

I've been eager to be with you tonight. My angst has been sort of building throughout the day of what I hope God might accomplish as we open His Word, as we think about it and as we ask His Spirit to be here among us, to be active among us, to speak to us, to encourage us, to confront us and to even soothe our hearts.

So we'll be in Philippians 4 today. I love this letter that Paul wrote to the church in Philippi. It's just a very encouraging little letter that Paul wrote to this church that he loves very much. The church in Philippi was the first church that Paul planted in Europe. You can read the story of how that happened in Acts 16. It's just an unbelievable story. If you read through the letter, it's very obvious that Paul has great affection for these believers in Philippi. Most of the letters in the New Testament are full of correction and reproof. This one is not. Overall, this is a very positive letter. In fact, it's arguably the most positive letter that Paul wrote in terms of what he wanted to say to the church.

So his purpose in writing this letter is to encourage them. He's in jail when he wrote it, so he wanted to encourage them. But then he also wanted to give them some instruction and thank them for a gift of support that they had sent him while he was in prison. So the part that we're going to read tonight is part of the thank you that Paul is including in this letter to the church. And sandwiched in between his thank yous are some profound statements that he makes that I'm hoping we can meditate on and consider together tonight.

So let's read Philippians 4:8-14. "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. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. 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. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. 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. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble."

"I have learned the secret," Paul says, "of being content in any and every situation." As I was preparing this sermon my wife and I watched *The Last Samurai*. Tom Cruise becomes a Japanese samurai and saves the nation of Japan. I love it for many reasons. One of the reasons is because it's very realistic. In the very last scene of this movie, Tom Cruise is walking across an open field in Japan. As he's walking, the narrator (one of the characters in the story) voices over the scene and says, "No one knows what became of him. Some say that he died of his wounds and others that he returned to his own country. But I like to think that he may have at last found some small measure of peace that we all seek but few ever find."

So I'm watching this movie and thinking about Philippians 4, and it just hit me like a ton of bricks. That is us in regards to seeking after contentment. Many of us feel this way about our lives. We're all seeking this measure of contentment, to be content and to be at rest. We're all looking for this, yet few of us ever find it. The apostle Paul is saying at the end of Philippians 4, "I've found it. I've learned it. In any and every circumstance, I know what it means to be content." So we as a church would do good to learn from him.

Just by way of confession, I personally have spent the vast majority of my life with my heart displaced or discontented for one reason or another. If I wasn't discontented because I didn't have a spouse, I was discontent with my job. If I wasn't discontent with my job or the fact that I was single, I was discontent with my friendships, my roommates, my bank account, my playing time in college athletics or my housing situation. On and on I could go. As I look back on the years of my life, a common theme and thread throughout my entire story is discontentment. So I want you to know that I have not learned what Paul is talking about here. I am still on my way to learning, by God's grace. And I don't think I'm alone in that. I don't think I even need to be a prophet to know that the vast majority of us are struggling deeply with being content.

Being discontented is a universal problem. It doesn't matter if you're single, if you're married, if you're widowed, if you're rich, poor, black, brown, white, old, young, in college or out of college. Every human heart struggles with this. It's a universal problem, and there's no sign that it's getting any better in our culture or otherwise. In fact, I read an article this week from some newspaper in London that essentially said from the time one turns thirteen to the time one turns forty, it's just downhill in terms of contentment and happiness. It's just a slow and steady decline. Apparently 74 is the year that you have your best chance of being content if you make it there. So there's not an encouraging outlook here, but this is a universal problem. It's something that we all struggle with.

You and I are struggling with being content primarily because of our trust in God. You and I are not struggling with being content primarily because we're single, because of our job, because of our spouse, because of our bank account or because of our living arrangements. You and I struggle with contentment primarily because we struggle and we fail to trust God. That's why discontentment surfaces in our lives in all the ways that it does. Deep down, we struggle badly with trusting God and believing that God is what is best for us and always does what is best for us. We struggle to trust Him in that and to hope in Him in that. And because we do, we are discontent in a myriad of ways.

