

December 9, 2012
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NO HALF-BAKED CAKES
Philippians 4:11-13

INTRODUCTION

With the arrival of the Christmas season once again the time was upon us to put up lights outside. I am not going to put up as many lights as I have in the past in part because right now it's too hard. It's not that putting up lights has gotten more difficult. It's that getting to the lights is so hard. That's because we have them stored in our garage. Oh the horror. Our garage is currently a nightmare. As soon as I open the door to our garage I feel a sense of depression. It's overwhelming. There's so much stuff in there that it has almost all become useless because you can't access any of it. No matter what you want a mountain of other things is in the way. It is so defeating. I believe the stuff is miraculously multiplying in there.

It's not all our fault. Laurie and I are not hoarders. I don't have my yearbooks from high school or college. We don't have 20 year old magazines stacked in the garage. We don't keep old toilet paper rolls or other useless trinkets. Of course, we do have some bottles of coke in there that are more than 30 years old, so I suppose we have contributed to our own problem. However, my children have seriously exacerbated the situation. When they both moved this year a bunch of their stuff ended up in our garage. They claim they're going to sell it, but it's been 8 months and it isn't going anywhere. I saw a neighbor's garage that was sparkling clean, totally organized and neat, with space for two cars in it. At that point I suffered from a severe case of garage envy.

Our garage serves as a cautionary tale. It is one more example of the fact that having more stuff has not actually made life easier and more peaceful. Indeed, quite the opposite is true. Having more has made my life more complicated and in some ways more difficult. I've been discussing recently the topic "Keep It Simple." How can we simplify our lives, for we all know that is a big step toward having more peaceful lives? Today we are going to look at a quality that we are commanded by God to have that will go a long way toward enabling us to live more simply. This quality can be seen in Philippians 4:11-13.

CONTENTMENT IS CRUCIAL TO SIMPLICITY

This little passage is part of a letter written by one of history's great church planters, Saul of Tarsus whose middle name was Paul. Late in his life, probably around 61 A. D., he wrote this letter to a group of people in the Macedonian town

of Philippi. They comprised a church he had planted around ten years earlier. Paul was incarcerated, probably in Rome, when he wrote. This church had just sent him money to help him out. Roman prisoners like Paul had to pay for their own food, so this was a big help. In this part of the letter Paul thanked them for the gift.

However, he also went to some pains to tell them that it wasn't just the gift that he valued, it was their love for him. In this passage he says he certainly could use the money, but he would survive either way. What he was most joyful about was the fact that these people continued to care about him as they always had.

In that context he made the statement, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." At that time in his life he had nothing. He was in chains and had no resources. There had been other times in his life when he was free and had as much money as he needed. In both kinds of situations, whether he had nothing or more than he needed, he had learned to be at peace.

Our complications and the stress in our lives often begins with the premise, "I need more" or "I need something else." We feel we need some change in our circumstances to be at peace or happy. Then the pressure begins. We must have this new or different thing. We obsess, strive and stress to make the change come about, whatever it may be. It becomes a serious focus of our time and energy. If we don't get it we become frustrated, our lives become consumed and distorted by our need for it, and if we never get it we feel cheated and can easily become resentful. Or we finally get it, but eventually it becomes just one more thing in our life and we move on to something else. The first step to stress and complication in life is discontentment. To be discontented is to step onto a treadmill that will never stop. We will run until we are exhausted and even then we will not rest because the treadmill keeps going. Socrates said, "He who is not contented with what he has would not be contented with what he would like to have."

Hebrews 13:5 says, "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have." We can expand that from money to all areas of life. Be content with how much recognition, how much approval, how much success you have.

But isn't discontentment the starting point of change? Isn't it true that any improvement starts with being unhappy with existing conditions? Doesn't constant contentment mean that we will be forever stuck with the status quo? Perhaps you noticed the news in the local sports scene this week that at the end of the season the Chargers are going to fire both their head coach and their general manager. Why

would they do that? I don't know. Perhaps it has to do with the fact that the team has been in a steady decline the past 4 years and this year they are just woeful. If you do not follow the Chargers you should know that this season they have found astounding, at times nearly spectacular and most certainly improbable, ways to lose games. Before the season started the general manager A. J. Smith said if the team didn't go to the playoffs this year he deserved to be fired.

