

## **Philippians 4:11b-13 (Reading 4:4-20)**

### **Sinful Contentment and Corrosive Discontent**

---

#### **Paul's contentment**

Paul was writing this letter to the Christians in Philippi from a jail cell where he was facing the very real possibility of imminent execution. His letter was prompted partly by a gift sent to him from the church at Philippi, a gift brought to him by Epaphroditus. It may have been a gift of food or of clothing or of money to make his time in jail a little more bearable. This letter, written in response, is therefore, in part, a thank you letter. Paul wants the Philippians to know that their gift has come to him as a welcome relief. Nevertheless, Paul wants tells them:

"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength." Philippians 4:11b-13

So I wanted us to think about the subject of contentment.

Paul says, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances" (verse 11). And again, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation" (verse 13). He repeats more or less the same phrase to emphasise his point.

What is this secret of contentment that Paul has learned? And, how can we learn this secret? In a world of discontent surely this is a great prize. When Jeremiah Burroughs, a minister of the Gospel in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, wrote a book on contentment he entitled it, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. He was making the point that it is something to be prized, to be sought out until one finds it.

#### **Divine discontent**

But, on the other hand, is it always right to be content? Or do we often settle for too easy a contentment? It is these questions that prompted the strange and somewhat paradoxical title of this message, "Sinful Contentment and Corrosive Discontent."

Taking Paul's words in these verses in isolation from the rest of Scripture, we might conclude that contentment is *always* a virtue, and a spiritual virtue at that. But I want to question that and even to suggest that contentment, far from being a spiritual virtue, may actually be sinful. Let me explain what I mean before you drag me off the platform before I can say more.

Can we not sometimes settle for too easy a contentment given the grinding poverty of many in our world while we are relatively comfortable? Is it right for us to be content when so many in the world do not have the Scriptures in their heart language and we have dozens of Bible translations in English? Is there not such a thing as divine discontent?

Was it not discontent that thrust Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden and set angels to guard its entrance so that there were unable to return?

Was it not discontent that moved God to regret that he had ever created humankind – made in his image – discontent that caused him to send a flood to destroy the earth he had once pronounced "very good"?

Was it not discontent that drove God to descent upon Babel and confuse the languages of rebellious humanity?

But was it not also discontent with a confused and rebellious world that moved God to call Abram and to embrace him in his love saying, "I am your shield, your very great reward". Was in not discontent with a world gone wrong that moved God to promise Abram, "Through you, all nations on earth will be blessed"?

Was it not discontent that Israel his people were enslaved in Egypt that prompted God to remember his covenant promises and to come down to rescue them?

Was it not discontent with their rebellion that almost drove God to abandon the Israelites at Mt Sinai and later which sentenced them to 40 years of wandering in the wilderness? Was in not discontent even with Moses, their leader, which barred him from entering the Promised Land?

Was it not God's discontent with the rebellious nature of the Israelites some centuries later which caused his glory to leave the Temple and for them to be taken away into captivity. And is it not this same discontent which is reflected in the thundering words of the prophets and the answering laments of his people, "How long O Lord!"?

There is a passion of discontent in the heart of God: a discontent over a fallen and spoilt world and over a people who seem so slow to understand his purposes and so reluctant to do his will.

## **Discontented Jesus**

When Jesus comes into the world, revealing the heart and character of the living God, does not that same discontent often mark his words and his acts?

Is he not discontented with the false teachers who burden and oppress God's people rather than bringing them life and freedom? "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees", he says, "You hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to."

Is not Jesus passionately discontented (to say the least) with the Jewish leaders who would rather a man remain paralysed than that he should be healed on the Sabbath day?

And is there not a passionate discontent evident in Jesus weeping over Jerusalem, crying, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace" (Luke 19:41-42)?

Is not his discontent with the harsh and hurtful reality of death displayed in his tears at the tomb of his friend Lazarus? The shortest verse in the Bible (John 11:35) is surely big with the expression of this discontent that fills the heart of the Lord Jesus.

And does he not often express a sad discontent with the faithlessness of his disciples who are so slow to learn and who so frequently fall into unbelief?

The discontented Saviour displays the passion of discontent that moves the heart of God.

## **Divine Contentment**

But I want you also to see with me that there is also a deep contentment in the heart of God.

