SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

November 15, 2026

The Pathway to Contentment
"Rely on God's Strength"
Philippians 4:10-14
Rev. Mike Fordham

The 19th century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard told the following parable: "There once was a lily who lived a happy life beside a rippling brook. This beautiful little flower, in its simple surroundings, was content and carefree. Until one day. Until the day when the bird showed up. Now this feathered visitor was a showoff. A braggart and teller of tales. It would swoop in and fill the lily's head full of stories of better places and far more beautiful flowers. Each story was crafted to convey the message that, in comparison to other flowers, and other places, this poor lily was a nobody. A failed lily. Captive to simplicity. Embarrassingly inadequate. Following each visit from the bird, the lily fretted more. It couldn't sleep. It no longer woke up happy. It felt incapacitated by ***not-enough-ness***. The beautiful little flower, once content, now realized, in comparison with others out there in the wide world, it was ugly, deficient, incarcerated in its familiar surroundings. But the bird was there to help. The bird had the answer. So together they formulated a plan. Early one morning, the bird landed beside the lily and began pecking away at the soil around its roots. Now liberated, the lily was placed under the wings of the bird and away they flew to the better place. In that better place, where lilies were more beautiful, where life was fuller, the flower told itself it would truly be a lily worthy of the name. But, alas, they never made it. High in the heavens, rootless and finally free of its former constraints, the lily withered. And the lily died." The lily was living the good life that God had created it to live, while the bird struggled with anxiety, comparison, and not-enough-ness or the feeling that no matter what he had it was never enough.

Contentment is almost impossible to achieve in our 21st Century prosperous American culture. We live in a world of not-enough-ness where we have bought into the lie that if we just had a better house, lived in a better neighborhood, had a better car, a better wife or husband, better children, better parents, a better family, a better job, a better school, better friends, better health, more money, and more and better of everything, then we would finally achieve the elusive state of contentment. Ironically, our pursuit of contentment through better or more makes it impossible to achieve contentment. Thankfully, the Bible has the answer to experience true, lasting, contentment that has absolutely nothing to do with our state in our life but is something we learn to experience in all circumstances through utter and total dependence upon God's power.

PHILIPPIANS 4:10-14

> ***How I praise the Lord that you are concerned about me again. I know you have always been concerned for me, but you didn't have the chance to help me. [11] Not that I was ever in need, for I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. [12] I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. [13] For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength. [14] Even so, you have done well to share with me in my present difficulty.***

CONTENT IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES

Paul first makes an audacious statement that has always been very hard for me to swallow and that is that he is ***Content in All Circumstances***. First, it is important to understand what Paul is not saying. Paul is not saying that being content in all circumstances is referring to being complacent. Paul is also not saying that someone who is content in all circumstances has little or no drive, or is content with status quo, is not growing, has no goals, is stagnant, does not like to be challenged, and certainly does not like change. The Bible is clear that constant growth and change is a normal part of the Christian life. We are not ever satisfied or content with where we are in our relationship with God as we are daily striving to be closer to God and daily yielding ourselves to God changing us to become more and more like Jesus.

To better appreciate and understand Paul's statement that he is content in all circumstances we need to revisit what we've mentioned in the two prior sermons that Paul was writing this letter to the Philippian church from prison. In first-century Rome, prison was not used as a long-term sentence for a crime; instead, Roman law used detention centers and holding cells simply to keep people locked up while they waited for a trial or an execution.

Paul probably experienced two different kinds of prisons. The first was ***House Arrest*** where a prisoner lived under military guard in his own private home while often chained to a Roman soldier. At home the prisoner had some freedoms such as paying for his own food and clothing and could host a steady stream of visitors and co-workers and preach or write letters without much if any interference.

The second kind of imprisonment was that of a ***Dungeon*** which was probably Paul's second arrest under Emperor Nero. This was much harsher and treated the prisoner as a condemned criminal awaiting execution. This was typically a pitch-dark, cramped, damp, poorly ventilated, grim, stone-walled underground chamber near the Roman Forum again serving as a holding place before execution as the prisoner was wearing heavy iron chains. In neither one of them did they feed or clothe you or take care of your daily needs. In both you relied on outside help to provide food and clothing that the prison system never supplied. Paul wrote the statement that he was content even in prison where he knew he was facing execution for his faith.

