

Have you seen some of the memes about 2020? Some are hilarious. Let me share a few.

This is the worst month of 2020 (**picture**). 2019 was such a bad year (**picture**). But wait there's more (**picture**). Sometimes I wonder if this is happening (**picture**). Arno and toilet paper (**picture**). Me at the beginning and end of pandemic (**picture**). Stop touching your face (**picture**). After washing my hand so many times (**picture**). Holiday in Italy (**picture**). Ramses watching you complain about one plague (**picture**). Giant Meteor (**picture**).

When you think of contentment, what comes to mind? We're winding down the clock on our Philippians series: *Joy No Matter What* and are down to the last two messages. Throughout this series we've been looking at how God wants us to live in joy. Paul mentions the word *joy* 15 times in this short book. A vital part of joy is being content.

But let's be honest. When we consider commands to have joy and to be content, 2020 doesn't fit. If we're honest, we think **Contentment??? In 2020??? Seriously???** Yup, it's not optional. It's a command. Wonderfully, when God gives a command, He provides the empowerment for it.

Are you a content person? Most of us, when we think of contentment, think of learning to enjoy having less. Maybe a picture of a vow of poverty. That's not the Bible's understanding of contentment. Contentment has nothing to do with what you have or don't have. Paul is the poster child for this.

In Philippians 4:10-13, a man who sits in prison because of corrupt officials awaiting possible execution over false charges instructs us how to find contentment. The answer lies buried in the midst of a thank-you note.

This church at Philippi had sent a financial gift to Paul the prisoner and he wants to express his heartfelt thanks. At the same time he doesn't want to give the impression that the Lord wasn't sufficient for his every need. Even though he's in a very difficult situation, he doesn't want his donors to think that he was discontent before their gift arrived, yet he also wants them to know that their generosity was truly appreciated.

So Paul combines his gratitude with this lesson on contentment. We'll consider first what contentment is and then how we acquire it. Paul had learned to be content and so can we. If ever learning to be content was essential, it's now, in 2020. Learning to be content will radically change your life and testimony. There are **four key words** in this passage: **Concern, Content, Circumstance** and **Christ**. But first...

What is contentment? Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (**picture**), observed that our society is marked by "*inextinguishable discontent.*"

Our continued quest is for better and what's next. We want a better job with better pay and a better boss. We want better relationships, a better car, a better house or a longer drive in golf. We have a propensity to live endlessly for the next thing - the next weekend, the next vacation, the next purchase... the next experience. We're never satisfied, never content, and envious of those who have what we have not attained or accumulated.

Family psychologist, John Rosemond (**picture**) wrote about the epidemic of discontented boredom in our culture among suburban affluent children. As part of his study he found that on average American five year old owns 250 toys (**picture**). Think about it, a five-year-old has only lived for 260 weeks. That's almost one toy per week. No wonder they're bored!

Writing for *Quartz Magazine*, Ruth Whippman (**pictures**) found that: Despite all of the effort and money they're pumping into the endeavor, Americans consistently rank as some of the least happy people in the developed world. One recent survey even placed the day-to-day happiness of Americans two places behind the citizens of Rwanda.

According to the World Health Organization, Americans are the most anxious people on the planet, with nearly a third of us likely to suffer from an anxiety disorder. But it's not just them, it's us – it's in the Church.

The word *content* in 4:11 comes from a Greek word that means self-sufficient or independent. But it's not emotional detachment or complacency. I like this definition: *Contentment is an inner sense of rest or peace that comes from being right with God and knowing that He is in control of all that happens to us.*

It means having our focus on the eternal, the kingdom of God and serving Him, not on the love of money and things. If God grants us material comforts, we can thankfully enjoy them, knowing it all comes from our Father's loving hand. If He takes our riches, our joy remains steady, because we're anchored on Him. Contentment means not being battered around by difficult circumstances or people, and not being wrongly seduced by prosperity because our life is centered on a living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. No matter what happens to us or what others do to us, we have the steady assurance that the Lord is for us and He will not forsake us.

As John Stott (**picture**) wrote, "*Contentment is the secret of inward peace. It remembers the stark truth that we brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it. Life, in fact, is a pilgrimage from one moment of nakedness to*

another. So we should travel light and live simply. Our enemy is not possessions, but excess. Our battle cry is not 'Nothing!' but 'Enough!' We've got enough. Simplicity says, if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that."

