

PHILIPPIANS: "LEARNING TO BE CONTENT"

Ten "Secrets" of Joy and Contentment

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Introduction

"LEARNING TO BE CONTENT"

There is an epidemic sweeping our planet. Highly contagious, this disease is being rapidly spread throughout our culture, infiltrating all facets of society. Symptoms include feelings of agitated frustration, restless dissatisfaction, depression, fatigue, anxiety, and a lack of joy. Chronic pain often accompanies the onslaught of these symptoms.

While the prognosis of this disease is rarely terminal, improper diagnosis and subsequent failure to apply the proper remedy can result in lifelong disability and stunted growth.

This disease of epidemic proportions is called "*discontentment*."

Perhaps you have already been infected with this destructive malady. Followers of the Lord Jesus Christ can also become "*discontent*," though we do not want to admit it. After all, Christians have been promised an "*abundant life*" through Christ (*John 10:10*). So what's the problem? Why aren't we content?

In order to diagnose the problem, take a moment to honestly consider your own life. Circle those words below that you think best describe your daily life

Joyful

Encouraged

Weak

Unappreciated

Fulfilled

Satisfied

Craving more

Fearful

Discouraged

Thankful

Tired

Frustrated

Overwhelmed

Enthusiastic

Peaceful

Sense of failure

Strong

Worried

Confident

Secure

Trapped

Hopeful

Could you be diagnosed as "*discontent*?" Though people inwardly desire to live contented lives, few actually experience true joy. Is it possible to be cured from

being “*discontent?*” Is there any way to escape living a life of frustrated dissatisfaction?

Is contentment an issue of heredity versus environment? Are some people genetically “*born*” contented, while others are innately discontent? Do contented people simply have the advantage of easy, nonstressed lives? Is contentment attainable by everyone?

1. Philippians 4:11. How did Paul become content?

Was his contentment related to his circumstances?

When Paul said that he had “*learned*” to be content, the specific Greek word that he used meant that he had, “*come to understand something based upon the facts.*” When Paul “*learned*” contentment, he “*clearly perceived with his mind*” certain facts. He was not born content; he had to perceive something mentally before experiencing contentment.

To be “*content*” means to “*be satisfied in mind or disposition; to be full, to have enough.*” Experiencing this satisfaction in life was something that Paul had to first mentally learn.

The question then arises, “*What is it that we need to learn in order to become content?*” Is there some single fact that once mentally mastered, will usher in a new era of contentment in life?

2. Philippians 4:12. What had Paul “*learned*” that enabled him to be content in all circumstances?

When Paul speaks of learning the “*secret*” of living above his circumstances, he uses a term that is found only in this one place in Scripture (*Philippians 4:12*). The term, “*secret,*” means, “*to initiate into the mysteries, introduce to things not known before.*”

For Paul, “*the secret*” was not a single fact; it was more a series of “*previously unknown mysteries*” to which he had been introduced. Much like being instructed in special information and experiences through initiation into a special fraternity, Paul had been initiated into new ideas, experiencing new attitudes and ways of thinking, when he met Christ. Many of these new ideas and attitudes can be found in the book of Philippians.

Philippians is an epistle, a letter, which Paul addressed to the Macedonian church that he had helped to establish. The church was founded under divine leading (*Acts 16:6, 7*), after the Lord used a vision to direct Paul to Philippi (*Acts 16:6-10*). Interestingly, the Philippian church began in a prison (*Acts 16:23-34*), and the letter itself was written about a decade later, in 61 A.D., during Paul's imprisonment in Rome (*Philippians 1:13*).

3. **Acts 28:14-31.** Describe the specific conditions of Paul's Roman imprisonment.

How long was he confined?

When Paul wrote the book of Philippians, his circumstances were not easy. Yet the letter that he writes to his friends reflects an exuberant spirit of contentment.

4. Read through a written out, printed "*working copy*" of Paul's letter to the Philippians. As you read, note each place that you find the following terms. Use a distinctive diagram, marking, or color, indicating on the page each time that you locate these words in your text.

- Joy or rejoice _____
- Attitude or mind _____
- Jesus Christ _____
(including He, His, Him, Lord, or any pronoun referring to Christ)
- Thank, thanks, thanksgiving _____

After marking each of the above terms, go back through the text, counting the number of times that each term used. Record that number in the space provided.

When spiritually applied, the principles gleaned from Philippians provide the antidote to "*discontentment*," and open the door to a healthy life of peace and joy. It is indeed possible for every Christian to "*learn to be content*." Yet, the mental "*learning*" only makes contentment a possibility. Something additional is required to make contentment a practical reality in our lives.

5. **Philippians 4:9.** What must we do in order to experience the reality of the truth that we have learned?

