

# The Secret of Contentment

Pastor Chris Baker // 08.19.18 // Centralia FBC

## Introduction

Children who are in kindergarten through the third grade, you are dismissed to go to children's church. While they're moving toward the back doors I want to share with you that we have a prayer guide for our schools in the foyer that will be available to you as you leave today. This guide walks you through prayers for students, parents, and staff and I want to encourage you to bathe these three groups of people in your prayers over the next several weeks.

We're going to start off with the congregational participation portion of the message this morning. Who can tell me what I have here? (a \$1 bill) It is a dollar bill, but that's not what I want you to think of it as this morning. And by the way, this is not a sermon about money. Some of you can relax now. We will talk about money, but we'll do it when the text talks about money and if you read the Bible long you'll realize that it does so quite frequently. That's an important topic, but not what is in view in this morning's text.

But I'm holding a dollar not because I want to talk about money, but because I want to talk about what this represents for us. This dollar is enough. It's not enough for a lot. . . in fact, it's enough for much less than it used to be. But it's enough for a sausage mcmuffin. It's enough for a can of coke or a cup of coffee.

But in 1907 this dollar would have bought you a new pair of patent leather shoes. In 1920 it was good for 5 pounds of sugar. By 1950, one dollar was the price of a Mr. Potato Head and in 1960 it would have gotten you two tickets to the movie theatre. In 1990 on average it would have both you a gallon of milk.<sup>1</sup> Today, it takes this dollar is only enough to download *Respect* by Aretha Franklin on iTunes. That's actually a pretty good investment.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.visualcapitalist.com/buying-power-us-dollar-century/](http://www.visualcapitalist.com/buying-power-us-dollar-century/)

A dollar isn't much to most of us. Since we're here we should pause and recognize, though, that we live in a world where over 1 billion people live on less than this every day.<sup>2</sup>

We all live on much more than this daily. But many of us believe that there's a number out there. And if we collect enough of this, then we will be able to live content lives. Paul writes in our text today that he has learned the secret of being content. Spoiler alert: he doesn't make any reference to how much money he had to make to discover that secret.

We wouldn't likely articulate it in a place like church, but most of us somewhere in the back of our mind think that if we could just get a little more: a bigger bank account, a bigger house, a nicer car, a better body, a better husband or wife, a more prestigious job—if we could just get that one thing then the happiness, the contentment, that we've been striving for would finally be ours.

We work hard, we achieve the American Dream, and it produces happiness. It's written right into the Declaration of Independence. We have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The only problem is we aren't catching it. I ventured into Wal-Mart with several hundred other Americans this week and I didn't walk out thinking they'd found their happiness.

Writing for *Quartz Magazine* in 2016 Ruth Whippman found that:

***Despite all of the effort and money they are pumping into the endeavor, Americans consistently rank as some of the least happy people in the developed world. One recent survey even placed the day-to-day happiness of the American people two places behind the citizens of Rwanda. What's more, according to the World Health Organization, Americans are far and away the most anxious people on the planet, with nearly a third of people in this country likely to suffer from an anxiety disorder in their lifetime.***<sup>3</sup>

By-and-large we have failed to learn the secret of contentment. I think—if you'll hear them today—Paul's words in this text will be intensely practical for you as you live your day-to-day life. Americans may not be content, but remember if you belong to Christ you're a citizen of a different Kingdom.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dosomething.org/us/facts/11-facts-about-global-poverty>

<sup>3</sup> <https://qz.com/803055/america-the-anxious-americans-are-spending-a-fortune-on-finding-happiness-and-becoming-less-happy-in-the-process/>

What we'll find today as we open Philippians 4:10-13 together is that as disciples of Jesus Christ we can and should strive for a supernatural contentment that is manifested in an inner peace and outward joy despite no matter our circumstances. Let me define contentment for us so that we are clear on what we are talking about going forward. ***Contentment is a heart attitude that joyfully submits to and delights in God's sovereignty over all our circumstances.***

I hope that sounds clear, and I hope that sounds hard. In fact I believe this to be impossible without the aid of the Holy Spirit and I think Paul would agree. Let's read our text together:

***10 I rejoiced in the Lord greatly because once again you renewed your care for me. You were, in fact, concerned about me but lacked the opportunity to show it. 11 I don't say this out of need, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I find myself. 12 I know both how to make do with little, and I know how to make do with a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content—whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need. 13 I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me.***

From these four verses we learn five truths about contentment. We'll take a few moments to examine each of them for the remainder of our time together today, but here they are for those of you who are note-takers.