A man went to a pastor for counseling. He was in the midst of a financial collapse. "I've lost everything," he bemoaned. "Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that you've lost your faith." "No," the man corrected him, "I haven't lost my faith." "Well, then I'm sad to hear that you've lost your character." "I didn't say that," the man corrected. "I still have my character." "I'm sorry to hear that you've lost your salvation." "That's not what I said," the man objected. "I haven't lost my salvation." "So, you have your faith, your character, your salvation. Seems to me," the minister observed, "that you've lost none of the things that really matter." And we haven't either.

You and I could pray like the Puritan. He sat down to a meal of bread and water, bowed his head and praised, "All this and Jesus too?" It's important to notice Paul's lesson on contentment is triggered by generosity on the part of these Philippian Christians. Generosity always brings wonderful things to us.

1. A mark of true Christianity is concern for others, particularly other believers. Notice verse 10, "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."

Paul mentions that the Philippians had *revived* their concern for him. The same word was used of flowers blossoming again or of trees leafing out in the springtime. That's how spiritual growth is to be. It's continually forward and a continually blossoming with more and more Christlikeness.

Paul is quick to add that they always had been concerned, but lacked opportunity. We don't know what had prohibited their sending a gift sooner, whether it was a lack of funds, not having a reliable messenger to take the gift, not knowing about Paul's circumstances, or some other reason. Whatever the reason, Paul was confident that God was in control, God knew his need, and God would supply or not supply as He saw fit. Paul trusted His Heavenly Father in this most practical area of his financial support.

Christ-followers care for others. Think about the encounters that you had last week. Consider the conversations you had with your neighbor, a clerk in a store or a stranger. Here's an important question: *When you were interacting with the other person, were your "antennas" up?* In other words, were you really listening to them with your mind, your heart, and your spirit? Were you thinking about how you could show care to them? Or were you just thinking of all the things you had to do and how to cut things short so you could move on? Do you really care about others? Do you love others as you love yourself, or as you want to be loved?

Concerning involvement in caring for others, the Bible says that if we see someone in need of food and we give them a blessing with our mouths but do nothing about their hunger, James 2:14-17, then what good is it? To be a Christian means to be personally involved.

We're giving you an opportunity to care for others as we collect non-perishable items for the Milwaukee Rescue Mission (**picture**). As Christ-followers, we're to be like Jesus. Jesus cared. We're to care too.

These Philippians demonstrated that they were truly Christ-followers by caring for others. If you're self-absorbed or are family absorbed, check your spiritual pulse. Those who know Jesus care for others.

Christ-followers are grateful for others. There are four levels of living. People in the lowest level constantly complain. These folks are always griping. Rather than being humbly grateful, they're grumbly hateful. The second is a tad higher. These aren't people who constantly complain; they just never give thanks for anything. They take things for granted. The third are those who thank God for the obvious blessings, when things are going well and everything is fine. The fourth, the highest level, are those who give thanks always for all things. This attitude will revolutionize your life.

When was the last time you received a "thank you" note and not for a wedding or graduation gift? This is a 1st century "thank you" note.

Why is it that we often think thankful thoughts, yet too rarely verbalize them? Are we afraid of looking foolish or weak? Are we too preoccupied with our own worlds to take the time to offer encouragement?

Sharing gratitude encourages others. Gratitude is contagious. If those around you are whiners or complainers, maybe you're the virus carrier. Work to cultivate thankfulness in your circle of influence. Paul did. Our words of thankfulness have the power to lift wounded souls and point hearts to our generous God Who's given us so much. Share your words of thanks and let God transform your life and soul, and the lives of those who receive them.

2. Contentment is a process of spiritual growth. "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." When my children were young, periodically they'd be bored with school and I'd hear that common saying every parent has heard: "I already know that." But did they?

Let me share what I shared with them. It's an explanation of having truly learned something. If you've truly learned something, you can illustrate it in several ways. If you've truly learned something, then you can teach it to someone else. For example, Scripture is clear that you don't really know what it is to be a Christ-follower unless you've disciplined someone else and trained them to be a Christ-follower. Too many of us know about contentment yet haven't really learned what it is to be content.

