dreams. The church of which you are a member may not always give you the bond of closeness which you crave. Even the children you raised with such zeal do not turn out the way you had planned when you held them in your arms as a baby and dreamed of their future. How true are the words of the Psalmist David, "The LORD is my light and my salvation-- whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life-- of whom shall I be afraid?" Then he goes on to say, "Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me."

Know peace living above our circumstances

While you will have no lasting peace living under your circumstances, you can know lasting peace living above your circumstances. Paul knew this peace and contentment in the love that Jesus had for him. He writes, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." He also wrote, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

Few Christians have ever lived on a bigger roller coaster ride than Paul did. He wrote to the Christians in Corinth, "I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea, and in danger from false brothers..." There were times when Paul was well fed by Christians who cared for him. Other times, he went to bed without a meal in his stomach. With all these dangers, he was given strength to be content no matter what the situation was.

What was the secret of his contentment? It was Christ who gave him the strength to see the blessings he had in Christ were far superior to any problems which might be coming his way. Paul's secret was not that of the Stoic philosophers of his day and our day who tell us "We need to learn to accept the good with bad and rise above our problems by sheer force of will." Paul's secret was not that of so-called "Positive Thinkers" who call us on us to see the cup half full rather than half empty. His contentment did not come from seeing a silver lining in the dark clouds. The secret was the strength Christ gave him to see that in Christ Jesus Savior is cup of blessings was not half empty or half full but always overflowing.

I have a friend, a pastor in the ministry, who likes to collect autographs of famous people. At a conference a number of years ago, he heard that Evander Holyfield, the famous boxer, was in the city. After the first day of conference, he said that he was going to the hotel to get Evander Holyfield's autograph. I laughed because I knew it was impossible. That night he came back with picture of the famous boxer with the words written on it, "God's blessings- Philippians 4:13." Philippians 4:13? Let's read that again, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." Remember the large bulging muscles of Evander Holyfield. Some might say, "The Lord sure gave him strength." I know there are times in your life that you have simply cried out for help to the Lord with these words, "Lord, give me strength!" When my kids need some counseling from dear old dad, I tell them to remember my very personal prayer. "Lord, give me the strength of ten men." I really have prayed that prayer often. So often we simply cry out to the Lord for strength and help.

What is the context of these famous words of Paul, "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength?" It is in the context of the tough job of finding peace and contentment in this life. You, see my dear Christian the Lord Jesus used his strength to save us from eternal death and punishment. He also uses his strength to keep reminding us of what he has done for us.

Let me remind you of how much Jesus has loved you with a simple story of a young man who was practicing his dance moves in his bedroom and accidentally kicked a large hole in the wall. He thought of trying to repair it before his parents came home, but then he knew he would probably even make it worse. He told his dad that night, and together they were able to repair the hole, put on new spackle, sand it down, and repaint it. You and I have put terrible holes in our relationship to God. Our feeble attempts to patch things up only make it worse. God our Father removed those holes of sin through the strength and power of Jesus his Son. The Jesus who declared you perfect in God's sight through his death, life and resurrection, is the same Jesus who uses his power and strength to show you how much he has loved you. That allows you to live above your circumstances and know a peace this world cannot give. That's your special place that you go to when life overwhelms you as it often will. That's the secret of contentment. As we sang in our opening hymn:

Rejoice, my heart, be glad and sing;

A cheerful trust maintain,

For God, the source of ev'rything,

Your treasure shall remain.