So I want to talk about what's underneath our discontentment. What's causing it? What's causing that feeling or that sense to consistently arise in your life and in your heart? What's underneath our discontentment? And then how do we nurture a heart of contentment? How do we learn the secret of being content in any and every circumstance? That's what I want to spend our time together thinking about.

So let's pray again and ask the Holy Spirit to help us, to minister to us, to confront us, to rebuke us and to encourage us. "Father, I have heard a number of sermons on contentment, and yet I have experienced it so little. So that tells me, unless You come and minister to us, this sermon is not going to be helpful. It's going to give us more knowledge that we're not going to be obedient to and we're not going to do anything with except forget or be puffed up by it. So God, would You be merciful to come and minister to us, change us, convict us and lead us into repentance and joy? Show us what You've already given us in Christ. Let it impact us in the deepest of places. I pray and ask in Jesus' name. Amen."

Let's start by just getting a definition of contentment. It's interesting that this word "contentment" in Philippians 4 is the only time in the New Testament that Paul uses this particular word in the Greek for "contentment." It's the only place it's found in the New Testament. There are other words that Paul and other writers of the New Testament use to express the same concept. So let me show you a few of those Scriptures to just hammer home the point that this virtue of contentment was normative in the early church. It was a normative virtue to ask God to cultivate in the hearts of believers in the early church.

In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul is speaking about his hardships, difficulties and the fact that he even has a thorn in the flesh and it's been hard and humbling for him. He says, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong." Again, he's speaking to this

circumstance and saying, "Even in the hard circumstances, I've learned to be content. I've learned to be content with weaknesses."

In 1 Timothy 6, Paul is telling Timothy to not be like those who are false teachers and are greedy for gain and glory. He says, "Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content." So again, Paul is speaking to the situations and circumstances of life and encouraging Timothy to have a heart that is content in God regardless of what he has or doesn't have.

And in Hebrews 13, the writer says this to the church. "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" So this is a normal conversation. This idea of contentment was a normal thing that was talked about in the early church.

So let me give you a couple of definitions. The first is from one of my seminary professors, Sinclair Ferguson. He's a professor and pastor in South Carolina. He said, "Contentment is the direct fruit of having no higher ambition than to belong to the Lord at His disposal." So when we use the word "contentment," that's what we mean. One who is content in a gospel-centered way is one who has no higher ambition than to be at the Lord's disposal. It is one who says, "The aim of my life is for God to do with me whatever He wills. Because He is my Father and I trust Him." That's what it means to be content, to have no higher ambition than to belong to the Lord at His disposal.

Jeremiah Burroughs said this about contentment. "Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition."

I think that these two definitions are great summaries of what Paul means when he says, "I have learned to be content." When we talk about this word tonight, this is what I mean. Our highest ambition is to be the Lord's and to be at His disposal. That's what it means to be content.

If you read Genesis 2, you can actually get a glimpse of what contentment looks like fleshed out in the life of a human being. What you see in Genesis 2 is the creation account where God creates man and woman in His image, and as He does, you see this unreal picture emerge of a man walking with God, depending on God, working for God, trusting and obeying God's word. You see man in Genesis 2 utterly and totally content. It's really a beautiful picture. Man is content in his relationship with God. If you look closely, you see that man is content in the work that God has given him to do. He's content in every single one of his relationships. In Genesis 2, you see man as he was created to be, content in God, trusting God, depending on God, obeying God, believing God's word, freely submitting to God and delighting in God's wise and fatherly disposal. You see mankind with no higher ambition than to be the Lord's and be at His disposal. It's a beautiful picture, the way that mankind was created to live.

Of course, if you keep reading, you learn in Genesis 3 that almost immediately after man is created, man is tempted away from this content posture of heart that he was created to live in. You see the Satan in the serpent come on the scene in the garden and he begins to question what God has told the man and the woman. As the man and woman actually lend their ears to his counsel, to his deception, you see distrust and discontentment begin to blossom in their hearts. Man is content, on the scene comes the serpent and begins to deceive and twist God's word and man lends his heart to what the serpent says. As he does, discontentment blossoms and gives birth to sin and rebellion against God. Discontentment leads to rebellion.