***Contentment is a by-product of joy (v.10)***

***Contentment is not an optional pursuit (v.11)***

***Contentment is learned (v.11)***

***Contentment is not based on circumstances (v.12)***

***and finally;***

***Contentment only comes from Christ (v.13)***

We'll spend some time on that last truth shortly but I since it is drawn from verse 13 I want to point out that this verse is used out of context as much as any verse in the entire Bible.

Athletes write it on their shoes, we hang it up in our houses, and more dangerously prosperity preachers turn it into a false promise of achievement.

This is not a verse about climbing to new heights or embracing your destiny or having your wildest dreams fulfilled. If it is, then Paul was a lunatic. This was written by a man who was effectively a death row inmate who had no likelihood of ever tasting freedom again. And it was written within the context of him saying that he's rejoicing in his circumstances. It's not about being able to achieve anything you dream of because you have Christ on your side. If you decide you want to fly and climb to the roof of the church building and jump off shouting "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength" then you're going to be in for a very abrupt realization that this verse doesn't mean that. That's an absurd example but that's the way many people misuse this verse.

To understand what it really means we need to see it in its context. So let's start by first seeing that **contentment is a by-product of joy.**

Paul starts verse 10 by saying that he rejoiced because of the Philippian church's care for him. Remember, what we are reading here is a letter that Paul would have sent to back to the church in response to sending a care package with Epaphroditus to aid Paul while he was held in captivity in Rome. They took the ideas of Christian unity and community seriously at Philippi. Paul is thankful for that, but even if they hadn't done so he still would have been joyful and content.

Look at the last half of verse 10 on into verse 11: You were, in fact, concerned about me but lacked the opportunity to show it. I don't say this out of need, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I find myself.

As Paul was being shuffled between governors as a prisoner and then traveling to Rome—a process that literally took years—the Philippians likely would not have been able to find Paul to send him a care package even if they wanted to. Now that they have, he's thankful and his joy is enhanced by their friendship, but not dependent on it.

Joy is a supernatural gift from the Holy Spirit that is to be present in the life of every believer. The joy of our salvation overcomes any circumstances the world can throw at us. We were separated from God because of our sin, but God sent His son to redeem us through living a perfect life, dying a substitutionary death, and then resurrecting Him and restoring Him to His rightful place in glory. One day, we will experience that glory for all eternity because God has saved us by grace through faith and because of that we can have joy. And because Paul

has the joy of knowing Christ, he can be content whether or not the Philippians express their care for him. He is content regardless of his circumstances.

We need to see that this type of contentment is not something that disciples are free to just take or leave. **Contentment is not optional** for those of us who belong to Christ.

Paul doesn't say I've learned the secret of contentment and it's not very good—let's move on to something else.

He lays it out for them here as a challenge. We are to be a people who strive for contentment. I recognize that this could be discouraging to many of us because this is a hard command. But I think our third truth should provide some encouragement.

**Contentment is learned.** Paul didn't just role out of bed one morning and experience contentment. He says twice in these four verses that he has learned contentment. Contentment is not natural for us as sinful beings, but discontentment is.

It's one of the root causes of the very first sin. Adam and Eve had every blessing imaginable in the garden, but they weren't content with God's sovereignty over them. He said in Genesis 2 You are free to eat from any tree of the garden but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or you will die. Were they content to live as God said? No! And neither are we, by default.

Paul had to learn contentment and so do we. And do you know what? Many of you have already taken the most important step in the process of learning contentment. That's recognizing you don't have it. If you are here and you know that you have a deep discontentment present in your life today then you have already made a huge step in learning how to be content. You see, once we understand we have to learn contentment and admit that we aren't there yet it will lead us to realize that our **contentment is not based on our circumstances.**

Pursuing money or possessions or power is never enough because you're always going to be left empty. You'll never have all of those things and they will continually leave you wanting more.

Your circumstances are not a reflection of God’s feelings about you. The idea that the better you are the more God will bless you physically and materially is a false gospel. If that were true then, based on his circumstances God must have hated Paul. But we know that is not true.

