



## The Secret of Contentment – Part 1

### We Could All Use Some Good News Series

All week long I've been studying this text that we're about to dive into and I have been waiting for this moment, because this word we're about to look at is so good and has such rich application for our lives, especially right now. Today I want to show you a secret. So those of you who are kids, or if you can remember being a kid, think of your friend saying, "I have a secret to tell you!" You listen up, right? You want to know what nobody else knows.

Today, I have a secret to tell you—something most people don't know. The reason I'm using the word secret is because that's the word God uses in what we're about to read. This not me saying, or your friend saying, "I have a secret to tell you." This is the God of the universe saying to you and to me, "I have a secret to tell you, something not everybody else knows." So when God is telling you a secret, you stop whatever you're doing and listen. Let's stop whatever we're doing, whatever else we may be thinking about in our lives right now, and let's listen to the secret.

Let's read this chapter we've been studying and memorizing. We're going to say it out loud together like we've been doing every week. We'll go from Philippians 4:1 to verse 13. Let's say it together, in this room or our homes, wherever we are and whomever we're with. Let's hear the Word of God, and specifically when we get to the end, let's hear the secret.

*<sup>1</sup> Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.*

*<sup>2</sup> I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. <sup>3</sup> Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.*

*<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. <sup>5</sup> Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; <sup>6</sup> do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

*<sup>8</sup> Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. <sup>9</sup> What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.*

*<sup>10</sup> I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. <sup>11</sup> Not that I am*

*speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. <sup>12</sup> I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. <sup>13</sup> I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*

All right, did you see it there at the end of this passage? He says, “*I have learned the secret...*” There it is. God says, “Here’s the secret of being content.” There’s no way we can cover all this in one week, so we’re going to have two parts here. We would be really rushing over good stuff if we tried to do it all today, so I’m going to totally leave you hanging at the end.

Today, we’re going to see what this secret is. What contentment is. Then next week, Lord willing, we’re going to learn how to get it. That’s what Paul is saying here in the Bible: “I have learned to be content. I know how. In any and every circumstance, I have learned and I can do this.” Next week we’ll ask the question, “How can we learn this? How can we know and how do this secret to experience contentment in our lives?”

Now, before we dive into Part One on the secret of contentment, I want to at least mention one significant side note from verse ten. This is bonus content here, in addition to the secret of contentment. We have the main meal coming, but this is like a really juicy appetizer, on the house. Paul writes in verse ten, “*I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity.*” Remember, Paul, who is writing the book of Philippians under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is in prison as he’s penning these words. He’s in prison for proclaiming the gospel.

Now, for those of you who are watching who are not yet Christians, the gospel is the good news of God’s love for the world in Jesus. The Bible teaches that all of us have sinned against God. We have all turned from God’s ways to our own ways. As a result of our sin, we are separated from God and deserve eternal judgment before God when we die. But the good news is that God loves us and has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus lived a perfect life with no sin, then chose to die on a cross to pay the penalty of death for your sin and my sin. That means anyone, anywhere, who turns from their sin and themselves—their own ways—trusting in Jesus to save them from their sin can have eternal life with God starting right now. This is the gospel.

For those of you who are watching from home or other places, I invite you to text JESUS to 571-581-6297, if you want to know more about what it means to have eternal life through Jesus. I pray that many people would text to that number today. If you don’t know Jesus, don’t wait another second.

The point to what we’re reading, though, is that Paul was proclaiming this gospel in the first century and was thrown into a Roman prison because of it. In Roman prisons, the prisoners were dependent on outside support for everything they needed. They needed others to bring them food, clothing or anything else they would need.

Here in verse ten, Paul says he rejoices in the Lord because they had revived their concern for him. You jump down to Philippians 4:18 where he says, *“I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.”* The Christians in Philippi had sent Paul gifts to support him in prison. Now this is the bonus content here. In the language Paul uses, I want you to see two critical ingredients for Christian generosity. We’ll hit these really quickly, then I’ll show you why this bonus content is really helpful, particularly in light of all that’s going on around us right now.

