

Essays in Philippians- Learning Contentment

Part 16

Phil. 4:11

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. 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. I can do all things through him who strengthens me (Phil. 4:10-13).

The secret to life is contentment. Simply defined, contentment is a state of satisfaction or fulfillment. In some respects, contentment can stifle growth and achievement. Paul refused to rest in past accomplishments. Instead, he continued to reach forward to the prize (Phil. 3:12-13). In other respects, contentment is the reward for a job well done.

Are you content in your life? Life is filled with a wide range of experiences. There are highs and lows; peaks and valleys. We experience joys and sorrows. Suffering in the solitude of a Roman jail, Paul reflected on his life. He acknowledged that he had lived in a variety of circumstances and conditions. He had been through hard times. He was nearly destroyed by events that transpired in Ephesus (2 Cor. 1:8-10). Yet, he also had prosperous seasons during his life. Many people obeyed the Gospel as a result of his efforts. Yet, he remained content throughout his life.

When we read of Paul's contentment, we are rightfully impressed. Most of us are probably doubtful of our abilities to have handled Paul's circumstances the way he did. Yet, we all want his contentment. How, then, can we share in Paul's contentment?

"I Have Learned"

Arguably the most important word of this passage is the word "learned." Contentment is a learned state of being. Of course, to become anything in life, we have to learn. How can we remain at peace when life disappoints us? How can we remain humble when we have success? We have to learn.

The process of learning is multi-faceted. First, learning requires desire. We must take an interest in contentment. We have to want to know how to handle hard times and good times. Learning must become a priority. If we lack contentment, this may be due to our failure to learn this mindset. Second, learning requires commitment. Most do not mind learning to be content when life is good. It is easy to be at peace when we have what we want. On the contrary, learning contentment when life is hard is unappealing to us. When life does not go our way, we tend to become angry and bitter. We must stay committed to learning contentment even when it is hard.

Learning to Be Content

First, learning contentment involves acceptance. Acceptance is difficult, especially when life does not go our way. We must learn to accept life as it is. Of course, we do not want to accept when something bad happens to us. However, refusing to accept reality can give birth to anger and resentment. These attitudes are debilitating to our growth as Christians. They do not bring peace. Denial only bring destruction.

For example, Paul had to learn to accept his imprisonment. Accepting his situation gave him the presence of mind to be useful as an evangelist. He did not spend his days railing against the government. He did not plot revenge against Christians who were using his imprisonment to discredit him (Phil. 1:15-18). Instead, he found ways to be productive for the sake of the Gospel.

Second, learning contentment requires trust in Christ. During the valleys of Paul's life, he grew in his trust of Christ. Remembering the events at Ephesus, he wrote, "For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again" (2 Cor. 1:8-10).

Paul found peace by relying on God. This passage in Philippians is an expression of Paul's confidence. He learned that he could face every season of life with Christ. The momentum of Philippians chapter four builds to one of the most famous lines Paul ever wrote: "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:13).

Third, contentment is gained by service. Too many foolishly think contentment will come when something good happens in their life. Until that time, they remain upset and dissatisfied. Paul was not waiting to be released from prison to become content. Instead, he was teaching prison guards and writing letters of encouragement to churches.

Service is the primary activity of saints. Jesus exemplified service by washing the disciples' feet (John 13). James wrote that visiting orphans and widows was the demonstration of pure religion (Jas. 1:27). Paul told the elders of Ephesus, "You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:34-35).

To experience contentment, we must spend and be spent for the sake of others (2 Cor. 12:15). We must pour ourselves into the lives of others. We must help others get to Heaven. As Paul poetically described earlier in the letter, the outpouring of self-giving love expected of us was most significantly shown in Christ (Phil. 2:5-11). Contentment will never be gained through selfishness.

Conclusion

Paul's letter to the saints at Philippi was and is encouraging. The saints of this church would have been reassured to learn that Paul was alive and continuing his ministry. This letter gives us a clearer perspective on life. As Christians, the world can discourage and depress us. We need to be wise to our opponents. Yet, Paul teaches us that we can strive together and make progress for the Gospel in the world. No matter what is happening in our world or our lives, we can be useful in the service of God.