Paul says that we must “*repeatedly, continually, and habitually exercise*” what we have learned. The implication is that it will take energetic work to accomplish the task. The goal of this study is to “*learn to be content.*” Our approach will be one of practical application. As we “*practice these things,*” we will not only intellectually learn contentment, we will also experience it.

Any attempt to achieve contentment will be stillborn unless we have been born again. Complete and lasting contentment is predicated on a personal relationship with Christ. If we “*practice*” being content by relying on our own determination and skills, any apparent successes will be merely temporary and disappointing.

6. **Philippians 4:13.** From where does the strength come to accomplish all things?

Paul had “*learned to be content,*” and he had “*learned the secret*” (*Philippians 4:12*). Yet, what exactly is the “*secret,*” those “*mysteries,*” that Paul had learned? What, specifically, are we to be “*practicing?*” A careful look into the book of Philippians reveals ten such “*secrets*” that can help us to “*learn to be content.*”

“Secret” Number One

“NURTURE A THANKFUL HEART”

(Philippians 1:1-18)

7. **Philippians 1:1-11.** Look at each place where Paul uses the word “*I.*” List each thing that Paul says that he does.

What is the first thing that Paul says that he does as he remembers the past?

As you think about your own past, can you say that this is the first response that comes from your heart?

The book of Philippians is permeated with an attitude of thanksgiving. One of the “*secrets*” of contentment that Paul had learned was to nurture a thankful heart.

Most would agree that it is fairly easy to thank God when things are going well. Paul's initial attitude toward life was one of thankfulness and gratitude to God. Yet, was Paul's life an easy one?

8. **II Corinthians 11:23-28.** Prior to his imprisonment in Rome, what had Paul already experienced?

9. **Philippians 1:12-18.** List those specific things that might have been viewed as "*negatives*" in Paul's life and ministry during his imprisonment in Rome.

What "*positives*" did Paul perceive resulting from these circumstances?

What was Paul's heart response to these "*negative*" circumstances?

10. **I Thessalonians 5:18.** What does Paul say that believers should always do?

Why should believers respond in this manner?

Some may argue that Paul only said, "*in everything give thanks;*" they emphasize that Paul did not say, "*for everything give thanks.*" In other words, they maintain that the Lord does not ask us to thank Him for the specific circumstance; rather they suggest that the Lord only asks us to have a generally grateful heart as we endure through the difficulty.

Yet, when Paul uses the word "*in,*" (*I Thessalonians 5:18*), he is saying something quite extreme. He is literally saying "*no matter what the circumstances may be, be thankful and give thanks, because this specific event is God's precise will for you.*" Paul was not saying, "*Praise the Lord, anyway;*" rather, he was saying, "*Praise the Lord, because...*"

11. **Ephesians 5:20.** What does Paul say that believers should always do?

Joseph grew up in a family plagued with sibling rivalry. When he was a teenager, his own brothers sold him into slavery. He was taken to Egypt, where he was falsely accused of rape, and though innocent, spent years in prison. Yet, Joseph discovered that it is actually possible to genuinely be thankful for specific adverse circumstances.

12. Genesis 50:20. Almost fifteen years after Joseph's brothers had sold him into slavery, he encountered them again. How did Joseph view his brothers' actions?

13. Genesis 45:5-8. What kind of an attitude did Joseph have toward his brothers?

How did Joseph's view of God affect his attitude?

Developing a proper view of God's sovereignty, and purposefulness regarding the events of life, is the key to contentment. When we know the Lord well, we have confidence that He is doing what is best in our lives.

14. Romans 8:28. What does God cause to happen with all circumstances in the lives of His children?

Does this passage say that all circumstances are good?

What difficult circumstance are you currently experiencing in your own life?

In light of God's Word, how should you respond to the above situation?

Are you responding properly?

Joseph recognized that some circumstances are not innately good. They may have even been intentionally used by others to harm us. Yet it is genuinely possible to “*always give thanks for all things,*” when we know that God is not only in control, but that He is also using all circumstances for our good.

It has been said that,

“contentment is being sweetly resigned to the sovereignty and providence of God

Frances Jane Crosby had a challenging life. Her father died when she was a child, and a doctor’s careless error resulted in her permanent blindness when she was only six weeks old. Many might respond to those circumstances with self-pity, resentment, or bitterness, but Frances later wrote in her autobiography,

“It seemed intended by the blessed Providence of God that I should be blind all my life, and I thank Him for the dispensation.”

She welcomed her blindness as a gift from God, saying,

“I could not have written thousands of hymns if I had been hindered by the distractions of seeing all the interesting and beautiful objects that would have been presented to my notice.”