The Greek word Paul uses for contentment is one that describes an inner sufficiency or independence from outward circumstances. Paul's contentment then was an inward

state of spiritual stability and satisfaction that remained completely independent of changing external circumstances. Rather than needing external comfort, wealth, or ideal conditions to be at peace, a person who has this contentment has an internal steadiness. I'm sure as I describe what this contentment looks like, we are all longing deep within our hearts to experience this miraculous, ever-elusive contentment. John Bogle, the founder of the Vanguard Group, wrote in his book, *Enough: True Measures of Money, Business, and Life*, about an event that highlights the importance of contentment. There was a party given by a billionaire hedge fund manager on Shelter Island. The successful author Kurt Vonnegut informs, Joseph Heller, another successful author, that their host had made more money in a single day than Heller had earned from his wildly popular novel *Catch-22* over its whole history. Heller responds. "Yes, but I have something he will never have … enough."

LEARNED TO BE CONTENT

When Paul says he is content in every circumstance, let's be honest, that sounds impossible, totally unrealistic. Where then did Paul get this otherworldly, supernatural peace and contentment from? How did Paul get this contentment? Notice that Paul does not just say that he is content in all circumstances but that he has ***Learned to be Content*** in all circumstances. In other words, contentment was not something Paul had because he was an easy-going person to whom it just came naturally. Quite the contrary, everything I read about Paul was that he was a driven, type A personality. Paul also didn't even achieve contentment by just praying for it and immediately had it.

Contentment didn't come naturally to Paul as he had to learn it like we all do over time, through real-life experiences. Paul learned contentment in the school of hard knocks. Has anyone here attended the school of hard knocks? If we look at the life of the Apostle Paul, we see that he lived a hard life when he became a Christian. In *2 Corinthians 11:23-29*, Paul describes what his school of hard knocks was like. He writes,*"23 Are they servants of Christ? I know I sound like a madman, but I have served him far more! I have worked harder, been put in prison more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again.24 Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. 26 I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. 27 I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm. 28 Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of my concern for all the churches. 29 Who is weak without my feeling that weakness? Who is led astray, and I do not burn with anger?"*

We all know it's true that the places where we best learn how to be content are through setbacks, misfortunes, and through life's many painful trials. Bristlecone pines are the oldest living things on our planet, with approximately eighteen living examples that are over 4,000 years old. The oldest of these were germinating as the Egyptian pyramids

were being built. During ancient Israel's heyday under King David, they were already 1,500 years old–and they are still growing today. Surprisingly, this species lives under the harshest conditions imaginable. They are located at an altitude of more than 9,000 feet above sea level on the east side of the Sierra Nevada in the White Hills of California, one of the driest regions on earth. They grow in a most adverse climate, with hardly any rain, facing strong, extremely cold winds. The oldest have an annual growth of just a few tenths of a millimeter and reach only about sixty feet tall. However, they continue to grow and produce seeds from which seedlings spring up, their quiet strength preparing them for thousands of years to come. The oldest living bristlecone pine, named Methuselah, is 4,850 years old. Its exact location is kept secret by the US Forest Service due to the danger of vandalism. These life giants continue to grow even into the fifth millennium of their lives. It is not difficult to hear what these trees have to say to us: that which has ceased to grow is headed inevitably toward decay and will soon die. It is through the winds of adversity, the fires of suffering, the droughts of life, the seasons of change, that we can learn to be content in every circumstance. As *James 1:2-4* says, *"2 Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. 3 For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow.4 So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing."*

RELY ON GOD'S POWER

While the school of hard knocks was a great learning atmosphere for Paul, in and of itself it doesn't give God's peace and contentment. The true secret to experiencing peace in all circumstances is walking through the highs and lows of life learning to ***Rely on God's Power*** to get us through them. Paul's contentment was not just some positive thoughts he learned to muster up when things got tough. Paul's contentment was not anchored in self-reliance, but in the sustaining strength of Christ. His contentment was not even found in believing that God would change his challenging circumstance. For Paul, his contentment was found in walking with God through whatever he faced and knowing that the power of God would see him through it and give him God's peace and contentment. Paul gives us a great example of the key to his ability to have contentment in all circumstances as he writes in *2 Corinthians 1:8-11, "8 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead."* God used the circumstances in Paul's life to teach Paul that he was weak and needed to be utterly dependent upon God to face whatever life threw his way. In everything, especially while enduring suffering, Paul relied on the strength of Christ, who lived in him and worked through him to see him through. Paul's relationship with Jesus provided the inner power to stay steady whether life is full or empty. Instead of denying his circumstances or relying on self-sufficiency, Paul drew his strength, peace, and inner contentment from his daily relationship with Jesus. The key to being content in all our circumstances is total dependence upon God whether or not God changes the circumstances of our lives.