This is the perversion taught by the prosperity gospel—a dangerous heresy that is taught all over the world that has led millions astray. The teaching, which goes by a number of names—health and wealth gospel or the Word of Faith movement just to name a couple—goes like this: God rewards your faith with increases in health and/or wealth on this side of eternity.

One scholar explains it this way:

***In the forefront is the doctrine of the assurance of “divine” physical health and prosperity through faith. In short, this means that “health and wealth” are the automatic divine right of all Bible-believing Christians and may be procreated by faith as part of the package of salvation, since the Atonement of Christ includes not just the removal of sin, but also the removal of sickness and poverty.<sup>4</sup>***

Your circumstances are not a reflection of God’s happiness with you. So your contentment cannot be anchored in your circumstances.

Instead, they must be anchored in Christ because true, lasting, **supernatural contentment only comes from Christ.**

Because of our relationship with Jesus, we don’t ultimately care if life plays out like a Disney movie. Because of our relationship with Jesus, success, wealth, and power are ultimately meaningless. Because of our relationship with Jesus, we are able to be content no matter what God places in our path.

That’s what Paul means when he writes I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me. He meant I am able to endure whatever circumstances life throws at me because I have found a deep and lasting contentment. All my needs have been satisfied in the finished work of Jesus Christ on my behalf.

This type of contentment is depicted beautifully by David in Psalm 131:

***Lord, my heart is not proud;  
my eyes are not haughty.  
I do not get involved with things  
too great or too wondrous for me.  
2 Instead, I have calmed and quieted my soul  
like a weaned child with its mother;  
my soul is like a weaned child.  
3 Israel, put your hope in the Lord,  
both now and forever.***

When you're alone is your soul calm and quiet? Or do you find yourself troubled? When we think about how to apply these verses, we need to be focused on where our contentment comes from.

If for you, contentment looks like Jesus plus anything: Jesus plus the approval of my family and friends, Jesus plus success in my job, Jesus plus a spouse, Jesus plus a new car, Jesus plus attention—then you'll never be content.

What's enough? Christ. Because it is only through Christ that we can be content and we can only be content because He gives us the strength to be content. At the end of your days are going to be like the subject of a poem written by 14-year old Jason Lehman to Dear Abby back in 1988? It's a profound piece that I fear will hit close to home for many of us:

***It was spring, but it was summer I wanted,  
The warm days, and the great outdoors.  
It was summer, but it was fall I wanted,  
The colorful leaves, and the cool, dry air.  
It was fall, but it was winter I wanted,  
The beautiful snow, and the joy of the holiday season.  
It was winter, but it was spring I wanted,  
The warmth and the blossoming of nature.  
I was a child, but it was adulthood I wanted,  
The freedom and respect.  
I was 20, but it was 30 I wanted,  
To be mature, and sophisticated.  
I was middle-aged, but it was 20 I wanted,***

***The youth and the free spirit.***

***I was retired, but it was middle-age I wanted,***

***The presence of mind without limitations.***

***My life was over, and I never got what I wanted.<sup>5</sup>***

If Jesus isn't enough, you run the risk of finishing this life and never getting what you want. If all you want is Christ, you can have all that you want today.

Let's turn our eyes toward application really quickly before we close. What does this mean for the way that you go about your Monday?

First, if this is an area where you struggle then you need to acknowledge that struggle. We said earlier that recognizing you don't have contentment is the first step toward gaining it. Admit your discontent. Admit it to God, and repent. Then admit it to someone who cares about you and ask them to partner with you in praying over this.

Second, be thankful. Thankfulness is the antidote for discontent. Realize that what God has already done for you if you belong to Christ is much more than anything all the accomplishments in this world could ever bring. Live in that reality. That's much better than the next iPhone.

Lastly, work hard. That might sound antithetical when we are talking about contentment. But don't hear this message and think God's Word tells us to just sit back and do nothing because we are saved. Just as the gospel should shape our outlook, the gospel should shape the things we are working toward. If you are working hard simply to have more stuff or more status then that work is ultimately meaningless. But if you are content with your circumstances then you have freedom to invest yourself (time, talent, and treasure) in the areas that matter for eternity.

Let's pray.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=365&dat=19890214&id=GfoJAAAAIBAJ&sjid=rT8DAAAAIBAJ&pg=5666,972814>