So the owner of the Chargers is not content with the team. I should hope not. They're painful to watch. He, like everyone else in the universe, apparently realizes that if he wants the team to get better he has to make some changes. The changes are motivated by the fact that he is not content to put a team on the field that makes its fans want to put bags over their heads because they are so embarrassed by its ineptitude. His discontentment with the pathetic status quo is the only hope for improvement!

Isn't that true of all of us? Why would you go to college or grad school if you were content with whatever your situation is? Why would you marry if you were content to be single? Why would you apply for a better job if you were content with the one you have? Why would you do anything to change your circumstances if you were always content with what you have?

So is Dean Spanos, the Chargers' owner, disobeying God because he is discontented and acting on that lack of contentment? No, being content doesn't mean you have no interest in change. Acts 21 tells us that when Paul was falsely accused of violating the temple in Jerusalem a riot occurred and he was put in jail. He went through several trials, all of which revealed that he was innocent of any wrong. But the Roman governor left him in prison because he wanted a bribe from Paul. Paul decided that staying in prison indefinitely because he wouldn't bribe a corrupt official was not ideal. So he did something about it. He appealed to Caesar. That was akin to appealing to the Supreme Court today. That got him out from under the corrupt governor and sent his case to Rome where he could get some kind of decision on it.

Was Paul discontent with his situation? I don't believe he was. I think he was content, but that his contentment did not rule out taking action to change a less than ideal situation. This raises the question, what is contentment? The ancient Stoic philosophers that were popular in Paul's day were big on contentment. In fact, it was the prime virtue for Stoics. They felt that all virtue depended on being content. In their view contentment was an almost zen-like quality. One was to

remove himself from the need and desire for anything or anyone so that one's peace then could never be affected by what others did.

That's not what Paul meant by contentment. In a more biblical view God wants us to be fully human and fully alive. He wants us to experience all of life, not be numb to it. So this contentment is rather different than the Stoics envisioned. Here is my definition of a biblical concept of contentment:

Contentment is a cheerful, humble and grateful acceptance of whatever God has given to me today.

This kind of contentment will seek to change something less than optimum if possible. But it will accept it if God chooses not to grant that change, and will do so cheerfully, not begrudgingly and resignedly. Where contentment diverges from discontentment is that it doesn't see change as crucial to life. Yes, it will seek improvement if possible, but it doesn't think that improvement is essential to joy, to hope, to peace and to fulfillment.

CONTENTMENT IS AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF JOY

Note that my definition of contentment sees it as **cheerful** acceptance. This is different than stoic acceptance. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said in regard to contentment, "After all, the best thing one can do when it is raining is let it rain." There is some common sense about that, but that's close to resignation. I'm not a big fan of rainy days. I'm all right if we have one or two, but when we have three straight days of rain I am really over it. But I can't do a thing about it so I just have to accept it. It won't do any good to call the weather service and complain or to call the weather channel and ask them to change the forecast for tomorrow. All I can do is accept it. That's resignation, not contentment.

We have lots of family that live in the Seattle area. Perhaps you are aware of the fact that it can be a little rainy up there. Some of our relatives up there seem to revel in that weather. But we have one relative up there who sees the weather for what it truly is. Beginning in January we start getting calls from this person. She says, "I can't take it anymore. I've had it. We are moving. I can't live like this. This is the last year that I will put up with the gloom and the rain." This has gone on for years. She's still there so in one sense I guess you could say she has accepted it. But the truth is that she is not content. She has not embraced the climate up there. She is not cheerful about it. True biblical contentment is about embracing what God has brought to you today. If we have it, it completely changes our perspective on life.

Let's continue to use Paul as our example. Do you know what he did while in chains in Rome after years of living as a prisoner unfairly? Was he railing against the injustice? Was he grumbling against God because of the crummy circumstances he caused him to be in? In Philippians 1:12 addressing his situation he said, "Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel." He concluded his discussion of his situation saying, "I will continue to rejoice." He was cheerfully accepting his situation and was joyful! It wasn't according to his plan, but he embraced what was happening.