Genesis 3 tells us, "When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate." In this horrific moment, the man and the woman, in rebelling against God out of their discontentment, plunged themselves along with the rest of humanity into absolute disarray and futility. They plunged themselves, creation and all of history along with them into futility.

Elliot Greene, one of my seminary professors, would always say to me, "Beau, you know what the first sin in the Bible is, don't you? The first sin in the Bible is mankind being discontent with the blessings of God." That's what happened in Genesis 3. When mankind became discontent and rebelled against God, his essence was completely changed. Paul would say later to the church in Rome that, in this moment, out of discontentment, "sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned." Because of it, man's contentment was lost. The contentment that we saw in Genesis 2 was lost. And as a result, in all directions peace was turned to enmity, dependence was replaced with independence, submission was replaced with rebellion and our ambition to belong to a sovereign God was replaced with an ambition to be sovereign ourselves.

And I think we would do well to pause and just think about how devastating an exchange this is, not just for Adam and Eve but for all of mankind, creation and history along with them. John Piper said this about how horrible this is. "God is infinitely worthy and honorable. But sin says the opposite. Sin says that other things are more desirable and more worthy. How serious is this? The seriousness of a crime is determined, in part, by the dignity of the person and the office being dishonored. If the person is infinitely worthy and infinitely honorable and infinitely desirable and holds an office of infinite dignity and authority, then rebuffing him is an infinitely outrageous crime. Therefore, it deserves an infinite punishment." That is weighty, and it's true. We would do good to think about that.

Of course the beauty of the Christian gospel is that Jesus Christ has come to save us from our sin, from our discontentment and from our rebellion, He has come to save us from the distrust that leads us to rebel against God and He has come to save us from the infinite punishment that is due to us because we have sinned against a holy God, because we've rebelled against a holy God and because through our actions and words we have told a holy God, "No thank You. You're not good enough. You're not sovereign enough. You're not satisfying enough for me. I'll go look for my own god." And the good news of Christianity is that Jesus, in His life, death and resurrection, has come to save us from that state and reconcile us to God.

I think it's good for us to be sobered by how horrible our discontentment is. It's not just a respectable sin that we can deal with here and there. It is something to be killed in us. I don't know if you've ever sat down and thought deeply about what is actually beneath your discontentment, but it's pretty ugly stuff. When you flip that rock over, what's there is not good. What's underneath and causing the discontentment that arises and surfaces in our life is not good.

And let me just be clear. When I say discontentment, I'm not talking about a holy and good discontentment. There is a good, godly discontentment where we long for God, we want God to return and we have angst because He has not yet come back and made all things new. That's good discontentment. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm also not talking about a good and healthy ambition. I think there is an ambition that can honor the Lord. It's rare, but I do think there is a good ambition or even neutral ambition. That's not what I'm talking about either.

When I talk about discontentment, I'm talking about what the Bible describes over and over again as "murmuring" and "grumbling" against God. If you turn over that rock of discontentment, what is under there is brutal. Let's just talk about a few.

Firstly, what is revealed by our discontentment is ingratitude. Truly our discontentment and grumbling points to and exposes in us our lack of gratitude to God. We become so mindful of what we want and don't have that it suffocates our ability to be thankful for what we do have. If you're a Christian in here tonight, God has saved you by His grace, which is the best news in the world. We talked about last week about how you were an orphan and He has chosen, on His own initiative of grace, to adopt you into His family forever. It's unbelievable. He has forgiven your sins, all of them in the past, present and future. He has opened your blind eyes. He has healed your crippled soul.

