



**CONTEMPT OR CONTENTMENT?  
Philippians 4:10-13**

Dr. Fred Craddock tells of growing up during the depression and how often money was not in great supply for his family. The family had to move to town to seek work. Every able family member tried to find some work to earn money. The family kept an old cigar box on the kitchen table where all the funds that were earned were kept in order that his mother could pay the rent and buy the necessary food items.

However, once in a while his Dad – on a Friday night – would take the money and go to town and buy his wife a box of chocolates or a beautiful rose. She would always fuss and tell her husband that they did not have the funds. One day his father shared something that he never forgot. He said to Mrs. Craddock, **“When our lives are defined by what goes in and out of the box, we will then be poor people. Life would have then robbed us of our joy.”**

The same thing can happen to a church – if we would allow what goes in and out of those offering plates to solely define the life of our church.

As we open our scripture lesson today, we see that Paul refused to allow this imprisonment in a Roman jail cell to define his life and purpose.

If I were to divide or select an overarching theme for each of the four chapters of this marvelous letter, it would look like this:

**Chapter One** – Christ is the ultimate purpose for life.

**Chapter Two** – Christ is our pattern and role model for Christian servanthood.

**Chapter Three** – Jesus Christ is our identity and goal for life’s sacred journey.

**Chapter Four** – Jesus Christ supplies every good thought and need for us to live the Christian life.

I believe in **Philippians 4:10-13**, that all four of these secrets shared for the journey of life are operative. It was because of these four secrets or insights being operative in Paul’s life that prison bars did not imprison him or his mission in life but in reality became a launching pad for future activity.

I want to share three insights on how we can have contentment or peace in Christ even in the midst of challenging circumstances.

### **FIRST CONTENTMENT IS FOUND IN FOCUSING ON WHAT IS IMPORTANT.**

A few years ago the movie “**Titanic**” was a blockbuster hit. There were many important lessons learned from this disaster.

A very wealthy woman found herself in a lifeboat with common people. Suddenly she remembered something of importance in her first class stateroom. She was given three minutes – or she would lose her place on the boat. She passed the casino tables where millions of dollars were scattered almost ankle deep across the floor. Then she pushed aside her expensive diamond necklace and earrings and grabbed 3 small oranges left over from her afternoon snack – and raced back to the lifeboat. There she shared her food with others. However, thirty minutes before that – she would not have chosen 3 oranges over her jewelry and casino winnings. In seconds – worthless things became priceless. Yes, when adversity breathes its cold breath upon us – we are forced to choose what is important.

In prison, Paul focused in on his relationship to Jesus Christ. That alone was worth more than anything else in all creation. Paul focused in on the sovereign will of God. Paul was encouraged by the gifts brought to the prison cell by Epaphroditus.

That gift - and the expression of care and love it represented - was of greater value than the gift itself. Yes, Paul learned that true contentment does not arise from external cultural circumstances – but from an internal commitment that cannot be taken away.

### **SECONDLY, CONTENTMENT GIVES US THE ABILITY TO CHOOSE OUR VIEW OF LIFE IN ANY GIVEN SET OF CIRCUMSTANCES.**

The dictionary defines contentment as the “ability to adjust oneself and desires to what is at hand – thus producing ease of mind.” In **verse 11** Paul shares, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.” We know he had times of great resources and times of meager rations – but he did not quit or give up the ministry and mission. Instead of grumbling – Paul was far too busy pouring out his life as a drink offering on the altar of the Lord. The story is told of a great violinist who was giving a concert – when the A string on his violin broke. Without stopping, he adjusted to the situation, and finished the piece on three strings. A lesser violinist might have stopped and complained about his bad luck. But it takes a really great artist to do what he did. He was able to work with what was available to him. He made and produced the best music he could without creating any sour notes about the broken string.

Someone once asked the great Christian, Phillips Brooks, why he was so confident and optimistic about life? He replied, “Because I am a Christian.” As Christians, we can be confident, hopeful, and joyful, because God is with us and nothing

can separate us from Him. You and I can be confident if we choose to be, and if Christ is really in us, we will be!

