

Choose Joy
Philippians 4:10-23
Part 9—Choose Joy

Introduction

Years ago, Robert Fulghum wrote a profound essay. This is how it began. *“Most of what I really need to know about how to live...I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sand box at nursery school.*

These are the things I learned.

- *Share everything.*
- *Play fair.*
- *Don't hit people.*
- *Put things back where you found them.*
- *Clean up your own mess.*
- *Don't take things that aren't yours.*
- *Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.*
- *Wash your hands before you eat.*
- *Flush.*
- *Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.*
- *When you go out in the world, watch for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.”*

I think Fulghum, to a great extent, was right. Most of what we need to know about living we learned when we were young. But one lesson that's not learned in kindergarten—and in fact is not learned ever by most people—is how to be content.

This is unfortunate because contentment is key to joyful living. This is why I want to focus on contentment in this final message from Philippians. We've called this series Choose Joy. And I hope you've been doing that...choosing joy. Have you? Today we consider Philippians 4:10-23. Please follow along in your message notes.

¹⁰ I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹ I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² 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. ¹³ I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

¹⁴ Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. ¹⁵ Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; ¹⁶ for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. ¹⁷ Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. ¹⁸ I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a

fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. ¹⁹ And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

²⁰ To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen. ²¹ Greet all God's people in Christ Jesus. The brothers and sisters who are with me send greetings. ²² All God's people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household. ²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

Contentment is a wonderful virtue. It comes from being rightly related to God and trusting in his sovereign love over our lives. Yet many of us, including me, have tried to find contentment in all the wrong places. We've tried to find it in money, possessions, power, prestige, relationships or jobs. But all those things left us empty, didn't they?

I love the definition of contentment offered by the Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs. "Christian contentment is that sweet, inward quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal of every condition." In other words, contentment is being at peace with what God has assigned us; it's to be at rest.

The Bible has a great deal to say about contentment.

- John the Baptist told some soldiers to be content with their wages. (Luke 3:14)
- Paul wrote to Timothy, *"But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it."* (1 Tim 6:6-7).
- This is repeated by the author of the book of Hebrews. *"Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have..."* (Hebrews 13:5)
- But even though we're frequently told to be content in Scripture, very few Christ followers actually experience contentment.

As Paul wraps up his letter, he expresses his deep gratitude. As the church's founding pastor, Paul had a special relationship with the Philippians. The church had supported his ministry in the past and they'd recently sent another gift. The passage we're looking at is his thank-you note. As we look beneath the surface, we discover a man who is utterly content. Looking through the lens of his life we see **Five keys to contentment**

The first is....

1. Relax in God's sovereignty.

Look again at verse 10. ¹⁰ I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it.

Ten years had passed since Paul's ministry in Philippi. Right after he left the church the Philippians had sent Paul financial support. But even though they continued to be concerned they apparently weren't able to help for a lengthy period of time. We're not told why they weren't able to help...maybe they didn't know where Paul was. But recently Epaphroditus arrived in Rome bringing a generous gift. Because of this Paul says in verse 10 that he rejoiced in the Lord greatly.

I want us to notice Paul's gracious attitude regarding the time when he didn't receive anything from the Philippians. Notice he doesn't scold them for not sending support. In fact, Paul isn't agitated at all by what may have been a ten-year lapse in their financial help. He didn't get worked up. He didn't fret. There was no panic even though he had experienced times of real scarcity.

How could Paul remain content in the face of those things? He knew the times and the seasons of life are controlled by God's sovereignty. We saw this in chapter 1. Even though Paul was chained to a Roman guard, he still rejoiced because God used his negative circumstances to advance the cause of Christ. Because of his chains the entire palace guard heard the Gospel and the brethren were encouraged to be bold for Christ.

We called this having a Romans 8:28 mindset. "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." This mindset allows us to look beyond our immediate situation and relax...knowing that God is always at work.

Relaxing in God's sovereignty is foundational to contentment. Just think how much stomach acid we would avoid if we stopped trying to control people or manipulate circumstances. Some of us know what it's like to wake up at night fretting about how we can convince someone to get our way, or how we can twist things so they turn out like we want. But instead of doing those things, if we sit back, relax, and trust God's sovereignty, we'd certainly live much more contented lives.

Last week, I mentioned that worry was one of our greatest joy robbers. Instead of allowing worry to consume us Paul says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." (Philippians 4:6) In other words, don't worry about anything but pray about everything. Let God be God. Relax in his sovereignty. Don't carry on your shoulders the weight God carries on his! Jesus said, "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Matthew 6:27) Worry doesn't help anything!

So, the first key to contentment is to relax in God's sovereignty. Remember Romans 8:28. "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

The second key to contentment is to...