He has done these things through Christ, and yet we'll still be frustrated with Him because we want a bigger house. We're unable to be grateful because we want a better job, because we want a spouse or a different spouse. And it exposes our absolute lack of gratitude towards God for what He has done. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Thank You for Jesus, but I really want this though. If you could get me into this degree program, that would be better and I would be happier." We're just ungrateful, and our discontentment exposes that.

What else is underneath the rock of discontentment? Arrogance is under there. We're often discontent because we believe that we have a better plan for our lives than God does. Of course, we would never say it that way. Perhaps we would in a candid moment. Most of us wouldn't say it that way, but that's absolutely what our actions and grumbings reveal. We think we can manage our lives better than God has or is. We know better than God and we're smarter than God, so we get frustrated in that and wander away from obedience to Him. Because we want to be little sovereigns, and we think that we could do a better job than Him.

This is what you see in Genesis 3. All of these are what you see in Genesis 3. The serpent said to Adam and Eve, "Did God really say that? Did He really say don't do this? Do you know what God doesn't want for you? He knows that if you eat from the Tree your eyes are going to be opened and you're going to be like Him." That was alluring to Adam and Eve, just like it's alluring to you and me. We want to be sovereign. We want to manage and control our lives, and we think deep down that we can do a better job than God. Our discontentment points to this fact. It points to this reality, whether we are willing to admit it or not. So underneath our discontentment is often arrogance.

Something else that's under there is lust and greed. It's this attitude of, "I want more." Again we saw this in Adam and Eve, and it's no different with us. God has provided for our deepest needs in Christ, and it's not enough for us. We want to touch that tree too. "We realize You've given us this garden and everything in it, but we want that too. We realize that You've given us Christ and everything that comes in Him, but we want this too."

I can really see this clearly in my children. What I dress up in religious language, they just have no shame about. They will just act out sinfully and not even have a clue. So I've really been able to see this sort of lust and greed in my son. He's two-years-old, and his favorite thing right now is music, particularly the drums. He loves the drums. In fact, I really do believe that he thinks that the purpose of us gathering each Sunday is so that he can hear hear the drums and go upstairs to Kid's Village and play the drums. So of course, I love getting him in situations where he can hear music.

Jonathan, who is a member of our congregation, leads the marching band at UNT. He told me that it would be okay if I brought Haddon over to watch the marching band practice. This is his dream come true. It's just the best thing he could possibly imagine. So a few weeks ago, we got to go over there and have a front row seat to watch the band play. John even had the whole band wave to Haddon. It was just a good day. We sat there for an hour and a half just listening to the best marching band in the nation play, and he loved every minute of it.

And then we get home and get ready to get in bed, and Haddon starts saying, "More band! I want more." So I try to reason with him and say, "Well son, we already saw the band today." And he just gets more adamant. So I go, "Haddon,

you've had a great day, buddy. You really have." But he just wants "More band." I go, "Haddon, you have had more band than anyone else in Denton, Texas today. It's okay, buddy. There will be more later." He just couldn't understand. Eventually it led to him throwing a fit and kicking and screaming.

What's happening in that moment? He's not thankful for that. His heart just lusts for more. He wants more. We laugh at him, but that is so the posture of our heart. We're so greedy. "Thank You, O God, for sending Your Son. Thank You, God, for sending Your Spirit. I want more. I want that as well, and I want more of that. Until You give me more of that, I'm not going to be happy with what You've already given and provided for me." It's devastating.

Something else that is underneath and really causing our discontentment is entitlement. We actually believe that we deserve something from God, that He owes us something or that He is somehow in our debt and should do something for us that He's not already doing. Because we believe that, we're discontent.

But at the bottom, underneath all these things, what is driving and compelling our discontentment is always idolatry. Beneath every grumble, beneath every murmur, beneath every moment of frustration, the sin beneath the sin is the fact that we want something more than we want God and that we love something more than we love God. And because we do, until He provides that for us, we're going to be discontent and dissatisfied.

Tullian Tchividjian was here a few months ago and said that beneath every sin is the failure to believe everything I need, I already possess in Christ. That's what's at the bottom of discontentment, our failure to believe that everything we need, we already possess in Jesus Christ.