Benjamin Franklin (**picture**) said, "*Content makes poor men rich; discontent makes rich men poor.*"

Before movie companies were careful about translations—assuming no one in the U.S. would understand—a director needed an African messenger who was to gasp out a sentence to the big chief, collapsing as he delivered his message, since he'd run for days with his vital news. A local Englishman who spoke Swahili was asked to write an urgent-sounding sentence in the language. He did, tongue in cheek. An American actor played the part beautifully. And all went well until the movie was shown in Nairobi (where everyone spoke Swahili). The drama of the tense moment was reduced to extreme comedy. What the messenger actually said as he threw himself down exhausted before the chief was, "*I do not think I am getting paid enough money for this part.*" Too often that's us. We're discontent and covering it.

Paul had learned to be content in all conditions. It didn't come naturally. It wasn't an instantaneous transformation. It's a process, something we learn from walking with God each day. A key to this process is understanding that everything, major and minor, is under God's control. He uses all of our circumstances to train us in godliness if we trust Him. Our attitude in trials and our deliberate submission to His sovereignty in the trial is crucial.

Next week we'll look at the promise in 4:19. It's vital to note that God promises to supply our *needs*, not *greeds*. Most of us have far more than our needs. We live in relative luxury, even if we live in a house that we consider small or drive an older model car.

I read a story of a Jewish man in Hungary who went to his rabbi and complained, "Life is unbearable. There are nine of us living in one room. What can I do?" The rabbi answered, "Take your goat into the room with you." The man was incredulous, but the rabbi insisted, "Do as I say and come back in a week." A week later the man returned looking more distraught than before. "We can't stand it," he told the rabbi. "The goat is filthy." The rabbi said, "Go home and let the goat out, and come back in a week." A week later the man returned, radiant, exclaiming, "Life is beautiful. We enjoy every minute of it now that there's no goat—only the nine of us."

Much of contentment is a matter of perspective. When we live for ourselves and our own pleasure, we're not going to be content. If though we follow Paul in living to serve the Savior, we'll be content, whether we have little or much. We foolishly think that we'll be content when we accumulate enough money in the bank and enough possessions to make us secure.

Contentment is connected to generosity. The most miserable individuals you will ever meet are selfish. For the believer, we will only know contentment when we give generously to the Lord's work, whether to missions, our local church, or to meeting the needs of the poor through Christian ministries. Jesus said, "*Where your treasure is, your heart will be*" (Matt. 6:21). If your treasure is in this world, your heart will be in this world, which isn't a secure environment! If your treasure is in the kingdom of God, your heart will be there, and it is a secure, certain and eternal realm.

3. Circumstances must not be allowed to steal our contentment. "*In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.*"

So, what's your perfect day? And how often have you had a "perfect" day? Something much more powerful than having a perfect day is having a peaceful and contented heart...no matter what.

Happiness depends on circumstances; Contentment comes from confidence in God. Verse 12 lays this out. "*I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty.*" Poverty and prosperity both have their benefits, yet both can lead us astray spiritually. If we take Jesus' words seriously, riches can wreck our soul much quicker than poverty (Matthew 19:23-26).

Remember the comedy film, *Cool Runnings* (**picture**)? It's based on the true story about the first Jamaican bobsled team to go to the Winter Olympics. John Candy plays a former American gold medalist who becomes the coach for the Jamaican team. The players grow to like the American coach and affectionately dub him "Sled-god." Late in the story the coach's dark past comes out. In an Olympics following his gold medal performance, he broke the rules by weighting the U.S. sled, bringing disgrace on himself and on his team. One of the Jamaican bobsledders could not understand why anyone who'd already won a gold medal would cheat. Finally he nervously asked Candy to explain. "I thought I had to win," said the coach. "But I learned something. If you are not happy without a gold medal, you won't be happy with it, either."

Paul knew the perfect day or riches or anything else are not the way to contentment. He refused to become a slave to things he couldn't control. What about you? Are you killing yourself to get some gold medal?

My friend, if you're not happy without what you think you must have, you won't be happy with it. During this pandemic many of us have been telling ourselves and others, "I just want the world to return to normal, to be like it used to be." Were you content then? If not, what makes you think you'll be content if it went back to the way it was? It's not a problem of circumstances. It's our heart and attitude.