2. Rest in God provision.

Look again at verse 11. ¹¹ I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.

Doesn't that blow you away? Remember that Paul was under house arrest, chained to a Roman soldier and living on a sparse diet. But none of those circumstances affected his contentment. He had learned to be content "whatever the circumstances." You might underline that phrase. This is almost impossible for us to grasp, isn't it? Nothing in our society encourages us to be content with what we have. Just the opposite! Sometimes I

feel like we're being carried along by a raging river that screams at us to buy more, get more and do more.

Matthew Sleeth is an MD who wrote a provocative book called "*Serve God Save the Planet.*" Dr. Sleeth was a former ER doctor and chief of medical staff at a prominent hospital in the USA. He writes about a colleague named Todd. I think Todd represents the way many of us think—even though most of us may not be able to live it out quite like Todd.

After Todd began his medical residency, he and his wife began searching for the perfect home on the ocean. They looked for a year and a half, during which time Todd began to pick up more and more shifts. Sometimes he'd finish a 24-hour shift at one hospital before dashing off to work 24-hours at a second hospital. All this was to ramp up his salary so he could qualify for a bigger mortgage.

Finally, they found their "*perfect home*" located at the end of a peninsula with a great ocean view and a deep-water dock. There was only one problem, according to Todd: the house itself. It was a mess. So, they consulted an architect who was able to salvage part of the garage, but otherwise designed a whole new dream house.

Todd worked more and more hours to offset the skyrocketing construction costs. In January, he was so exhausted and the family was arguing so frequently that they threw caution to the wind and went on a lavish tropical vacation, paid for on credit.

By spring the house was complete. But one day Todd came to work in a rage. His wife had gone on a shopping spree and spent \$20,000 on curtains, rugs and furniture. They had built a home too big for their old furniture, she explained. In retaliation, Todd went to a boat dealer. "*No sense in living right on the water if we don't own a boat,*" he reasoned. The boat dealer sold him not only a boat, but two Jet Skies as well. No payments were due until winter.

When Todd hauled his new boat home using his wife's minivan, he burned out the transmission. So, he bought a large SUV with a towing package and leather seats. But when they arrived home, they were chagrined to realize that the one part of the old house they saved—the garage—wasn't big enough to hold the new SUV. So, the architect and builders returned and in a matter of weeks the garage was rebuilt. Not long after that, Todd and his wife divorced.

Now the details may be different in your case, but that same basic story is repeated time and time again. And, friends, listen to me, it is insanity to live like that. You heard me right. It's insanity to live beyond your means buying things you don't really need to impress people who don't really care with money you don't really have. Years ago, Pam and I read Dave Ramsey's book "*A Total Money Makeover.*" The book re-iterated a biblical principle I've taught many times: All of us need to get out of foolish debt and stay out of foolish debt!

But the only way to do that—the only way to stop living beyond our means—is to rest in what God provides. Another way to say this is we need to allow God to circumcise our want. Paul was not content because he was sitting on a Caribbean beach sipping a Piña Colada. He was content chained to a Roman soldier eating stale bread and gruel. Why? Because he had allowed God to circumcise his want! He rested in what God had provided. He had Christ in his life and that was enough.

Have you done that? Have you allowed God to circumcise your want? When was the last time you rested in what God had provided? Scripture says, *“But if we have food and clothing we will be content with that.”* (1 Timothy 6:8) Every one of us has food and clothing, but are we content?

I love the way this principle is expressed in Psalm 16:6. *“The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance.”* God assigns each of us different boundary lines. We all have different gifts, skills, backgrounds and experiences. God will apportion to some of us more challenges and some of us will have more opportunities. The key to contentment is not looking to see what the Jones’ may or may not have, but trusting that God knows what’s best for each of us.

Thus, the first key to contentment is to relax in God’s sovereignty. And the second key is to rest in God’s provision. Paul says, *“I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.”* The third key is to....

3. Refuse to let circumstances dictate your joy.

Look again at verse 12. *¹²I 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.*

Here Paul expands on what he says in the previous verse. Two times he repeats the phrase *“I know.”* *“I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty.”* He repeats this to emphasize that by experience he has learned to live above his circumstances. Paul learned to get off the roller coaster of feeling content only when things were going well and then feeling lousy when things were not going well. I’m sure you know what that roller coaster is like. I think we’ve all been there.

Notice he learned to be content *“in any and every situation.”* Think about that as it relates to your life. If Paul has food, he’s content. If he’s hungry, he’s still content. He learned to live with contentment in any and every situation. One reason I started fasting years ago was to train my body not to control my emotions.