### **Christian generosity starts with an open heart.**

The first ingredient for Christian generosity is an open heart. Twice in Philippians 4:10, Paul uses the word “concern” to say how grateful he is. *“You have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me.”* I find it interesting that the same word translated “concern” in Philippians 4 is also in Philippians 1:7, when Paul wrote, *“It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart.”* That word “feel” is actually the same word that’s translated “concern” in Philippians 4:10.

Basically Paul is saying to these Philippians Christians, “You have been on my heart and now it’s encouraging to know I am on your heart. You have revived your concern for me.” Christian generosity involves hearts that are open to see people who are in need around you—or maybe people who are in need who are far from you, as Paul was far from these Philippian Christians.

### **Christian generosity also involves open hands.**

Christian generosity starts with an open heart, but that’s not where it stops. Christian generosity also involves open hands. Christian generosity involves both. Paul says, *“You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity.”* They had revived their concern for him *“at length.”* It had been a while since they had shown this concern for Paul. We don’t know why, but they didn’t have opportunity in the past. Whatever had changed, they now have opportunity, which leads to the second part of Christian generosity: open hands. Now they are able to help Paul in ways they were not able to help before.

Why is this so important? In the middle of a pandemic, God is calling us to be generous people, with open hearts and open hands, to the extent we have opportunity. To the extent you or I have opportunity, God is calling us in Philippians 4:10 to be generous—individually, in our families, as a church family—and not to hoard the resources we have. Rather, we should have open hearts that lead to open hands.

Obviously, some of you are being furloughed or laid off during this time. You may have an open heart, but you may not have opportunity like you’ve had in the past. That’s okay. That’s part of what Philippians 4:10 is saying. But to the extent we do have opportunity, brothers and sisters, let’s be a people of open hearts and open hands.

One of the reasons I didn't want to skip over this is because I want to pause and praise God for this kind of generosity in our church over the last five months in the middle of a pandemic. By God's grace, you have continued to give even in the middle of all the challenges going on. As a result of your giving, there are many people who have been able to rejoice in the Lord greatly, because of your open hearts and open hands.

From the very first week of this shut-down, we as a church said, "We are not going to go into hiding during this time. We're going to go into our communities most hard hit by economic challenges with physical resources, namely food, along with the gospel. Over the last five months, because of your generosity, we have spent about \$1.5 million delivering about three million pounds of food to vulnerable communities across our city with the gospel.

I rejoice greatly in the Lord to see your open hearts and your open hands. So as long as we have opportunity, let's continue to give to the glory of our God, with hearts for people right around us and far from us.

That then leads into verse 11, where Paul quickly makes a clarification about what he just said in verse ten: "*Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.*" This is really interesting. Paul is very grateful for their gift, but it's not the gift that makes him content. He wants to make sure it's really, really clear that what leads to this secret he's learned in not getting more stuff.

We're starting to learn what his secret of contentment is. We have to know what it is before we can know how to get it—how to learn about it, have it, know it and do it. Let's look at a definition of contentment. I'm going to let you in on the secret right now, then I want to show it to you in God's Word. Here it is.

**Contentment is the sweet inward state of perpetual joy, peace, gentleness and strength in every moment, regardless of our circumstances.**

According to the Bible, contentment is the sweet inward state of perpetual joy, peace, gentleness and strength in every moment, regardless of our circumstances. Think about that and ask yourself, "Do I want that?" I think that's a pretty good secret, don't you?

- It's a sweet inward state. It's inside of you.
- It's perpetual, never-ending and constant.
- It's joy, peace, gentleness and strength combined.
- It's for in every single moment of your life, regardless of what happens around you or to you.
- It's for anyone, anywhere.

Now you're thinking, "No way. There's no way that's real. There's no way that is possible." That's kind of the way secrets work, right? Somebody whispers something in your ear and you're like, "No. No way." They're like, "Yeah, it's true." That's what God is saying right now. We're reading this and thinking, "No way." But He is saying, "Yes, this is true. This is possible for you on this earth."

Paul just said that. He actually said, "I have it. I have this contentment. I know this. I can do this. I'm doing this in prison, having this state of perpetual joy, peace, gentleness and strength." I use these words because that's the whole context of Philippians 4 and what we've been reading, studying and memorizing together. Going back to Philippians 4:4: "*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.*" This is about joy. Paul is talking about perpetual constant, never-ending joy.