The ability to be content begins with the realization that we cannot be content in our own human effort. We can only do so through God's power in our lives! Raymond McHenry, in his book entitled, *McHenry's Quips, Quotes and Other Notes* shares a great story about Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Russian writer who spent years in a Siberian prison. At one point he had become completely discouraged and decided to give up and die. His plan was to stop working out in the field, to lean on his shovel, and wait for the guards to come and beat him to death. However, when he stopped, another prisoner reached over with his shovel and quickly drew a cross at his feet, then erased it before a guard could see it. Solzhenitsyn later said that his entire being was energized by that little reminder of the hope and courage we have in Christ. He found the strength to continue because a fellow believer cared enough to remind him of our hope. True satisfaction does not come from having enough money, comfort, or success, but from relying on the sustaining power and presence of Jesus Christ. Every time we struggle with contentment we have the opportunity to turn to God in prayer and honestly admit that we cannot do it on our own but need the Holy Spirit to give us His supernatural peace and contentment.

Maybe you are in one of those times in life wherein it seems impossible to be content. You are dealing with a very stressful health issue, or just wrestling with emotional turmoil deep within, or facing financial struggles, job challenges, or relationship issues with someone important to you, or maybe all is good in your life, but you wish you still had more and just cannot find lasting contentment. I invite you to join me in praying a prayer that is prayed every week here on Friday evenings at Celebrate Recovery, ***The Serenity Prayer:***

> **"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardship as a pathway to peace; taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that You will make all things right if I surrender to Your will; so that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen."**

Do you need to rely on the grace and power of God in whatever circumstances you find yourself in? Come to the altar rails and stand or kneel at the feet of Jesus and surrender your life over to His grace and power. He will give you peace and contentment that cannot be found anywhere in this world but only in a relationship with Jesus. In the midst of your storm, come to the shelter of the presence of Jesus.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES: (Books marked with * are available to be checked-out in the Asbury Discipleship Resource Center)

- *Anxious for Nothing: Finding Calm in a Chaotic World,* Max Lucado
- *Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts,* Jerry Bridges
- *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines,* David Mathis
- *Praying the Bible,* Donald S. Whitney
- *Chasing Contentment: Trusting God in a Discontented Age,* Erik Raymond
- *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment,* Jeremiah Burroughs

Icebreaker Questions

1. If you could change one thing about your current circumstances that you believe would make life more enjoyable or less stressful, what would it be?
2. Think about a time when you finally received or achieved something you had wanted for a long time. Did it bring the lasting satisfaction you expected? Why or why not?

Sermon Discussion Questions

1. Paul declares that he has learned to be content whether he has plenty or little. How is biblical contentment different from complacency or simply accepting the status quo? What makes it difficult to experience contentment in today's culture of comparison and wanting more?
2. Paul learned contentment through suffering, hardship, and unexpected challenges. How has God used a difficult season in your life to strengthen your faith or change your perspective? What might God be teaching you through your present circumstances?
3. Paul describes experiencing pressures so overwhelming that he learned to rely not on himself but on God. Why do we often wait until we have exhausted our own strength before turning to God? What practical steps can we take to depend on Him daily rather than only during a crisis?
4. Paul writes, “For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.” How does understanding this verse in the context of Paul's suffering and contentment change its meaning? How can Christ's strength sustain us even when God does not change our circumstances?
5. The sermon concludes with the Serenity Prayer, reminding us to recognize what we can and cannot change. What is one area of your life where you struggle to surrender control to God? How might trusting His presence and power help you experience greater peace and contentment this week?
6. What impacted you most from the sermon?
7. How might this group pray for you this week?