So underneath our discontentment is some pretty horrible stuff. Again, it's not just a respectable sort of sin that we don't need to be real violent about. It's horrible. And let me tell you why discontentment is so poisonous. When discontentment gives birth in our life, it erodes worship. You cannot worship when you're ungrateful and discontent. You can't do it. The two are at odds. You could come in here and sing some song, but you cannot have your life characterized by worship. Because the two are at odds. Because worship is our response to God for who He is and what He has done through Jesus Christ. When you want to be who God is and are not satisfied with what He has done in your life, you don't worship. You can't. You can sing songs, but you can't worship (and the two are different).

Often, not only does it erode worship, but when we actually receive something from the Lord, what we receive only serves to highlight and remind us of the fact that we still haven't got what we really want. How maddening is that? God as a gracious Father says, "Yeah, I'm going to give you this," and because we're so discontent, when we get from the Lord, we don't receive with thanksgiving. Instead we say, "Oh, that's not what I wanted." It's crazy.

A discontented hear rejects ministry. The discontented heart is so laser focused on what it wants that it doesn't care what God might have to offer outside of what it wants. I have also seen this consistently in the past couple of years with my son. A few months ago, we took a family vacation to the beach. It was the first time Haddon had been to the beach, and my wife and I were super excited about this. He loves water and sand, so we thought the two together would be a great idea. Between the beach and the parking area is a hill that you have to go over, and then it opens up to the sand and the ocean. So we're moving from the car heading in that direction.

On the way, before we get over the hill, there is this big puddle of mud. Of course, Haddon likes mud too. So he wanted to stop and throw himself into the mud. He did that and began to play with the mud. And again, we tried to reason with him and tell him, "Hey son, we're not here for the mud. Over the hill, there is water and sand. There's an ocean. It's

unbelievable. Why don't you put the mud down and come enjoy this with us." But he wanted to stay in the mud. He didn't even care about what was over the hill, what was being offered to him.

C.S. Lewis said years ago that this is all of us. We, like little children, are so intent on playing in the mud pies because we don't even understand what's being offered by a holiday at sea. And often, I think God does this to us. He tries to minister to us, He tries to take us away from the mud pies that we want to stay and play in and He wants to take us to the ocean, and we say, "No thank You" because we do not understand what He is offering. We don't trust Him. All we know is "This is what I want. This is what I'm holding on to. So no thank You. I'll just stay and play in the mud." We end up rejecting the very ministry that God has for us and to us. We were trying to minister to Haddon, and he didn't know that. He thought we were trying to steal from his joy in stead of adding to it. Many of us are the same.

So discontentment erodes worship, reject ministry and hinders joyful obedience. It's really hard to follow someone that you don't trust, and it's even harder to follow someone with whom you are angry. So discontentment is not the soil that joyful obedience grows in. Do you think you're going to be obedient to God when you're frustrated with Him and you don't trust Him? No. So discontentment hinders joyful obedience.

And lastly, discontentment robs your ability to celebrate with and for others, especially those who receive what you want. In a very real way, the opposite of contentment is covetousness. When you covet what your friends have, it paralyzes your ability to rejoice with them. You may do the song and dance at that moment, you may say what you know needs to be said, but deep down you are unable to celebrate with them because you're so focused on the fact that they got what you wanted and didn't get. So you can't even be happy for them because you're sad about yourself and so absorbed with yourself. It is astounding to think about how much discontentment flows out of our comparison and by comparing ourselves with other people. It's just heartbreaking to think about.

So not only is what is underneath our discontentment horrible, but what discontentment causes in our lives is poisonous and toxic. Let me just pause here and ask you a few questions. How are you doing? What is the state of your heart? How content are you in your life right now? Are you content? If not, in what areas of your life are you discontent? Are you discontent relationally? With your job? With your finances? If you're not content, where is the discontentment? What area or areas of your life are you discontented? What thing or person, if you had it, do you think would make you content? Because if you can identify that, you can begin to really get to the roots of what's causing your discontentment and the roots of your idolatry.