This contentment centres in the Lord Jesus Christ of whom the Father said, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" – words which echo God's verdict upon his completed creation at the beginning when he pronounced that it was "very good."

Here then we find a supreme contentment in the heart of God – he is content with his Son. He is content with all that Jesus is as the human being who now perfectly reflects the character of the living God – the image of God restored in humankind. He is content with all that Jesus has set himself to do and will do in saving his people from their sins.

And there is a contentment in the heart of Christ, a contentment in doing his Father's will. There is even a paradoxical contentment in the cross, for despite his anguish in the garden it was, "For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame" (Hebrews 12:2). And there is contentment in his cry from the cross, "It is finished", and in his words, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

And it is in the light of this contentment that we read the words of Isaiah 53:11 concerning The Suffering Servant, "He will see the result of the suffering of his soul and be satisfied." Jesus is satisfied, content, in the knowledge that he has completed all that the Father had given him to do. He is satisfied that all the Father has given to him will come to him and they all shall be given

eternal life. He is satisfied that no-one will be able to snatch them from the saving hands and safekeeping of the Father and the Son and that every one of them will be raised like him on the last day.

It is here at the cross that the divine discontent has its focus as God pours out the judgment demanded by a fallen and rebellious world on the head of his own Son. It is here at the cross and at the empty tomb that the divine contentment finds its full expression – "Here is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased".

Any contentment that drives a detour around the message of the cross and which avoids the way of the cross is sinful contentment.

## **Back to the Apostle Paul**

Let me take you back to the Apostle Paul – the one who writes here in Philippians of having found the secret of contentment.

Was not the life of the Apostle Paul driven by a spirit of discontent? Was it not discontent which drove him back and forth across the known world of his day proclaiming Christ in places where he was not known? Was it not discontent which drove him on despite shipwrecks and beatings and imprisonments, deprivations and hunger, despite the hatred of those he considered to be his own people and despite the misunderstandings and rejection of many of those whom he had brought to Christ?

Is there not a deep discontent in the heart of this man over the unbelief that characterises the vast majority of his fellow Jews? Listen to him in Romans 9:1-4:

I speak the truth in Christ – I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit – I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel.

Is there not a discontent that burns in the heart of this man over those whom he has brought to Christ but who are not living the way they should – a discontent behind so many of his letters? Listen to his words in Galatians 4:19, "My little children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you..." Some of his letters were written in "great distress and anguish of heart and many tears" (2 Corinthians 2:4). He writes so often from a deep discontent with the state of the church.

Paul's ministry was driven by a spirit of discontent.

So how can he write here in Philippians 4 that he has learnt the secret of contentment – contentment no matter what may now happen to him? In the face of the imminent prospect of death, has he given up his former concerns? Is he saying that he no longer cares?

Not at all.

It was not clear what the immediate future held in store for him, whether he will be executed or whether he will be freed. Nor does he know which of the two he would rather happened to him: he is content to leave himself in God's hands. Listen to what he says in Philippians 1:20-24:

I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

Paul is content in and with Christ. Here is the secret of contentment of which he speaks. In life he is content to devote himself to the cause of Christ whatever the cost – shipwrecks, beatings, imprisonment, deprivation, loss, the hatred of his own people, misunderstanding and rejection by those he loved. Despite all of this he is content. "For to me to live is Christ" and he is content with

him. This is the secret of Christian contentment. And, if he should die, he will be content with that – more than content for, "to die is gain" – it is to be with Christ which is better by far.

Here is Paul's contentment, it is contentment in and with Christ. And in this there is no discontentment. He is entirely satisfied with Christ, the one for whom he has gladly suffered the loss of all things. There is no disappointment in Christ. Paul does not regret the loss of his rabbinic career, or of the status he had as a leading Pharisee. On the contrary, not only does he have Christ, he also has the joy and crown of those whom he has also brought to Christ – whose lives have also been transformed by the Gospel.

And so we see in this man no easy or cheap contentment. His life has consisted *both* of a passionate, aching discontent with the world around him – with its unbelief, with the many who have not yet heard of the Lord Jesus Christ or who have not yet come to faith in him. He longs that all would see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. He is filled with discontent over all who make people captive to their own false teaching. He is filled with discontent over a world in the grip of powers opposed to the liberating gospel of Christ, whether powers of Jewish tradition, pagan religion or political oppression. His ministry has been driven by a spirit of discontentment.

