



THE SECRET OF CONTENTMENT (Sermon)

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A. Karl Barth, a famous theologian that influenced a lot of Christian thought, was asked what was his deepest theological thought. He responded, “That Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” There is something in this tremendous concept that should bring us joy: *Jesus loves me, this I know*.

Humans tend to look for joy and happiness in the wrong places. But it has been proven time and time again that material things and the accumulation of riches do not bring happiness or contentment. On the contrary, many times it is these material things that produce sadness and pain and rob us of true contentment.

If riches were the fountain of happiness, then North Americans would be the happiest people in the world. The United States has one of the richest economies in the world. Several years ago, this country had more than 5 million millionaires and 269 billionaires. The country which came closest to this was Japan, with 29 billionaires. However, the research indicated that only 20 percent of North Americans were happy.¹ Maybe that is why psychologist Ed Diener of the University of Illinois says, “Materialism is toxic to happiness. More so the wealthiest materialists are not that happy as those that do not worry about obtaining or spending anything.”

But what is contentment? Contentment is connected to a good frame of mind. It is a feeling of satisfaction with life which is not based on circumstances.

The Key to Paul’s Contentment

Even though Paul was not one of the twelve disciples of Christ, he was counted as one of the special disciples of Jesus. He had a personal encounter with Christ. He preached the

gospel of Christ. He became a great evangelist, pastor, missionary, and planter of churches. He was a good administrator and leader. Now he has come the end of his life. He is ready to retire and enjoy of a more tranquil and relaxed life; to enjoy the fruits of his labor. But all of a sudden he is taken prisoner and put in jail.

How did this affect his frame of mind? Did it make him feel sad, depressed, worried, discouraged, or mournful? He had every right to complain about God. He could have said, "*I am a servant of the Lord Most High. He is going to take me out of this prison. He is going to punish my enemies.*" "He knew that God had delivered the disciples many times. He himself had been liberated from jail on various occasions (see Acts 16). But now things did not seem to be getting better.

In his letter to Philippians, Paul makes an interesting declaration regarding contentment. And let's remember that the letter to the Philippians was written from a prison in Rome. To paraphrase, Paul tells them, Brothers, I have learned the secret of contentment. In order to be content and happy I do not need anything. Moreover, everything I need to be happy and content I already have. Because of that, I am happy in abundance. In scarceness, I am content; in my liberty, I am content; in my imprisonment, I am content; when I am satiated, I am content; and when I am hungry, I am content. When I do not have any problems, I am content. It does not matter what may happen, I am content. No one will take my contentment from me because my happiness does not depend on external factors since my joy and contentment come from my relationship with Jesus.

Now let us read the apostle's own words: "I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for 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. I can do all this through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:10-13).

Let’s review a couple of points in this declaration by Paul:

Life had not been easy for the apostle Paul. Since his conversion and transformation into a missionary believer and evangelist, he had to confront all kinds of adverse circumstances (see 2 Corinthians 11:24-29). Imprisonment, maltreatment, blows, stoning, shipwrecks, and threats have been part of Paul’s life. However, in Philippians Paul tells the church that he learned the secret to being content and happy, independent of the circumstances.

Neither was Paul’s contentment based on his personal gains. Many times we look for happiness in what we do instead of who we are. It is more important to be happy with who we are than with what we do. Sometimes we want to obtain an academic degree, an academic title, or maybe an important leadership role in the organization to which we belong. Sometimes we look for a promotion or a leadership role that is higher because we believe that this will bring us happiness.

Paul’s contentment did not come from his circumstances (Acts 16:25). Paul rejoiced in the Lord. In spite of the blows, in spite of the defamation, in spite of the lashing, and in spite of the imprisonment, he was happy. Instead of crying, he would sing; instead of complaining and judging, he would pray. Paul’s contentment did not proceed from his function or of his condition as an evangelist and apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul’s contentment came from his relationship with Jesus.

How is your relationship with Jesus? Does merely the thought of Jesus make you happy? Jesus was the center of Paul’s life. When Jesus is the center of a person’s life, then that person stays in tune with heavenly thoughts. That is why Paul was able to sing while in solitary confinement. You also can fill yourself with the celestial melodies.

An attitude of praise is an important ingredient of true contentment. Heaven permit that you and I always have an attitude of true contentment. Heaven permit that you and I always have an attitude of praise in our hearts; may we always share the great things that God has done for us, that we may count our blessings, and that we may remember what we came out of due to His grace.

Seven keys to live a happy life full of joy

1. Live your life with a purpose. One of the books that has most impacted both Christian and non-Christian communities in this century has been a book written by Rick Warren: *The Purpose Driven Life*. More than 20 million copies have been sold worldwide. The basic question that Pastor Warren presents in this book is: Why am I here on this earth? Every person must identify their purpose in life and decide to live according to that purpose. Many live with the Christopher Columbus syndrome. Christopher Columbus left on a journey without knowing where he was headed, when he arrived he did not know where he was, and when he returned home he did not know where he had been.

Many people only live to work, eat, and sleep, without any purpose in their life. That is why they do not have any encouragement or joy in their heart. When you discover the purpose of your life, and you live according to that purpose, your life will be full of joy. You will feel happy knowing that you are fulfilling the purpose for your life. Paul not only had a purpose in his life, he lived according to that purpose. Paul himself would say, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). Paul’s purpose in life was Christ. Christ brought him joy, Christ brought him happiness, and Christ provided him with contentment in his life. And if he died, it did not matter because his life was assured in Jesus Christ.