Then he says in verse five, "*Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.*" Mike showed us how reasonableness is gentleness, even in the face of injustice like Paul is facing. So you have this perpetual joy, gentleness and peace. We've talked about this in contrast to anxiety over the last couple weeks from verses six and seven: "*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*"

This is what Philippians 4 is all about: joy, gentleness and peace. We know Paul hasn't moved on from these things when he starts talking about contentment in verse 11, because Paul is still using the same words in verse nine where he says, "*The God of peace will be with you.*" We looked at that last week. Then in verse ten he says, "*I rejoiced in the Lord.*" That's the same exact phrase he used in verse four. So clearly Paul is still talking about peace and joy. The only thing different now is that he adds this in verse 13: "*I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*" He adds strength to the summary of the secret of contentment. We'll get to that more next week in one of the most misquoted verses in the Bible.

So he has been talking about joy in the Lord, peace from the Lord, gentleness from the Lord; now he adds strength in the Lord. This is not the only time he talks this way. In Ephesians 6:10 we read, "*Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.*" In 1 Timothy 1:12 he says, "*I thank him who has given me strength.*" Who has done it? "*Christ Jesus our Lord.*" In 2 Timothy 2:1 he tells Timothy, "*You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus.*" Moving to 2 Timothy 4:17, we read, "*The Lord stood by me and strengthened me.*"

The Bible is talking about a sweet inward state of perpetual joy, peace, gentleness and strength. I use the words "sweet inward state" because, according to God, contentment comes from inside, not outside of us. That's what Paul really wants to clarify here in response to their gift. He wants them to know he's grateful for their generosity. At the same time, he wants to be clear: "I am not content because of your gift; I was content without your gift." He says, "*I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.*"

Then he starts to get specific. He says, "*I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and*

*need.*” The point is, “My contentment is not dependent on any one of those things.” Did you see the repetition? “*In whatever situation I am in...*” “*In any and every circumstance...*” Then he lists the entire spectrum. “When I’m low or when I’m abounding. When I’m facing plenty or hunger. When I have abundance or need.” Paul is saying, “My joy, peace, gentleness and strength are not dependent on any of those things.” See it?

Another way to put this is this that contentment is completely free from dependence on circumstances. This is so significant, because this is so different than the way we naturally think about contentment. Let’s just be honest with each other. When things around us are going wonderfully, we are content people. But when things are going miserably, we are miserable people, because our contentment so often hinges on and revolves around our circumstances. But that’s not actually contentment.

Picture a baby crying because they’re hungry or they need you to change them. You feed them or change them and they stop crying. Now they’re content. Why? Because their circumstances changed. Picture a child complaining because they want something. Then you give in, give it to them and they stop complaining. Now they’re content. Why? Because their circumstances changed.

That’s the way we think about contentment. If only our circumstances would change, then we would be content. If things would get better, we would be content. But that’s not contentment. Contentment is completely free from any dependence on circumstances. Paul is saying, “When I’m brought low or abounding, I’m content. When I’m facing plenty or hunger, I’m content. When I’m facing abundance or need, I’m content. My contentment is completely free from dependence on circumstances.”

Maybe it would help to pause here and make this personal to our lives right now. The Bible is talking here about a contentment that does not hinge on how long this pandemic lasts. If it lasts another month or another year or another five years, we can be content.

The Bible is talking about a contentment that is not dependent on our economy. If our economy rebounds, we will be content. If our economy tanks, we will be content.

The Bible is talking here about a contentment that is not dependent on health. If you’re healthy, you are content. And if you’re sick with severe disease—from COVID to cancer or anything in between—you are content.

The Bible is talking here about a contentment regardless of circumstances this fall. Virtual school the whole year, in-person school, some combination? It doesn’t matter. You’re content. If you have a job, you’re content. If you don’t have a job, you’re content. If adoptions open back up, you’re content. If adoptions stay closed indefinitely, you’re content.

