

Sermon Given by

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### Philippians 4:10-23 - "The secret of contentment"

2 main points tonight – 2 markers of the mature Christian; contentment and generous giving. First then **contentment** and that's the title for this the last sermon in our series in Philippians - "the secret of contentment". Look down at our passage and there's a very striking sentence in v12. Paul writes these amazing words: "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation." Well contentment and how to get it is a great thing to think about. I guess that most of us can feel fairly content for at least some of the time in certain circumstances – for example when work is going really well – perhaps you get a promotion or you're just involved in a project that you find very interesting. Or when family life is on a high; the kids get great reports or do well in a play or on the sports pitch. Others will know contentment when they're on holiday or when their football team wins or when they're eating sticky toffee pudding in front of a log fire or when this or that happens - this or that specific circumstance is in place. We all know how to be content in some circumstances but what is the secret to being content in any and every situation; whether in good health or bad, employed or unemployed, doing well in school exams or not. What's the secret to contentment in every situation – it's a mouth-watering prospect and it's something that is increasingly alien to our culture. The whole advertising industry that bombards us on the TV, the Internet, our mobile phones, bill boards, the sides of buses – tells us all the time that we want more and that somehow we're incomplete and will be dissatisfied until we get this aftershave or that lipstick, this car or that new gadget. And yet so many people who get to the top of the tree in their line of work and even those who are rich and famous because of it and able to buy the best and newest of everything – so many of them find that they are left empty. They thought that particular circumstances would bring contentment but they don't. When I grew up in the early 1980s John McEnroe was the dominant force in men's tennis. I used to love watching him play – there was always great drama when Mac was on court. In his autobiography called Serious – he's very honest. This is what he says: "On October 1<sup>st</sup> 1984, I was standing in the Portland airport waiting to board a flight to LA for a week off. And suddenly I thought "I'm the greatest tennis player that ever lived – so why am I so empty inside? I won 82 out of the 85 matches I played in 1984. No-one had ever had a year like that before. But it wasn't enough. The feeling had been building up for a while. I'd been number 1 for 4 years and I'd never felt especially happy." Shortly after you read how he'd met Tatum O'Neal – the actress and he says this: "Was I looking for the love of my life? I don't know. I was searching for something. I was just sick of feeling empty. I wanted something more than just money out of all I had accomplished." That's John McEnroe – he had it all but the sporting glory, the money, the glamorous lifestyle left him empty. He wasn't content. Compare McEnroe and us so much of the time to the apostle Paul. And remember that Paul isn't saying this from an ivory tower, he's saying this from prison – he's in chains and facing a trial and possible death sentence and yet he can write from midway through v11: ***"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being***

***content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.”***

Why's Paul saying this? Well the context is that he's just received some financial support from the Philippians – it appears v10 that they'd been trying to get it to him for quite a while but now, finally, it had got through. He's grateful for this and rejoices greatly in the Lord and yet he wants them to know v11-12 that his contentment is not tied to his circumstances. He appreciates the gifts but it wasn't that until they arrived he was miserable and now he's cheered up. V11 ***“I am not saying this because I am in need”***. He was content. I looked up the word 'content' in the dictionary and it says “satisfied, accepting one's situation; desiring nothing more or nothing different.” That was Paul. It's a challenge for us isn't it to think about whether we can truly say we're content. Paul had no creature comforts and was facing the very real possibility of death and yet he was content. So what's the secret? Well we see to start with that contentment is learned. Did you notice that? V11 ***“I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.”*** V12 ***“I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation.”***

Contentment is learned over time. We won't wake up one morning and suddenly find ourselves content in any and every situation. No-one ever drifted into contentment. It has to be learned over time and especially in need and want, through trials and hardships, through sadness and disappointments because it's through those tough times that we have the opportunity to learn not to tie our contentment to our circumstances but to the promises of God and to the God of the promises as we cling to Him. Here's the secret v13: ***“I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”*** Whether at the moment the Lord has me in plenty or in need, the secret is through him – the Lord Jesus, who gives me strength. We saw this last week. Paul doesn't say ***“Rejoice always”*** – he says ***“Rejoice in the Lord always”***. The secret of contentment is having our ultimate joy, security, peace and delight in Christ. Imagine a darts board – that might be easier for some of you than others. In the middle, you have the bull's eye, the centre circle. Say that stands for Paul. Then you have the next circle around the bull's eye. Say that stands for the Lord Jesus. And then you have the rest of the board, the little zones coming away from the centre – say that stands for life's circumstances. Paul is saying that the secret of contentment is to remember that we're in Christ first and only in our circumstances second. So whatever our circumstances, we look for our contentment in what we have in Jesus. And what blessings we have in Christ; adoption into God's family – we can call God father, complete forgiveness for all our sin - amazing, unconditional and life-transforming love - the sure hope of heaven to come; Paul's already reminded us that our citizenship is in heaven. This life is like being in the transit lounge, heaven is the true destination - heaven will be brilliant and knowing that and all these blessings we have in Christ we can sit loose to conditions in transit. We'll never be truly content when our contentment is based on our circumstances, on any one or thing other than on Christ. For example if our contentment is based on our wealth and we lose our job or don't get a promotion we'd hoped for or our savings become worthless through another banking crisis then our world will collapse. Or even if we get the promotion and our savings grow, our pension is secure, the mortgage is on track, we'll always want that little bit more, that little extra buffer. If our contentment is in money then rather than living out v8 from last week, our thoughts instead will be consumed by the fluctuations of the market; we'll be constantly checking our bank balance, we'll spend more time searching the share prices than searching the Scriptures.

