

Godliness with Contentment

Philippians 4:11-13, 1 Timothy 6:6

Introduction

When we look back through history, it is easy to marvel at the way that God used particular saints in the past, and rightly so. One thing that often characterizes these people through the centuries is the fact that they were willing to do whatever God was calling them to do, grand or menial, smooth or rocky, light or heavy, in joyful obedience to their Lord. This virtue can be summed up by a short exhortation from the Puritan, Thomas Watson: “Be content to be at God’s disposal.”

Paul and Philippians

When you hear a sermon on contentment, the temptation that rears its ugly head says, “Sure, the Bible talks about contentment, but you don’t really know my situation or circumstances.” And this may be true. Neither, in fact, did Paul. Consider a few things about Paul’s own circumstances. How easy would it have been for Paul to be discontent (to put it lightly) about God’s plan to send him to Philippi? Paul was making a circuit through Asia Minor, preaching the gospel and establishing churches, when the Spirit redirected him and sent him to Macedonia (Acts 10:6-10). Paul obediently followed the Lord’s calling, but after spending some time in Philippi, Paul and Silas were dragged before the magistrate, beaten, and thrown in a high security prison (Acts 10:11-24). Paul may have been tempted at this point to question God’s plan. But, he did not give up hope and resign himself to these circumstances. Rather, he turned to the Lord of those circumstances, praying and singing. And the Lord delivered him. Other times, though, the Lord did not deliver him out of hard trials (2 Cor. 12:8-10).

Paul wrote to the Philippians saying that he has learned in all things to be content, writing from yet another prison (Phil. 1:12-14). These and all his other trials were according to God’s plan (Acts 9:15-16, cf. 2 Cor. 6:4ff, 11:23ff). Paul was chosen as a vessel to carry the grace of the gospel to the Gentiles. Through the grace of God and through his trials, Paul learned contentment such that his own chains remind him of the grace of God (Eph. 3:1). Paul understood that he has been saved by God’s grace, and that in His grace God has set before Him specific works to walk in (Eph. 2:8-10). Paul knew that he could do all that God him to through Christ who strengthens him (Phil. 4:13).

Faith and Contentment

This shows that contentment is rooted in faith. The author of Hebrews calls Christians to be content because God has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Heb. 13:5-6, cf. Ps. 118:5-6). This contentment drives out covetousness and fear, whether of material things and circumstances or of other people. Contentment enables us to boldly say, “The Lord is my helper, I will not fear. What can man do to me?” (cf. Ps. 23:1; Ps. 27:1, 14). On the other hand, discontentment brings covetousness, envy, fear, anxiety, and despair. “Discontent doth dislocate and unjoint the soul” (Watson). Discontentment cripples.

Godliness with Contentment

Sometimes, contentment is viewed as a stoic resignation to fate, or perhaps a denial of the reality of hardship and pain. This kind of contentment, however, is not godly contentment. This is because, as mentioned before, contentment really is rooted in faith. Paul ties contentment to godliness, or godly and pious living (1 Tim. 6:6)—in other words, living with God's grace and commands ever before us (cf. Deut. 6:1-9), loving Him with our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Godliness is submitting every aspect of our lives to the Lord Jesus. On the one hand, it is obvious that contentment is part of godliness. But here in 1 Tim. 6, Paul identifies them separately, though not distinctly. Consider, what would contentment apart from godliness (and apart from faith) be? It would be that stoic, cold resignation or denial of reality. Consider, what would godliness without contentment be? Paul implies that without contentment, there is no gain to be had from godliness. Some will use godliness (or a form of it) as a means to satisfy their covetous and self-righteous desires (1 Tim. 6:3-5). Godliness without contentment is self-centered and tends toward works-righteousness, leading then to further pride, anxiety, and despair. Paul specifies the love of money as the prime example of this sort of thing, but it is true of covetousness or discontent towards all sorts of things (1 Tim. 6:9-10).

On the other hand, godliness with contentment *is* great gain. Exercising ourselves in godliness (1 Tim. 4:7), walking in the works God has set before us (Eph. 2:10), and doing so contentedly brings great satisfaction. Prov. 19:23 says, "The fear of the Lord leads to life, and he who has it will abide in satisfaction; he will not be visited with evil." We know that there are real hardships, there are real evils that beset us. We also know there is no evil, no circumstance, no relationship, no political situation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ (Rom. 8:35-39). Rather, your good Father is working all of those things together for the good of those who love Him and have been called by Him (Rom. 8:28). When we see this, we learn with Paul to be content in all things. And we see also that the *reason* for our discontent is not the circumstances or lack of something. It is our view of God. Discontentment is at root a matter of unbelief, either in the ability of God or in His goodness.

Conclusion

Contentment is a grace, and it only comes by the power of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, contentment, like so many other parts of our sanctification, is something to be practiced. Christians should preach to themselves the need to adopt a perspective and posture of contentment *when they don't feel like it*. When contentment is easy, we should rejoice in it, lean into it, and give great thanks. When it doesn't come naturally, though, we should exhort ourselves and one another to commit ourselves to contentment. Commit yourself to that deep trust in your good and powerful heavenly Father, stand fast in your faith in Christ as Lord and Savior, and pray for that grace through the power of the Holy Spirit when you think you have reasons to be discontent. This is a learned and practiced virtue, as Paul indicates. And it stems ultimately from believing in Jesus Christ and believing that He is the Good Shepherd with whom you have no want. "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall never hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst" (John 6:35).