4. Our source of contentment is Jesus Christ. *"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."* Corrie Ten Boom (**picture**), who suffered the loss of her family and was imprisoned in a Nazi Concentration Camp said, *"If you look at the world, you will be distressed. If you look within you will be depressed. But if you look at Christ, you will be at rest."*

Paul wasn't some superman or super-saint. He just knew a "Super God." This is one of the most popular verses in the Bible. You see it on posters and t-shirts and coffee mugs. It consistently ranks in the top ten of people's favorite Bible verses. And it should. It's a wonderful verse. One I often turn to for encouragement and strength.

Unfortunately, it's also one of the most misapplied verses in the Bible. Many read this verse apart from its context and apart from the full scope of Scripture and misinterpret it to mean, "I can do anything I want through Him who gives me strength." So the person who wants a new car but can't afford the payments goes ahead and buys something they can't afford saying, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength!" Or the student who never studied tries to cover for their negligence by going into the test saying, "I can do everything through Him who gives me strength!" Prosperity preachers quote this verse to tell you that you can do or get anything you want because, "I can do everything through Him who gives me strength."

Fortunately, this verse doesn't say I can do or get anything I want, because we're all selfish people. That would create a nightmare of a world. No, it's a far better promise. No matter what my circumstances, no matter what trials I may face, no matter how difficult the road ahead, God will give me the strength to make it through. Whether in need or in plenty, whether hungry or well-fed, I can handle everything through Him who gives me strength.

The promise is not that I can do anything I want but rather I can do everything God calls me to do through Him who gives me strength. The secret to contentment is not self-sufficiency, but Christ-sufficiency. The strength I need doesn't come from within, but from without. When I'm weak, then I'm strong. I can do everything through Him. That's the key. Look to Christ for your strength.

There are two ways to handle pressure. One is illustrated by the bathysphere (**picture**), which is a miniature submarine. Bathyspheres are used to explore the ocean in places so deep the water pressure would crush a regular sub like a tin can. Bathyspheres compensate for the pressure with a steel hull several inches thick. They're small and cramped. When scientists in bathyspheres reach the ocean floor, however, they find they're not alone. When the outside lights are turned on and they look out the thick windows, they see fish. These fish cope with extreme pressure in a totally different way. They don't build thick skins; instead, they remain elastic and free. They compensate for the pressure outside through equal and opposite pressure inside themselves.

Content, maturing Christians aren't hard or thick-skinned. They're flexible. They love Jesus, depend on Him and are moved by the needs of others around them. They care about what happens to themselves and others. They've learned to rely on God's power within to enable them to withstand pressure from without. This strength wasn't something that Paul conjured up from within. It was a power that was infused into his life. Paul's statement in verse 13 was not an expression of self-confidence but God-confidence.

Conclusion: Essentially, it comes down to this – either you're a *thermometer* or you're a *thermostat* believer? A thermometer reflects its circumstances. Depending on the temperature, the mercury moves up or down. It moves according to the circumstances it's set in. Everything around a thermometer controls how the thermometer works, whether it moves up or down.

A thermostat changes its surroundings. Unlike the thermometer, the thermostat controls the heat or coldness around it. To have contentment, you must choose to be a thermostat believer.

Let's tie this up today with *Four Take Home Truths* and we're done.

We experience contentment when we choose to trust God and believe His promises. Paul learned that contentment has nothing to do with circumstances and has everything to do with your perspective on Jesus.

We experience contentment when our minds are focused on the right things. Focusing on anything other than God doesn't bring contentment. Contentment is "being satisfied in the Lord alone."

We experience contentment when we realize that we're just like every other person. Contentment must be unhinged from circumstances and not just for everyone else. This is particularly true when it comes to our contentment as it relates to money and possessions. Too often we know it's supposed to apply to us, and yet, we think somehow we're different and that the next _____ (fill in the blank) will fill the hole in our hearts. It won't.

We experience contentment when we bathe our hearts and minds in the Father's Love. We experience contentment when our confidence is in the Father who has promised us rest. The Father who has given you, as Peter says, “*everything that pertains to life and godliness through the knowledge of His Son*” (2 Peter 1:3).

Contentment??? **In 2020???** **Seriously???** Absolutely! Our Heavenly Father loves us and gives us all of the grace we need to rest in Him and know contentment. This isn't just for Paul or super saints. It's for us! Are you experiencing the peace and contentment that comes from “*I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.*”