At eight years of age, Fanny wrote:

*“Oh, what a happy child I am, although I cannot see!
I am resolved that in this world contented I will be.
How many blessings I enjoy that other people don’t!
So weep or sigh because I’m blind, I cannot, nor I won’t”*

While many might view such a life as being tragic, Fanny learned to be content. She nurtured a thankful heart, writing 8,000 songs of praise to the Lord. Hymns such as, “*To God Be the Glory,*” “*Blessed Assurance,*” “*Redeemed,*” and “*All the Way My Savior Leads Me,*” have blessed believers for over a century.

The Lord values the heart that remains thankful during adverse circumstances. He especially uses those difficult times to develop spiritual maturity in that *person (Romans 5:3-5)*, as He accomplishes His purposes on earth (*Job 42:2*). The Lord exhorts us to “*consider it all joy*” when we have troubles, because He uses those difficulties to make us “*perfect and complete*” (*James 1:2-4*).

While many may find it difficult to give thanks for their troubles; the sad truth is that most people neglect to even thank God for blessings.

15. Luke 17:11-18. How many lepers were healed?

How many healed lepers stopped what they were doing in order to thank Jesus?

According to verses 15 and 18, when a person gives thanks to the Lord, what else is he giving to God?

The Lord treasures a thankful heart, and says that *“it is good to give thanks to the Lord” (Psalm 92:1)*. It is the righteous who give thanks (*Psalm 97:12; 140:13*), and God receives our thanks as a *“sacrifice”* that *“honors”* Him (*Psalm 50:23; 107:22*).

On the other hand, God tells us that a lack of thankfulness is one of the first indicators of a darkened heart (*Romans 1:21*). It is easy to let murmuring, complaining, and criticizing snuff out any *“attitude of gratitude.”*

God tells us that when we murmur or complain against others, or about our life situations, that we are actually *“grumbling against the Lord” (Exodus 16:8)*. Since God is in control of everything, when we complain, we are really saying that He is doing a poor job of running things.

Thankful people are refreshing to be around. Yet, we can expect to see a decrease in thankfulness because, *“In the last days difficult times will come. For men will be ...ungrateful” (II Timothy 3:1, 2)*. Yet, the Lord continues to be *“kind to ungrateful men” (Luke 6:35)*.

Our desire to be content begins with our commitment to nurture a thankful heart. Thankfulness, or gratitude, has been defined as,

“learning to recognize and express appreciation for the benefits which I have received from God and others.”

Notice, there are two parts to thankfulness;

- 1) recognizing how others have benefited you, and,
- 2) expressing specific appreciation for that benefit.

The ability to recognize how God and others have benefited us goes contrary to our sinful human nature. Our proud hearts want to claim that we have gained the benefit for ourselves, rather than humbly acknowledging that it was God, or others, who have been instrumental in our success.

- 16. Daniel 4:30-37.** To whom did Nebuchadnezzar initially give the credit for his success as king?

According to verse 32, who did God say should get the credit for the king's success?

What did God do about Nebuchadnezzar's lack of gratitude?

What indication is there that Nebuchadnezzar developed a thankful heart?

Consider the "*successes*" of your own life. Do you believe that you have "*earned*" your "*successes*," or have you given God the credit? The truth is revealed when that "*success*" is threatened or taken from us; do we get defensive, angry, or bitter? Or rather, do we say as Job did, "*the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord*" (Job 1:21).

- 17. James 1:17.** When good things happen to us, who should get the credit?

Think of one "*good thing*" that has happened to you within this past year.

Have you recognized the source of this "*gift*?"

Have you said, "*thank you*," in such a way to acknowledge that it was a "*gift*?"

Many allow the initial thankful inclination of their hearts to be destroyed by comparing themselves with others. Greed and jealousy are enemies of a thankful heart (James 4:2).

An ungrateful heart looks at life and complains, "*it's not fair, I deserve more, I work harder than others, I always get the short end of the stick.*"

Henry Ward Beecher said, "*Pride slays thanksgiving, but an humble mind is the soil out of which thanks naturally grow. A proud man is seldom a grateful man, for he never thinks he gets as much as he deserves.*"

A thankful person senses, "*I have so much more than I deserve,*" while an ungrateful person believes, "*I deserve so much more than I have.*"

It is never wise to compare ourselves with others (*II Corinthians 10:12*). The thankful heart acknowledges that everything comes from God, and that God is providing exactly what is best for that person

Thankful words always flow from a thankful heart.

18. Psalm 26:6, 7. Where would David go to verbalize thanksgiving?

Who would hear his words of thanks?

Would the Lord say that you are faithful to verbalize thanks in this way?