The Bible is talking about a contentment here regardless of circumstances in life. If you’re single, you’re content. If you’re married, you’re content. If you have kids, you’re content. If you don’t have kids, you’re content. If you get into this school or you get that promotion, you are content. If you don’t get either, you are content. If you’re in prison or you’re free, it doesn’t matter because you’re content.

Do you see how revolutionary this is? Now, I want to be really clear. This is not to say that all these things I just mentioned are unimportant or that they don't affect our lives. That's part of the point. All of these things do affect our lives. This is not about pretending everything is perfect in life when it's not. So it's not about ignoring hurt, heartache, pain, disappointment or grief that is real. This is not about denying struggles and suffering in this world. Don't forget, Paul is languishing in prison as he's writing this. In 1 Corinthians 11:23-27 he describes how he had experienced countless beatings and had often been near death:

*Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.*

Needless to say, the Bible is not talking here about a superficial, Pollyanna approach to life that pretends like everything is easy when it's not. That's the beauty of this secret. There is a way to have perpetual joy, peace, gentleness and strength in the middle of the pain, in the middle of the hurt, in the middle of the heartache, in the middle of the grief, in the middle of the disappointment. There is a contentment to be found that is completely free from dependence on circumstances. Don't you want this? Don't you want an inward state of perpetual joy, gentleness, peace and strength in whatever situation you're in?

Now, the danger here is you might start to think, "Let me make sure I get this straight. Contentment is completely free from dependence on circumstances, okay. Contentment comes from inside, not outside of us. So that means I need to look inside myself and muster up this contentment on my own." This is why people resort to the self-help power of "positive thinking" we mentioned a couple weeks ago. People start to think that the secret is self-talk, self-esteem, self-confidence, self-worth, self-focus or self-sufficiency. But please hear loud and clear: that is not contentment. That is conceit. Self-focus in any way is pride. This is one of the things that is so fascinating about this passage. You've got to see this, because now we're getting into the heart of the secret.

In Philippians 4:11, when Paul says, "*I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content,*" the Greek word for content is *autarkas*. Why am I telling you this? This word is basically a combination of two words in the original language. The first word is *auta*, from which we would get "auto" as in autonomous. It's about the self. The second part, *arkas*, which can be summarized as a word that means sufficiency. The picture of this word is self-sufficiency. *Autarkas* is a word Greek philosophers would have used to describe self-sufficiency.

So why is the Bible using that word right there? The Bible clearly teaches only God is ultimately self-sufficient, right? Think about it. No one and nothing in this world are ultimately self-sufficient. You

are not self-sufficient. I am not self-sufficient. The only reason we have breath in our lungs right now is because God has put it there. The only reason your heart is beating at this moment is because God is giving it rhythm. As soon as He stops, so do you.

You and I are dependent on food, water and so many things that ultimately God alone can provide, and everything else in creation is the same way. We are all dependent on God, our Creator. Only He is ultimately self-sufficient. God does not need us to survive; we need Him to survive. This is actually crystal clear in the very next chapter of the Bible. Right after Philippians 4, Colossians 1 tells us that Jesus, as God, is the self-sufficient Creator who holds all things together. Hang with me here, because now we're starting to get to the heart of the secret. Listen to Colossians 1:15-17. Talking about Jesus, the Bible says:

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*

Did you hear that? Jesus is the only self-sufficient being in the universe. He is the image of the invisible God and by Him all things were created, including you and me. We're a part of "all things." We have been created through Him and for Him, therefore in Him we hold together. In other words, we are not self-sufficient. We are totally dependent on Jesus—every single one of us. Even if you hate Jesus right now, your very breath comes from the One you hate. None of us is self-sufficient.

So why then would Paul—the same guy who writes Colossians 1:17 about the self-sufficiency of Christ alone and how we're all dependent on Him—say in Philippians 4:11, "I have learned the secret to being content, to being self-sufficient"? Don't miss this. If you only read verse 11, you're thinking, "Paul, what in the world, bro? The key to perpetual joy, peace, gentleness and strength is self-sufficiency? Really?" This goes against everything the Bible says. This goes against that which is true in the universe.

