

Opening Words

One day, someone asked an extremely rich man how much money was enough to be content and he answered, “Just a little bit more.”

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¹⁰ But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned *before*, but you lacked opportunity. ¹¹ Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. ¹² I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. ¹³ I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

What amazing words from this man who was under house arrest and who was giving his all to serve Christ. It is important as we continue our study of contentment that we think about the difference between contentment and complacency. The two are not the same. Complacency has little concern or love for others. A content person will be prepared to reach out to others. A complacent person is unaware of the issues of life swirling around him. He is not engaged in meeting needs and changing things. A content person may be in the battle but he has peace in the battle.

Our desire is to be content people, not complacent people. We saw in our previous lesson that there are two sides to learning contentment – downside and an upside. We see the downside in Paul’s phrases, “humble means, going hungry, and suffering need.” We remind ourselves that Paul was a tentmaker by trade, a very modest, blue-collar job. As he followed Christ he learned to value Christ above his status and his possessions. He suffered the loss of all things. Yet, he learned the secret of contentment even when circumstances turned grim in his life. Paul was not a victim of circumstances but a victor over circumstances and this passage invites us to do the same.

How can we live this way? How can we learn the secret of contentment? Before I answer this question I want us to take a look at the upside part of the passage. Paul had to learn this lesson not only when things were going poorly for him but also when things were going well! Look at verse 12 again, Paul presents three positive, upside challenges. He said “I have had to learn the secret of living in prosperity, of being filled, and of having abundance.”

What? How can those things be a challenge? Those are the good times. Prosperity? Abundance? Isn’t this what we all want? Yet it is vital that we recognize the good times as a challenge as well and our problem is that we don’t know how to abound and remain content. You see, in this fallen world and in our fallen bodies, a problem takes place when we abound. You know what it is? *We always want more.*

One day, someone asked an extremely rich man how much money was enough to be content and he answered, “Just a little bit more.” That’s the way we are. God blesses us with good things. God is the

one who gives abundant food, who grants us nice places to live, great jobs, and wonderful friends and family. But in our fallen state we can easily turn our eyes off the Giver and onto the gift and make the gift the center of our focus. We can become greedy, always wanting more, and Paul tells us in Ephesians 5:5 and Colossians 3:5 that greed amounts to idolatry.

When Israel was on the border of the Promised Land, Moses warned them in this way in Deuteronomy 8:11-14.

¹¹ “Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; ¹² otherwise, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived *in them*, ¹³ and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, ¹⁴ then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Learning to be content in prosperity means that we realize that things and good times and gifts are wonderful but they are not final. They are not eternal and they cannot give us ultimate satisfaction. I read an article about a new movie Woody Allen has made. The new movie is called “To Rome with Love” and one of the themes of the movie is that nothing lasts and the depression that comes from realizing nothing is permanent. In the interview for the article someone asked Allen if he worried about his films not being remembered and he answered, ““I don’t care about my work lasting. I would like to last. They can turn my movies into guitar picks. Nothing lasts. Nothing at all. Not even the sun.”

Well, not quite Woody. It is true that things won’t last and Scripture does talk about the sun giving out and the sky being rolled up like a scroll, but we can last through Christ and we can overcome the depression of the partial truth that nothing lasts when we realize that Christ and not things are most important.

When we keep Christ at the center of life – even in good times – then we learn to be content in prosperity. We don’t let the prosperity control us. Let me share four practical steps to help us be content in our prosperity, if we are experiencing that now. These are so important because we do not want to let our abundance control us. Here they are:

1. Remember what Jesus said in Luke 12:15 – “Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not *even* when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.” I love that last phrase! Even when you have an abundance, that is not what life is about! In other words, keep your perspective. Keep your eyes clear. Think correctly. You may have a lot, but don’t let what you have cloud your thinking and deceive you into thinking that life is about what you get and what you own and what you possess. Life instead is about what you give and who you serve and the one you worship.
2. If you have abundance, realize that this is the grace of God and it does not make you better than your brother. James 1:17 says that every good thing given and every perfect gift is from God. Be grateful for what has been given to you! And do not fall into the trap that John talks about in 1 John 2:15-17 where he speaks of the danger of the boastful pride of life. This

is what Moses said to Israel, “when you go into the land and prosper, don’t get proud but remember the Lord!” And we know that this is true not only of people but of churches – The church in Laodicea was proud. They said, “ We are rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” and Jesus said “you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.”

3. Here is a third step to learn contentment in prosperous times – be generous. This is how Paul instructed Timothy in 1 Tim 6:17-19 with those in his churches who were well off.

Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. ¹⁸ *Instruct them* to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, ¹⁹ storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.

4. And fourth, “hold your treasure lightly.” Paul uses a very incisive term for riches – he calls them “*uncertain riches.*” You may have them today and they may be gone tomorrow.

If we can practice these four principles – realizing what life is about, being grateful to God, being generous with our abundance, and holding it all lightly, we will go a long ways toward developing contentment when life is good because we will be prepared when things turn upside down and we lose things and money and possessions. We will have learned the secret of contentment. We will have learned know how to get along with humble means, and how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance we will have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. ¹³ We will be able to do all things through Him who strengthens us.

And that brings us to the answer of the questions I proposed earlier in this broadcast, “How can we live this way? How can we learn the secret of contentment?” - by developing our relationship with Christ. It is by placing Christ first in our lives. The man who said I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me and I have learned to be content in any and every circumstance is the one who earlier said, “Whatever **things** were **gain** to me, those **things** I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ and I count them but rubbish that I may gain Him!”

What is more important? - things or Christ? Paul made his decision. For him, life became about knowing Christ. And so when he had things, that was fine as long as he had Christ, but when he did not have things, that was fine too, as long as he had Christ. And that is how he learned the secret of contentment and how you and I can experience it too!

Would you pray with me, “Father, you are so kind and generous. You are the true God and the God of abundance. You shower us with blessings freely. But we confess that on this side of eternity we can easily fall into the trap of making life about things and not about you. Deliver us from this. Open our eyes to see what life is about. Help us to hold onto things lightly. And help us to be grateful for all you give and to be generous. We want to learn the secret of contentment and point our world to you. We ask this in Jesus name and for your glory. Amen!”