19. Psalm 35:18. Before whom else would David also verbally give thanks to the Lord?

Would others say that you are faithful to verbalize thanks in this way?

We should thank God for everything; including how He uses other people to bless, shape, and build our lives. Throughout Scripture we see how the Lord uses various individuals to bless others:

- Timothy's mother and grandmother taught him of the Lord
(*II Timothy 1:5*).
- The King of Tyre provided the building materials for the Temple
(*I Kings 5*).
- Boaz was God's instrument of provision for the widow Ruth
(*Ruth 2:10*).
- The church in Philippi provided for Paul's material needs
(*Philippians 4:15, 16*).

Who has blessed your life? Not only should we thank the Lord for the way that He uses others to bless our lives, we should also thank those specific individuals whom God has used. The book of Philippians itself is a lengthy "thank you note" written to the church. Cultivating a thankful heart will result in expressing grateful words.

Yet, before we can give thanks, we must take time to identify those specific blessings that we have received from God, and from others. We need to ask ourselves; *“Have I received any blessing in my life for which I have not expressed gratitude? Is there any person who has benefited my life whom I have not yet thanked?”*

Nurturing a thankful heart is a key to being content in life. We are born neither thankful nor content; it has to be *“learned.”* Whether or not we *“learn to be content”* is a choice that we make each moment.

Like Paul, we can choose to thank the Lord for the past, and we can express our gratitude to others for the way that they have blessed our lives (*Philippians 1:3-6; 4:10-17*). Like Paul, we can also confidently thank God, by faith, for what He is going to do in the future (*1:6; 4:6*). We can choose to *“practice”* thankfulness.

***“The things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me,
practice these things; and the God of peace shall be with you”***
(*Philippians 4:9*).

HOMework

“Secret” Number One

“Practice” Nurturing a Thankful Heart:

1. List some of the spiritual and material blessings that the Lord has given to you. Then stop and thank God for each item on your list.

Material Blessings:

Spiritual Blessings (see Ephesians 1 if you need help getting started).

2. Next, consider giving thanks for your **family members**. List each person (spouse, parents, children, siblings, etc). Next to each name, write one quality about their life for which you are especially grateful.
3. Make a list of **other individuals** whom the Lord has used to benefit your life in any way (Christians as well as nonbelievers). Consider all aspects of your life; employers, teachers, doctors, etceteras. As you write each name, ask yourself if you have ever thanked that person for the way that God has used him. If you have not yet expressed your gratitude to that person, ask the Lord to show you how to do that.
4. Finally, make a list of **“difficult things for which God wants me to give thanks.”** As an act of faith in God’s loving sovereignty, tell the Lord; *“Though I may never understand why You have allowed _____ in my life, I choose to thank You. I trust You, and know that You are using this to accomplish good in my life.”*

“Secret” Number Two

“DEVELOP A SENSE OF LIFE PURPOSE”

(Philippians 1:19-30)

Why do you get up in the morning? Why are you alive? Does your life have a purpose? Do you have a sense of personal destiny?

Every person craves significance. We all desire for our lives to have some importance. But, for most people today, life seems meaningless and aimless. Contemporary evolutionary thinking teaches that we have “*come from nowhere*,” causing people to conclude that they are “*going nowhere*.” We tell ourselves that things are fine. Yet, our souls are restless and discontent. There remains that nagging sense that life should have value and purpose.

Since time began, philosophers have been asking, “*What is the meaning of life?*” The book of Ecclesiastes records how King Solomon, using his great wisdom, grappled with this question. He recognized that life appeared to be futile and aimless (1:4-11), so he tried intellectual efforts to discern his life purpose (1:12). Yet, the more that he understood of life, the greater was his grief and pain (1:18).

After “*intellectual*” efforts revealed no meaning to life, Solomon began “*experimenting*” to find life purpose. He threw himself wholeheartedly into various strategies in his quest for life purpose; the first being “*pleasure*” through alcohol (2:1-3). Next, he busied himself with elaborate building projects (2:4-7). Solomon accumulated servants, amassed great wealth, poured himself into “*the arts*,” and even experimented with “*sexual freedom*” (2:7, 8). Yet, what was the result of all of his efforts to infuse meaning into his life?

1. Ecclesiastes 2:17-20.

Like Solomon, many today are trying furiously to ascribe meaning to their lives by adopting myriads of personal and social “*causes*,” or sinking their energies into philanthropic projects. Some pursue physical pleasure. Still others become workaholics; cramming their schedules to overflowing in an effort to infuse their lives with meaning and purpose. Perhaps if they can keep themselves busy enough, and emotionally dulled, they won’t have time to notice the ethereal emptiness that whispers in their ears, “*Is this all there is?*”

2. James 4:14. How does our Creator describe the life span of men?