In 2:17 he said, "Even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith; I am glad and rejoice with all of you." In other words, even if this goes south and they decide to execute me, I rejoice in what is happening! His message in 3:1 was "Finally my brothers, rejoice in the Lord." In case they didn't get it he said in 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" Paul was cheerfully accepting his situation. He was doing all he could to change it, but if it didn't get any better then he'd accept that and rejoice anyway. He was content with whatever happened and he urged the Philippians to rejoice too.

Do you know what their circumstances were? They lived in what Paul described in 2 Corinthians 8:2 as "extreme poverty" and "severe trial." Wouldn't you think those are circumstances that call for change? They lived in poverty that would be inconceivable to us. No doubt if they could change it Paul would urge them to do so. But in the meantime he said, "Rejoice. Accept whatever God has brought into your lives today. Rejoice in him and be at peace." Be content with your circumstances today, whatever they are.

Joy and discontentment are not compatible. I recall one year when I really wanted a bike and my parents gave me one. But the two boys who lived across the street who always got the latest and greatest of everything, that same Christmas got new bikes too. Only they got shiny new 10 speed bikes. We had never seen 10 speed bikes with all those gears. They were so cool. You could ride them so fast because of all the gears. And you could go up a super steep hill in them. And I had a dumb 3 speed bike. It would have been just fine if our buddies hadn't gotten something so much better. From that point on I had no joy in my bicycle. In fact, I could see all that was wrong with it and riding it was not fun. The only thing that changed was my attitude. I was discontented with what I had so joy disappeared.

There will be no lasting joy for us until we are content with whatever our situation is. There will only be restlessness, disappointment, anxious striving for more, stress and frustration. Philippians 4:4 says, “Rejoice in the Lord always.” What sort of sentence is that? Grammarians call it an imperative. That means it is a command. It’s not a question, a statement or a suggestion. It’s not a recommendation. It is an order. You are *ordered* to rejoice in the Lord. When? Are you to rejoice when he finally answers your prayer and life goes the way you want? No, you are to rejoice *always*. Every single day of your life, regardless of what happens.

Most of you know Michael Townsend, who is a captain in the Marines. Suppose his commanding officer orders him to get in an F-18, fly it to the Chocolate Mountain gunnery range and drop some practice bombs. He could say, “Sir, I’m just not feeling that today. Maybe tomorrow.” Would he be obeying the order? Obviously not. He could say, “Uh, I’ll think about it Sir.” He still would not be obeying the order. He would only obey that order when he got in the plane, flew it to the desert and fired that missile. We are ordered by God to rejoice. And if we are not content with whatever is in our life this day, we will not rejoice. Just to be clear, if we are not rejoicing, we are directly disobeying God!

The great Puritan, Thomas Watson, wrote a treatise entitled *The Art of Divine Contentment*. He pointed out that if we are discontented we cannot rejoice in the Lord, we are not thankful to his mercy and we most certainly are not trusting him and giving him glory. So Watson said a discontented Christian is like a cake baked only on one side. That person may give the outside to God, but not his heart. This passage calls on us not to be half-baked cakes. It calls on us to give our hearts to God, to truly trust him and be content so that we can indeed rejoice always and be full of joy and gratitude.

CONTENTMENT MUST BE LEARNED

Paul’s statement in verse 11 that he had learned to be content in every situation is important. That suggests that there was a time when he was not content. He went through the experience of always longing for more or for thinking he could only be at peace if his situation changed. Through his experiences he learned to accept what God was doing in his life. I don’t know the exact process God took him through but I do know that it was something that had to develop in him. Part of that process involved both experiencing good and the less than ideal.

Why does contentment have to be learned? Thomas Watson wrote that when you “bid a natural man...be contented, you bid him to do what he hath no skill in.”

Contentment is not our natural state. For human beings the natural state of our heart is to be discontent. That is our default, always looking for something, different, for more, for better.

All the sports teams I follow seem cursed. I've pulled for the Padres and Chargers for more than 30 years and in all that time my teams amassed a total of 0 championships. I've come to the conclusion that if I team I like wins a championship it will probably be the end of the world. In hockey I became a fan of the L. A. Kings when I lived in L. A. after college. For 40 years they have failed to win a championship, until this year. In June they won the Stanley Cup as champions of the NHL for the first time in history. And sure enough, the world has ended. At least the hockey world has. Have you noticed that there is no NHL hockey being played? Do you know why? They have a labor dispute going on. One third of the games of what would have been the current season have already been canceled and there is now fear that they might wipe out the entire season. This is a business that brought in \$3.3 billion last year and they are fighting because they can't agree on how to share it. The minimum salary for players in the league was \$525,000. The average salary was \$2.4 million. Excuse me, but what's the problem here? Are the owners making money? Yes. Are the players making money? Yes, a lot of it. So why is there no hockey? Because the human heart is never content. It's never enough. That is a part of the curse, a tragic aspect of the human condition.