But when Christ is everything to me; when he has first place in my heart, when he is the one who consumes my thoughts, then life's circumstances no longer determine my mood, my contentment. The Lord gives me strength. As we share the bread and the wine later that's a wonderful opportunity to spiritually feed on Christ; to draw close to Him, to meditate upon what He's done for us and the blessings that flow through his death on the Cross. True contentment is only found in Christ. You may have heard this story before but it moves me each time I hear it and I think it's very fitting for this passage. In the early years of the Christian church a man called John Chrysostom – a brilliant preacher and minister was on trial for promoting Christ which at that time was a crime that could be punished by death. Apparently the Emperor said to him: "we will banish you" to which Chrysostom replied: "you cannot banish me for the whole world is my Father's home. "well then" said the Emperor "we will execute you." "you cannot, my life is hid with Christ" "well then we'll dispossess you of your estate." "you cannot, my treasure is in heaven." "Well then we'll put you in solitary confinement" "You cannot for I have a Divine friend from whom you can never separate me. I defy you, there is nothing you can do to hurt me!" John Chrysostom was a man, like the apostle Paul, who knew his security and contentment in Christ. He knew that nothing could separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus his Lord. He knew that even though he may walk through the valley of the shadow of death he need fear no evil for he knew that Christ was with him – his good Shepherd was by his side and he knew that glory awaited him.

Paul was content without the gift from the Philippians because his contentment was in Christ and yet v14 he really appreciated it: **"...it was good of you to share in my troubles."** That brings us to our second point; **the importance of giving to support gospel work** and the Philippians are a wonderful example to us. There are several things we can learn from them – I'm just going to pick out 2. First we see that they had been in partnership with Paul through their giving very soon after they'd come to faith. Did you notice that v15 – it was from the earliest days of their acquaintance with the gospel that they had been generous and consistent financial supporters of gospel ministry. It's been said that the last part of a Christian's person to be converted is his or her wallet or purse. And it appears from v15 that that was true sadly for several churches in Paul's day. Yet right from the start of their Christian lives the Philippians understood that to be a Christian is to be a partner in the Christian business, including a financial partner. I think that in the past when I've had the privilege of discipling young Christians; I've spoken about the need for Bible reading, prayer, joining a mid-week group, reading good Christian books and so on but I've probably regarded giving as a sort of spiritual A-Level subject, to come later. Whereas Paul clearly raised it straight away. You can imagine Paul saying that Jesus being Lord means Jesus being in charge of every area of our lives, including the use of our money to support gospel ministry. So we see first then that giving is something to encourage each other in from the very start of our Christian lives.

We also see from what Paul says that giving is primarily something between you and God. So Paul writes v17: **"Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God."** Paul was grateful for their gift – it made a difference – he was now amply supplied. In the past when he wasn't in prison their regular giving meant that he didn't always have to work as a tent-maker but could give

his full time and energy to preaching the gospel and planting churches. Their giving made a difference then and now but the key thing for Paul was that it was evidence of genuine spiritual fruit in their lives. It showed, in the words of v17, what may be credited to their account or v18 the language changes to that of sacrifice to God. The number one thing about their gift was that it showed genuine response to God. A genuine sense that all they had and were was God's anyway. It was concrete evidence that they loved Christ and longed for others to hear about him.

So tonight is a great opportunity for us to think about our giving. Am I giving? Could I give more generously? Am I giving prayerfully and joyfully? How are my motives in giving? Am I giving out of gratitude, on the basis of grace, or am I giving reluctantly or hoping to somehow twist God's arm into showing me favour? Some, through personal financial circumstances, will be able to give only a little. Others will be able to give a great deal. In a sense the sum is immaterial. The key issue is the attitude of glad and thankful sacrifice as we strive side by side for the faith of the gospel. Having said, v18, that his needs are amply supplied Paul goes on to reassure the Philippians about their needs, v19: ***“And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. To our God be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”***

Do you remember the image of the dart's board with us in the bull's eye, in Christ the next circle and then surrounded by the rest of the board of circumstances. The non-believing world doesn't know Christ. So the non-Christian sees him/herself in the bull's eye immediately surrounded by circumstances – often hostile, often unpredictable.

So where do you find security? Our culture's answer is to create around yourself a financial buffer or security cushion. And if you see things like the world does then sacrificial giving is crazy because giving is depleting your buffer; it's taking the filling out of your financial cushion. To which Paul says, but we don't see things as the world does. We're in Christ; He's got us. He'll take care of us. V19 ***“And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.”***

There's a great scene at the beginning of the film Superman – the original one with Christopher Reeve, where Lois Lane's helicopter has crashed on top of a skyscraper. She's hanging on for dear life to someone's hand in the helicopter but then her strength gives and she falls towards the horrified crowd below. On cue Superman shoots up from the pavement below and catches her and then glides gently up to the helipad with Lois in his arms. Then he says to her: “Don't worry Miss, I've got you!” And she takes a look down, swallows hard and says “You've got me but who's got you?” because she hasn't realised that Superman is (in the Hollywood world-view), ultimate security, his are the ultimate arms to be in. What Paul's saying in v19 is: “God has got us. And He in the real world is ultimate security. Underneath are his everlasting fatherly arms.”

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(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)