What are you afraid to be content about because you believe God will leave you there if you grew content? So many singles I talked to at the singles conference were actually afraid to nurture a heart of contentment in regards to their singleness because they were afraid that God would just leave them there if they became content in singleness.

For those of you who are single, I have just a word. Because I never nurtured contentment while I was single, I brought my discontentment into my marriage. Do you know what happened when I had children? I brought my discontentment into my parenting. Do you know what happened when I became a pastor? I brought my discontentment into my pastoring. To think that discontentment is going to go away once you find a spouse is not true. Don't believe that lie. If you don't nurture a heart of contentment by God's grace and with the help of His Spirit and the church while you're single, you're going to carry it right into your relationship and it's going to wreak unspeakable havoc on the lives and the lives of everyone around you. So don't believe that. But what are you afraid to be content about because you believe that God will leave you there if you grew content?

Charles Spurgeon, a famous pastor in London, said this about contentment. "These words show us that contentment is not a natural propensity of man. 'Ill weeds grow apace.' Covetousness, discontent, and murmuring are as natural to man as thorns are to the soil. We need not sow thistles and brambles; they come up naturally enough, because they are indigenous to earth: and so, we need not teach men to complain; they complain fast enough without any education. But the precious things of the earth must be cultivated. If we would have wheat, we must plough and sow; if we want flowers, there must be the garden, and all the gardener's care. Now, contentment is one of the flowers of heaven, and if we would have it, it must be cultivated; it will not grow in us by nature; it is the new nature alone that can produce it, and even then we must be specially careful and watchful that we maintain and cultivate the grace which God has sown in us."

Contentment has to be nurtured. It's not just going to happen. You're not going to stumble into it. It has to be contended for and cultivated. So I just want to encourage you to cultivate it. Contend for it. Think about what it would mean for you to do what Spurgeon is talking about. What would it mean for you to, like a gardener does to a flower, nurture and foster contentment in your life? What would that look like? Who are the groups of people that actually encourage you toward contentment? Who are those individuals or groups? What are the activities that help foster and nurture contentment in your life? Do them. Be a part of those activities. What are the scenes and environments that help you nurture contentment? Get there. Place yourself there. What would it look like for you to posture your heart in ways and set your heart and mind upon things that you know will nurture contentment in your life? Think about it and do it.

And then on the flip side, what are the things that draw you away from a contented posture of heart? What are the things that fuel your discontentment that you and I are so prone to? Who are the people who tend to push you away from contentment? Who are the people in your life who cause you to be more discontented, who cause you to be more allured to put your hope in other things to satisfy you and who cause you to have a heart of comparison?

Maybe you don't need to be around those people. I know some of you can't help but to be around them because you work with them or they're in your family. I do know that there are many well-meaning people in your life who will give you the worst, most antibiblical counsel regarding these things. I know that. I know that there are people who do not help you at all in terms of nurturing contentment and you can't do anything about it. So I know it's not as easy as saying, "Well, I'm going to get away from these types of people." But I do think it's something to think about. Who are the people and groups that draw you away from contentment?

What are the activities that choke out contentment in your life? What movies, television programs, magazines, websites or music throws fuel on the fire of discontentment that is already raging in your heart? Why would you expose yourself to that? I know that a lot of the things we watch we watch just in a thoughtless way and we don't really consider the implications on our heart for it, but realize that every advertisement on TV is meant to nurture discontentment. It's meant to teach you in a million different subtle and not so subtle ways that what you have is not good enough and you need what they're offering. So if you continually expose yourself to that, you're going to eventually get numb. You're going to give in and just start to believe it.