Proverbs 27:20 says, "Death and destruction are never satisfied, and neither are the eyes of man." We certainly know that death is never satisfied. It never says, "All right, that's enough. I don't need any more people to die." It is insatiable. Unfortunately that proverb says that the eyes of all of us are just as insatiable. We're never satisfied. We have to learn to be content because it is foreign to us.

So how does one learn to live in the unnatural state of contentment? God has to work in our lives and likely take us through the same process that Paul had to go through. We experience want and plenty. We set our hearts on so many things. We decide that if I could have the right award, the right success, the right job, the right amount of money, the right amount of approval, the right amount of recognition, the right applause, the right husband or wife, then it will be enough. I will be content and happy.

One thing that God will use to help us learn contentment is to give us that very thing that we desire so that we can discover the surprising truth that it's not enough. We get that thing and shortly thereafter find ourselves thinking we need

something else to be satisfied. After a while we might begin to learn that contentment isn't in the thing.

God will also use the exact opposite experience to teach us the same lesson. He sometimes will cause us to do without something so that we can discover that we can be joyful and at peace even without it. Have you heard about Snackocalypse Now? That's right, Hostess Brands is bankrupt and we are in danger of losing Ding Dongs, Ho Hos, Wonder Bread and Twinkies forever. I admit that at one time in my life I had a weakness for Twinkies. I'm not a fan of sweets and desserts in general, so this was a little odd, but I loved the things. However, for a long time I went without them. We just didn't buy them because they were an unnecessary expense. An interesting thing happened. I discovered that my life was just fine without Twinkies. In fact, when I had one a couple of years ago I found that I didn't like it all that much. I did without them and found that I was just fine without them, so that if they do in fact disappear now it will be no loss for me.

Paul experienced something like that. He went through having no money, no freedom, no respect from other people. In 2 Corinthians 11:23-25 Paul described some of the travails he had undergone in his ministry. In verses 26-27 he said, "I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked." What he found was that in all of those situations his Lord was with him still loving him and working for his good. What he discovered was that he could rejoice, he could be at peace, he could be content even in the most appalling of circumstances. He learned to be content.

CONTENTMENT COMES FROM GOD

Here is the secret Paul learned. "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." That is a verse that people love and constantly misuse. We rip it right out of its context and apply it to all manner of situations that it really wasn't intended for. I can pass this test that I haven't studied for because I can do everything through him who gives me strength. Um, maybe God is going to give you strength to deal with it when you get the test back and learn that you flunked. I can become an NFL football player because God will give me the strength. Uh, no, he probably won't. That's not what this verse promises.

Paul was referring to something in particular when he wrote this. He was thinking of being content no matter what kind of situation he was in, no matter what might happen to him. He was able to be content because God strengthened him and enabled him to. God was the source of his ability to be content.

The ancient Stoics saw contentment as a character quality that we have to develop on our own. Paul knew that would not work. This is something, as we saw earlier, that is not natural. If it is not natural it has to be supernatural. It has to come from God. This ability to be at peace is something God will give us if we ask him and trust him continually. Trust is a key element for having this ability. We have to trust the wisdom, the power, and the goodness of a sovereign God.

APPLICATION

Francis Chan, author and former pastor, related something he read in a letter he received from a 13-year-old young lady. She is recently baptized and since then she has been telling everyone she knows about Jesus. She was excited because she had a big breakthrough with five girls that she had been talking to about Jesus. Then she wrote this: "I've had kids curse at me, flip me off, even plug their ears and say, 'la, la, la, la' while I was talking to them. WHATEVER. I don't care. I know what I'm doing is good and good for them to hear, and I know there are more kids out there like me who love Jesus. Don't be afraid of what other people think. Do what you know is right. Hope to see you in heaven."