Like many of you, when I used to get hungry it changed how I treated people; I got grumpy; I lost my joy. But as I’ve fasted over the years, I’ve trained my body that hunger does not have to affect how much joy I experience. At least with respect to hunger, I’ve learned not to let circumstances dictate my joy.

You might consider trying this with some area where you struggle. For example, if you have a problem getting irritable when you can't buy something you want, why don't you intentionally deprive yourself from buying those things, even if you can afford them, to train yourself to be content regardless of your circumstances.

Or, if you tend to complain when you don't get your way, why don't you fast from getting your way for two weeks? Give up your right to get your way for two full weeks—in order to train yourself to be content even when you don't get your way.

Paul says he learned to be content in any and every situation. You and I can learn to be content too. But the problem is we don't even try. We may train ourselves in the gym. We may train ourselves to lose weight by going on diets. We may train ourselves to think by reading. But we never consider training ourselves to be content.

A huge part of this is re-training our mind to think positive, God-honoring thoughts even when our circumstances may be negative. Over the past nine weeks, we've been memorizing Philippians 4:8. One reason Paul was able to experience joy and contentment that transcended his negative circumstances is that he had trained his mind to think in a God-honoring manner.

I hope you've memorized Philippians 4:8. Let's repeat it one last time together. *“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”* Thinking these kinds of thoughts goes a long way toward not allowing circumstances to dictate the joy we experience.

A fourth key to contentment is to....

4. Rely on God's strength.

Look again at verse 13. *¹³I can do all this through him who gives me strength.*

This refers to having God's strength to endure all the trials Paul has just spoken about:

- Being in need,
- Being hungry
- And living in want.

Today we live in a world of unimaginable comfort. So, our challenges might not be things like hunger or scarcity. But the principle of relying on God's strength is just as important today, as it was for Paul. Paul got through his difficulties with contentment because he relied on God's strength. By his own testimony, *“I can do all this through him who gives me strength.”*

But what does it mean to rely on God's strength? Well, I've learned from the school of hard knocks that if I'm doing things in my own strength, I become harried and stressed. But if I do things in God's strength, they flow more naturally. For example, when I'm writing a sermon, I can feel the difference if I'm doing it in my strength or in God's strength. When I do it in my strength I labor over every word. It takes hours to write one

paragraph. But when I get out of the way and open myself to God's strength, the words seem to flow onto the page like a gently flowing river.

Now this is not to suggest doing things in God's strength will always be easy. It won't.

- Asking forgiveness won't be easy.
- Overcoming a bad habit won't be easy.
- Learning to think good and godly thoughts won't be easy.

Paul captures this when he writes about his thorn in the flesh. *“Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”* (2 Corinthians 12:8-10)

So, sometimes we experience God's strength in ways that make things flow more smoothly—like when I write a sermon. Other times we experience God's strength in ways that make us more resilient—like when Paul wrestled with the thorn in his flesh. Either way, relying on God's strength will add greatly to our level contentment.

Let's review: The first key to contentment is to relax in God's sovereignty. The second key is to rest God's provision. The third is to refuse to let circumstances dictate your joy. The fourth is to rely on God's strength. And finally, the fifth key to contentment is to...

5. Release resources generously.

In verses 14-19 Paul thanks the Philippians for sending financial support. He specifically mentions they had previously supported Paul several times after he left Philippi. This would have been weeks after the church was launched.

In other words, even though the church was still young, right away they grabbed a hold of the importance of financial generosity. Notice in verse 18 how Paul describes the gifts from the Philippians. They were a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. Each of these draws from OT sacrificial language. In other words, their financial gifts were a sacrificial act of worship.

Undoubtedly, they learned about the importance of giving from Paul. For better or for worse, it's often been observed that churches begin to reflect the heart and passion of their pastor. The Philippians became a generously giving church because their founding pastor, Paul, modeled for them that true love always gives. Someone once said that you can give without love, but you cannot love without giving.

Think about that the next time you are giving to ECF. Giving generously may be one of the least talked about keys to contentment. But some of the most contented Christians I've met are those who are the most generous.

Conclusion

As we wrap up, I'd like you to underline a phrase in verse 12: "*I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation...*"

Friends, once we learn to be content, we'll begin to experience rushing rivers of God-inspired joy. But I think Paul uses the word secret because contentment is not something everyone learns. It's available to every Christ follower, but, sadly, not everyone finds it.

So, what are some of the secrets to contentment?

1. Relax in God's sovereignty.
2. Rest in God's provision.
3. Refuse to let circumstances dictate your joy.
4. Rely on God's strength.
5. Release resources generously.

If we do these things, we will find joy amazing ways!