I just want to join my brother Spurgeon and encourage you to contend for contentment, to nurture it, to cultivate it and to do whatever you need to do to foster it. And of course you have to understand that your contending for contentment will only have power if it happens from the inside-out. This is not something you're going to be able to whiteknuckle. If you try to do this from the outside-in without your heart being changed, good luck. That's not going to last very long. The power and motivation that you and I need to contend for contentment only comes from our hearts embracing God and His gospel. It only comes from our hearts seeing God for the all-satisfying treasure that He really is.

So look back in Philippians 4 with me. I just want to close with offering you to exhortations from Philippians 4. The first exhortation is this. Repent of your grumbling and discontentment. Repent of that and ask the Holy Spirit to teach you contentment. Look in verse 11 with me. Paul says, "For I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. 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." We see in this verse that the desire for and ability to be content is wrought by the Spirit of God. Contentment is something to be learned.

Moses in Psalm 90 says in his prayer, "Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom." Apparently we don't as human beings naturally number our days. We don't naturally think about the fact that our days on earth are numbered. So Moses is saying, "God, I'm not going to naturally do this. So teach me to do it. Teach us to number our days." We need to be taught to number our days, and in the same way, we need to be taught contentment. It's something that is learned. It's a process.

It should encourage you that the apostle Paul says this, because it means that he didn't learn to be content overnight. It didn't happen to him as soon as he was converted. It was a process by which the Spirit of God with the help of the church taught him to be content. So if you're going, "Man, I am just overwhelmed with grief with the way that I have put my hope and trust in other things besides God, in the way that I've been arrogant and rebelled against God and the way that I have been filled with ingratitude toward Him," if that's you, take heart. This is learned.

So what I want to exhort you to do is repent, to be brutally honest with God about your discontentment and then to ask God to teach you to be content. Make that a consistent, normative prayer in your life.

The second exhortation is this. Look to Jesus Christ. In verse 13, Paul says, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." When he says "all things," he's not talking about sports. He's not talking about helping you get through finals week even though you did not study. What he means by "all things" is, "I'm in prison, and I can be content in every circumstance." That's what "all things" means here. "I can be content in every circumstance." How? "Through Him who strengthens me." Contentment only happens and through Jesus Christ. So look to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is both our example in contentment and also our Savior from our discontentment. Look to Him.

At the end of Jesus Christ's ministry in the Gospel accounts that we have, we find Jesus, like Adam, in a garden. We find Jesus in a garden thinking about a tree, just like Adam. We find Him tempted to wander away from God's will, tempted to wander away from obedience and what to do about that tree. It was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil for Adam, and it was the cross for Jesus Christ. And we see Him in the garden struggling, praying with God and knowing full well the horror that lays in front of Him in going to the cross and absorbing the wrath of God for sins. Jesus is faced with a temptation to go His own way, but unlike Adam, He doesn't. Instead, He entrusts Himself to the Father in the face of temptation. He says, "Not My will, Father, but Your will be done." And in the Lord Jesus Christ, in that moment, we see what true contentment is in the flesh. We see in the flesh what having no higher ambition than to belong to the Father and to be at His disposal really looks like. Jesus succeeded where Adam, you and I have failed. And in His contentment, Jesus has become both our example and our Savior. He entrusted Himself to the Father, He was content with His Father's will even to the point of death, even death on a cross. And that is unbelievable.

The degree that you see Jesus Christ doing this for us is the degree to which you will be strengthened with the faith, hope, endurance and everything else you need to do all things through Him who strengthens you. So look to Christ until He changes your heart. Dr. Tim Keller has said, "If grace has really changed our hearts, we don't ultimately care if life goes the way we want it, as long as we have him."

Let's pray. "Father, I think the only proper response for us is to repent and to worship. We need to repent because our idolatry has given birth to our rebellion and our discontentment has eroded our worship, trust and gratitude. So we need to repent and worship. Despite our sin, despite our grumbling and ingratitude, you have sent Jesus Christ to forgive us and to rescue us from being enslaved to our desires. Jesus, we thank You that You have shown us the way and that You have made a way for us to be lifted up from the fall. We bless You for that. So Holy Spirit, I pray now that You would lead us into repentance and into worship. I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen."

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