But keep reading. Paul says, "In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret." And what's the secret? Verse 13: "I can do all things by myself"? No. "I can do all things through myself"? No. "I can do all things through my strength or my efforts to muster up joy, peace and gentleness"? No. *"I can do all things through him who strengthens me."* I'm not 100% sure why the word "through" is translated that way here. Most often in the Bible, this word is translated "in." "I can do all things in him." And Who is the "him"? The "him" is the self-sufficient Creator of all—Christ—Who lives in me.

Ha! The One Who is before all things, in Whom all things hold together—He is dwelling in me. Which means that in any and every circumstance, in whatever situation, guess what I have living in me? I have the joy of Jesus dwelling in me. In any circumstance, whatever situation, I have the peace of Jesus living inside of me. I have the gentleness of Jesus living inside of me. In whatever situation, whatever circumstance, I have the strength of the Creator of the universe inside of me.

No circumstance can take that away from me. Single or married, kids or no kids, adoption or no adoption, school or no school, job or no job, health or sickness, pandemic or no pandemic—I have Christ in me, therefore I am content. See it? Contentment does not come from independence; contentment comes from total dependence on Christ. This is the secret to an inward state of perpetual joy, peace, gentleness and strength in every moment, regardless of your circumstances. Jesus is the secret—Christ in you.

This makes sense. Go back to the gospel. The core of our sin is asserting independence from God, thinking, “I can do this apart from You. I don’t need You. My ways are better than Your ways. Just leave me alone.” That’s sin and that’s what separates us from God forever, until we realize that God is perpetual joy and God is perpetual peace and gentleness and strength. These things are only found in God.

So we come back to how? By God’s grace through Jesus, through what Jesus has done on the cross for you and for me. Through faith in Him we are reconciled to God, then in Him we experience His perpetual joy, peace, gentleness and strength. We can have unending joy, all-surpassing peace, unexplainable gentleness and supernatural strength in a way that transcends and supersedes any and every circumstance in this world. Do you want that? Do you want contentment in your life that starts with looking to Jesus as your life? If you want contentment in your life, you must look to Jesus as your life.

This is where I so want to jump into Part Two. How do we do this? What does it mean? But we don’t have time, so you’re going to have to come back next week for that. This is going to go to a whole other level. We’re going to see how to get and live this secret.

As we look forward to next week, not one of us is guaranteed to be alive next week. That’s just reality. So I want to ask every single person listening today, right now in this moment, do you know Jesus as your life? Not just that you know some truths about Jesus, not even just that you believe some truths about Jesus. The demons believe truths about Jesus. Do you know Jesus as your life? Have you expressed dependence upon Him for your life? Have you trusted Him with your life? Have you turned from your self, your sin, your ways and trusted in Jesus as Savior of your life, as Lord of your life? If not, I want to urge you to do that today, because this is where contentment starts.

Please bow your heads with me, here in this room or wherever you might be. Let’s bow our heads, then just between you and God, is Jesus your life? If your answer to that question is not a resounding yes, then I invite you to pray right now to God, your Creator, saying, “God, I know I have asserted my independence from You. I have turned from You to my own ways. But in this moment, I confess my dependence on You. I need You for breath and I need You to save me from my sin. I believe Jesus died on a cross to pay the price for my sins, so today I trust in You, Jesus, as my Savior and my Lord.”

Jesus, we praise You for making reconciliation possible and for restoring relationship to You so that we can experience Your supernatural, circumstance-transcending peace, gentleness, joy and strength. Lord, help us. We want to be able to say authentically in the depth of our hearts, “However long this

pandemic lasts, we are content. If this or that circumstance we're facing right now doesn't change, we are content." We're not like children crying or complaining, "If only this changes, then we will be content."

God, give us grace, give us faith to say that regardless of the circumstance, we trust You. Even as we say this, we cry out to You. We express longings to You. We lay our hearts and our lives before You. We plead for your help. Jesus, You are our strength. Jesus, You are our joy. Jesus, You are our peace. Jesus, You are our gentleness. You are everything we need. We love You, we lay our lives before You and we praise You that we can do all things through You and in You. We can face all things through You and in You. God, teach us this secret, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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