At a time in life when most people are dominated, enslaved, by peer pressure, by fear of what their colleagues might think, here's a young girl who is looking to Jesus and saying, "Do what you know is right." When some mock her she responds "WHATEVER." Her "whatever" is a modern version of "I'm content." She's at peace, not desperate to get approval she feels she has to have. What can we do to be content?

ASK GOD TO STRENGTHEN YOU AND MAKE YOU CONTENT

It is God's command, his will, that you be content with what you have today, whatever it may be. That doesn't mean that you should not change it, but it does mean that your peace and joy must not depend on change. It is to embrace today what God has for you, and do that every single day. So if this is God's will, ask him to enable you! He will answer that prayer. Paul says he, and by extension we know it is true of us as well, is able to do all things, to be content and to rejoice in any and every circumstance, through God who strengthens us.

DON'T BUY THE LIE

The lie is that if only I could have this one thing, then I would be content. The lie is that contentment is found in something outside of you. It's not. It is not a thing, it is a quality you have inside that will be there regardless of what your circumstances might be.

USA Today published an article a few years back with the title "Psychologists Know What Makes People Happy." It was about how a number of researchers had been studying what brings happiness. They found out that having more stuff doesn't do it. In fact, it has just the opposite effect. The more people have the more stressed and less happy they tend to be. University of Illinois psychologist Ed Diener said, "materialism is toxic for happiness."

There was a time in my life, when I was in high school, that what I desperately wanted was a letter. In our case, it was actually two letters, a red E and a blue B. E-B, for East Bakersfield. It would prove that I was an athlete who had made the team. Well, I got it. I got what I thought I needed so terribly. For decades it sat in some box someplace around our house. Now I can't even find it. Had I never gotten it my life would have been no different whatsoever. The lie is that thing you absolutely must have is necessary for you to be at peace and to rejoice. You and I both know and must remember it is always a lie. Peace and the ability to rejoice come from inside, from the Lord, not from outside.

BELIEVE THAT WHAT GOD SUPPLIES IS ENOUGH

The answer for joy and happiness is being content and grateful for whatever we might have. The ability to do that comes from two things: the Spirit of God giving it to us, and the confidence that God is given us what is best for us.

This requires believing two crucial truths. God loves you and wants you to experience good always, and God is able to give you the good he wants you to have at any moment. If he sees that it is for your best, for the health of your soul, for you to be at peace and joyful, he can give it to you in an instant. He can calm the storm, produce fish where there were none, make food for one boy feed thousands of people, and give you today whatever is best for you this very moment, miraculously if necessary.

We don't need to think about being content in a given situation for the rest of our lives. We can seek to change a difficult circumstance, we can seek improvement. Where we err is in looking at the long term. How can I be content in this if it goes on indefinitely? Don't do that. Just be content with what God has given you today

and leave tomorrow's troubles alone. All I need to do is embrace whatever God has given me today and make it through this one day. Who knows what tomorrow will bring, so let's not worry about that.

Mike Leake is a pastor. When he was in school he faced a time when he has his school costs covered, all except for his books. He needed \$175 to buy books. He was young in his faith, he only had \$4, so he came up with a plan. He would pray, then use his \$4 to buy 4 lottery tickets. He would ask God to give him a winning ticket. He bought the tickets. He scratched off the first one, and got nothing. Second ticket, again nothing. Third ticket, nada again. He was down to his last ticket. He prayed, "Lord, please make this the winning ticket." Sure enough, he did win. He won another ticket. He knew at that moment that God was going to do it. He would go in, get that one more ticket and it would be God's amazing answer to his prayer. He went back into the store, bought the ticket, scratched it off, and got a big fat zero. He had just spent the last money he had for nothing. The next day he went to church. He was a little embarrassed, a little upset that God hadn't answered his prayer, and a little concerned because he didn't even have money for lunch now. He was standing in church singing the song that was being led, trying to worship, when a man from the church he didn't know well tapped him on the shoulder. With tears in his eyes the somewhat shy man said, "the Lord has moved in my heart to give you this." He handed Mike a check. Stunned, he glanced down and saw a 2 and a 0. He thought, "Hey, \$20, at least I'll have money for lunch." But then he looked at the written number. It wasn't 20, it was 200. He had his money for books plus money to eat lunch for several days. He says God, "is faithful to his people. My God supplies all my needs. The Lord will provide."