Yet, at the same time, he has found the secret of contentment: contentment with his own condition, whatever may happen to him. He is contented because for him "to live is Christ and to die is gain."

So we see something of the paradox of this driven man as he follows his Master in the way of the cross – driven by a troubled discontent with a world marred by sin and hell-bound in rebellion against God. Yet his life is marked by a deep contentment with Christ and a desire to know him and to know only more of him. In both of these, Paul reflects the heart of God himself.

And this paradox turns out to be no paradox at all, for this contentment with Christ is precisely the source of his discontentment with the world – he wants all the world to know Christ, the one in whom alone can give peace with God, lasting satisfaction and contentment.

So the contentment that Paul speaks of here in Philippians 4 is contentment in and with Christ. This is the secret of contentment. This is the pearl of great price.

## **Returning to ourselves**

Let me return to the strange title of this message, "Sinful Contentment and Corrosive Discontent" and apply what we have learnt to ourselves.

### **Sinful Contentment**

Do we sometimes settle for too easy a contentment, an easy contentment that fails to reflect the discontent in the heart of God?

We live in a world where the divisions between rich and poor are greater than ever before – where one man can afford to send his cast-off car into outer space while others lack the bare necessities in life. It's a world where those who have plenty grab more at the expense of those who have little. Is God content with such a world? Are we?

We live in a world where one continent may be ravaged by disease with millions of children being orphaned and an entire generation decimated. Is the Saviour who healed the sick content to watch disease ravage lives and destroy families? Are we?

We live in a world where children die of hunger in lands where crops have failed and famine stalks the land, where young children die without a cry in the arms of their helpless mothers, while in the West we struggle with the growing problems of obesity. Is God content with such a world? Are we?

We live in a world in which its resources are exploited for quick profits and pleasures at the expense of future generations and the poisoning of our environment: a world where our plastics are poisoning the oceans and killing its creatures. Is God content with such a world? Are we?

Read your papers, watch and listen to the news. What kind of world are we creating? Is God content with such a world? Are we?

And above all, we live in a world where billions of people live and die without any real hope – living lives of quiet or angry despair. Hundreds of millions are held captive to false religion and false hopes – without hope because they are without Christ. Is God content with such a world? Are we?

And we who profess to know Christ are all too often found squabbling among ourselves, sometimes with all the fury of political infighting. In seeking to gain advantage for our party we tear down the kingdom rather than building it up. Is God content with such a world – such a people? Are we?

We can settle for too easy a contentment, a sinful contentment in the face of a needy world – an "I'm all right Jack" contentment with the pleasant place in which our lot has fallen. Such contentment anaesthetises us to the pain and discontent in the heart of God – the discontent that drove him to send his Son into the world and subject him to the agony of the cross.

Being the people of God, followers of Christ, demands of us that same discontent, a discontent that drives and shapes a life of service, not least, indeed above all, a discontent with everything we see in ourselves which does not breathe the spirit of Christ and contribute to the building of his kingdom.

### **Corrosive Discontent**

But secondly, my title speaks of "corrosive discontent." This also can preoccupy us, a self-centred discontent which is angry with the way life has treated us: the perceived injustices; the failure to receive the recognition we believe that we deserve; the lack of the rewards we believe we have deserved; the failure of some of our deepest hopes and dreams. This is a self-centred discontent which is corrosive in its effects upon our relationship with others and of our view of God himself. It is destructive of any usefulness in God's service.

In the face of the dangers of such corrosive, self-centred discontent, Paul says that he has found the secret of being content – content in every circumstance and situation, despite all those injustices which he has suffered. He is content with Christ; a contentment, peace and satisfaction that pervades every part of his life and every situation he encounters – even imprisonment and the prospect of imminent death.

God calls us also to lives driven by a tireless discontent of the status quo, but marked also by a complete contentment with Christ. He calls us to live lives that reflect the passion in the heart of God himself, lives that are devoted to the service of Christ and spent in the building of his kingdom.

Now none but Christ can satisfy,  
none other name for me!  
There's love and life and lasting joy,  
Christ Jesus, found in thee.