2. Try to do something out of the ordinary. Don’t just settle for the status quo. The extraordinary is not another thing to add to the ordinary. The secret of people who do extraordinary things while they are ordinary and common is that they attempt the extraordinary. Jesus told His disciples, “Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do

the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12). There is joy in the heart of the person that humbly attempts to do something for God.

There is the story of a pastor in Africa that wanted to do something big for God, so he decided to wake up early every day and pray for four hours. The result? His small congregation grew from a couple dozen members to thousands.

3. Live your life to give. The happiest people on Earth are those that live to give. There is joy in receiving and accumulating, but the greatest joy is received when you share what you have with others. That is why the Lord Jesus said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). Give more than what is expected of you; surprise people by giving them something extra. It can be money, it can be a service, it can be a smile, or it can be a helping hand. “Give and it will be given to you” (Luke 6:38).

Two of the richest men in the world are Bill Gates and Warren Buffet. Both of them are leaving all of their riches to help other people in the world because they have discovered the blessing in giving. There is someone in the United States that is a millionaire, and he has built various luxurious churches for the Hispanic community in Oregon. One day he said, “You know, the more I give to God, the more He gives me.” It seems illogical for this person to waste his money helping others, but instead of his money running out, he receives more. This is how things are with God. They are illogical, but true, secure, and wonderful.

4. Smile even if you don’t feel like it. Scientists say that only thirteen facial muscles are used to smile but 111 muscles are used to frown or get mad. That is why it is easier to smile than to get angry. An adage in English says that if life gives you lemons, make lemonade. Life can be so worrisome and difficult that sometimes we do not even want to smile. But smile anyway and you will feel happy.

There is another story of a man, and in this story the man was so angry that he did not want to smile. One day he entered a store and an old lady with white hair was coming out of

the store. She looked the man in the eyes and smiled tenderly. He never forgot that smile. He did not want to smile, so he tried to frown once again. But that tender smile from that old lady who was a stranger melted his hardened face, and he had no other choice but to return the smile. To his surprise, after that experience, it was very difficult to remain mad and he continued walking happy and full of joy.

If you do not feel like smiling, smile anyway. This will change your life and will fill it with joy. The following declaration is a strong blow to those who think that being a good Christian means you have to live embittered: “The self proclaimed Christians that are always moaning and seem to believe that joy and happiness are sin, do not know true religion.”²

5. Be thankful. This is a mandate from God. Many times we do not feel happy because instead of appreciating what we have, we desire what we don't. To the one that lives this way, joy is illusive. Take this example of what happened a couple years ago on a popular television program of the famous Oprah Winfrey. She was celebrating her program which was being televised to 109 countries, and in appreciation she decided to give a brand new car to 276 surprised people that showed up to watch the program that day in the studio audience. You would think that all of these people—without exception—would be thankful for receiving a brand new car valued at over \$28,000 US. Instead, many complained because at the end of the year, they would have to pay extra income taxes based on the value car.

This example demonstrates that a person is not satisfied with what he has and will never be content. That is why God gives us this mandate: “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:18). “This mandate is a confirmation that even the things opposed to our well being will redound for our benefit. God would not tell us to be grateful for what will cause us harm.”³ “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts . . . And be thankful” (Colossians 3:15).

6. Sing praises to the Lord. Music and praise have a special power to influence our state of mind and help us change a sad and melancholic attitude to a state of mind that is

happy and content. When Paul and Silas were put in jail for preaching the gospel, they could have complained and with good reason. They could have protested and talked against God, but even so, the Bible says that they would sing. “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:25).

“Singing is a way that we will always be able to brandish against dismay. Opening our hearts in this way to the rays of light of the presence of our Savior, we will find health and will receive his blessing. Let us pay tribute with praise and thanksgiving through song. When we see ourselves being tempted, instead of giving expression to our feelings, with faith let us sing a song of thanksgiving to the Lord.”⁴

We should always give praise to the Lord for He is good, His love endures forever (see Psalms 136:1).

7. Trust in God. One of the most beautiful Psalms in the Bible is Psalms 34. It was written by David when he was running away from Saul and he pretended to be crazy in front of Abimelech. In spite of his problem, in spite of the sadness that overwhelmed him, David was sure of one thing—that God is good, and He is in control of everything. It is a song of praise for divine protection. “Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him” (Psalms 34:8).

You should never forget that we are children of the Heavenly King, of the Lord of the heavenly armies. It is our privilege to trust completely in God and put our lives in His hands.

Jesus the farmer has planted a seed of contentment in your heart. Will you allow it to grow and bear fruit?

To Meditate

Question: How can we be happy amidst pain and suffering?

Answer: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Question: What example does the Bible give of persons who lived happily in spite of their circumstances?

Answer: David: “But may the righteous be glad and rejoice before God” (Psalms 68:3-4, Psalms 34:1-22).

Paul: “Rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4-6).

Question: What hope do the children of God have that He is in control of all things?

Answer: “The righteous person may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all;” (Psalms 34:19).

DECISION: I intend to be happy and be satisfied whatever my situation. Jesus is my life and the basis of my contentment.

¹Dennis Wholey, *Are You Happy?*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986)

²Ellen G. White, *Ministry of Healing*, p. 194.

³*Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁴*Ibid.*, p.196.