Yes, faith gives us stability to stand firm regardless of the circumstances. Many of us remember that in our health classes we learned that on the hottest day if we take our temperature we are still 98.6 degrees. We are no hotter than usual – we just feel that way. It is also reassuring that in the coldest weather, we are as warm as usual.

Paul learned from life's many experiences that regardless of the environment surrounding him, he had spiritual stability because of the faith he had in Jesus Christ.

For those who have traveled to Niagara Falls, there is a foot bridge which spans Welland River just before it empties into the Niagara River and heads toward the great falls. At the point of the foot bridge, the river is more calm and navigable. But danger lurks. And so there is a sign affixed to the posts of the bridge intended to be read and heeded by boaters. It asks only two questions:

1. Do you have an anchor?
2. Do you know how to use it?

“Do you have an anchor?” Most of us can readily respond in the affirmative to this question. We have a faith and a belief which holds us firm. This is what gave Paul his source of contentment.

### **THIRDLY, CONTENTMENT IS USUALLY CLOSER TO YOU THAN YOU THINK.**

I'll tell you a parable. An American was down in Mexico on one of those beautiful beaches, near a village. He came upon a fisherman coming up with his boat onto the beach. He got out, unloaded his catch, just one fish. The American asked him how long it took him to catch that fish.

He said, “**Not very long. It doesn't take me long at all.**”

The American said, “Why didn't you stay out longer and catch some more fish?”

He said, “**Because this is sufficient for my family today.**”

The American asked him “What do you do with the rest of your day?”

He said, “Well, I sleep late, I fish a little, I come home and play with my children, then I take a siesta with my wife, then later in the afternoon my wife and I go with our children to the village. I sip a little wine, talk to my friends, and play the guitar. I have a very full and busy life.”

The American said, “Listen, I can help you. I have an MBA from Harvard, and I can help you. If you spend more time fishing, you can catch more fish, sell them, and

buy a bigger boat. In time, with more earnings, why you would be able to buy a lot of boats. In fact, you could have a fleet of boats. Then in time, with enough earnings, you wouldn't have to sell your fish to somebody else. You could put a cannery right here on this beach and process your own fish. Pretty soon you could get out of here. You could live in Mexico City, or Los Angeles, or someplace like that. Then pretty soon you would have enough money to be a wealthy man."

The Mexican asked, "**How long will this take?**"

He said, "Maybe fifteen or twenty years."

The Mexican asked, "**Then what?**"

He said, "Then you can retire, move to some beautiful spot. You can sleep late – fish a little – play with your children – take a walk into the village and be with your friends." Don't waste 15 or 20 years of your life working for that which is yours now. Christ is sufficient for this day – and every day. You can have contentment today – and never allow chaos to provide any view or direction for your life. Is Christ how you view your life?

Now to **verse 13** in which Paul shares, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." During the Korean Conflict, on a battle scarred hillside, a chaplain crawled through enemy fire to be where a soldier lay seriously wounded. The chaplain wet his handkerchief and wiped the man's face, gave him sips of water, held his hand, talked and prayer and waited with him until medics could arrive. Despite his pain and weakness, the soldier asked, "Sir, you are a follower of Jesus, aren't you?" "I try to be," the chaplain replied, "but I sometimes falter and fail." There was a moment's pause and then the soldier went on, "I'm not a Christian, sir, but if following Jesus makes you do what you've done for me, then I want to be a follower of Him, too."<sup>1</sup>

I am sure that as the Roman soldiers provided 24 hour round the clock security to prevent Paul from escaping, they saw the authentic witness of a man who refused to allow his imprisonment to have the last and deciding word. We know Paul's witness and work in this unlikely place of evangelistic opportunities led various Roman citizens to share, "**If following Jesus makes you this contented and provides you a life of such great purpose and power, we want to be followers of Him, too.**"

This brings us nicely to the Lord's Table. To keep our faith stable and strong, Christ gave us his body and blood. Here we are empowered to choose that which is important. Here the secrets of a God-centered life are clearly revealed.

Many live with contempt for life. Here we are given the power – purpose – and passion to be content with life. Yes – we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. May the bread and cup do exactly that. Let's go to the Holy Table.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz, March 4, 2007  
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## **ENDNOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to now-retired Pastor Donald J. Shelby for this story.