

XIV. Lesson 14 Learning Contentment– Phil. 4:8-13

April 4/5, 2007

Aim: To see how the gospel teaches us contentment.

A. Trained Minds – Meditate (Phil. 4:8-9)

In our modern world many people seek freedom from anxiety by trying to empty their minds; Paul teaches us that true peace can be ours only when our minds are properly filled. He points the Philippians to the store from which they can furnish their minds in verse 8. A mind full of these things will leave little room for anxiety-producing, peace-disrupting, and joy-destroying thoughts.

How can our minds be thus trained? Again Paul answers: by allowing our lives to be shaped by apostolic example and apostolic teaching (v. 9). The kind of Bible study in which we are presently engaged is itself the prescription the apostle provides.

In these two verses, Paul seems to be saying, ‘Now you know how you ought to live, but I am telling you that in every part of your life your standard of conduct must be better than that of the pagan world around you. Now that you belong to Christ you are required to live as citizens of heaven.’ To encourage them to live upright lives, Paul tells them that they must get their thinking right (4:8) and make sure their behavior is right (4:9). [Orthodoxy (right thinking) leads to orthopraxy (right living)].

All our behavior begins in our minds. How we think determines how we act. Charles Spurgeon wrote, ‘God will not live in the parlor of our hearts if we entertain the devil in the cellar of our thoughts.’ This means that if we think unhelpful, selfish, and wicked thoughts, then our behavior will certainly be influenced by those thoughts, and unless we are checked, we shall end up doing wrong things. The reverse is also true. If we think good, wholesome, and right thoughts, then it is much more likely that we shall act in right ways. The sure way to keep sinful thoughts, and those things which disturb our inner peace, out of our heads is to concentrate on those matters which are good.

The apostle begins verse 8 with a word which he had already used at the beginning of chapter 3, the word, ‘Finally’ (*loipon*), which means ‘Well, then ...’ or ‘So ...’.

He then gives them a list of virtues which he wants them to strive after. The verb ‘think’ (*logizesthe*) means more than ‘keep in mind.’ It is rather ‘take into account, reflect upon, and then allow these things to shape your conduct.’

Each of the first six things he prefixes with the word ‘whatever.’ He means, ‘It doesn’t matter what your situation is, or how you are feeling; this is what I want you to do. I want you to put these excellent matters into practice.’

He first speaks about those things which are ‘true’ and ‘noble.’ These are realities. That is what the truth actually is, it is something which is real.

- **True** – those things that correspond to the teaching of God’s word.
- **Noble** (*semna*) – ‘honorable,’ ‘dignified, elevated;’ those things that have the dignity of moral excellence.

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Next, he urges the Philippians to do their utmost to do that which is ‘just’ and ‘pure.’ He is talking now about their moral characters. That which is right is that which is in keeping with God’s law. That which is pure is that which is free from any blemish or corruption.

- **Just** – those things that conform to God’s standards.
- **Pure** – those things that are free from the taint of sin.

Finally, the last couplet has to do with the way they appear to others. These are qualities that affect other people. The word ‘lovely’ can be translated as ‘winsome.’ The Lord wants us to act in ways which draw out love in other people.

- **Lovely** (*prospile*) – ‘pleasing, attractive, beautiful;’ those virtues that make believers attractive and winsome, such as generosity, kindness, compassion, and willingness to forgive;
- **Things of good report** (*euphema*) – ‘admirable;’ not ‘well spoken of’ but ‘speaking well of;’ those things that give Christians a good reputation and a good name.

Rather than prolong the list of desirable qualities which should grace the lives of the Philippians, the apostle seems to sum up all the virtues which he might have included in two last terms.

- **Excellent** (*arete*) – signifies both excellence in any sphere of activity and the prestige which such excellence acquires.
- **Praiseworthy** (*epainos*) – either ‘what deserves your praise’ or ‘anything which calls down the approval of God’ as in Rom. 2:29.

In verse 9, Paul for the third time calls his readers explicitly to follow his example (2:17-18; 3:17). Paul is not merely giving way here to pride; he is not bragging about his own importance. Rather, he is saying that if we are to experience the presence of the God of peace, then we are required to model ourselves on the way Paul lived. The multiplication of verbs (learned, received, heard, seen) shows how well his readers would be able to appreciate his character in which, by the grace of God, the virtues he had enumerated earlier were displayed. Every pastor is called to set the kind of example that others can follow.

‘Received’ (*parelabete*) is a technical term used for the receiving of a tradition (*cf.* 1 Cor. 11:23; 15:3). Before the composition of the New Testament and its acceptance as authoritative Scripture, ‘the tradition,’ as a standard of Christian belief and behavior, was embodied in the teaching and example of those persons in whose lives the authority and ethical practice of the Lord was to be found (*cf.* 1 Cor. 11:2; 15:1ff; Gal. 1:9; Col. 2:5; 1 Th. 4:1-2; 2 Th. 2:15). Before they were committed to writing and later formed the corpus of New Testament Scripture, they were ‘learned, received, heard, seen’ in the person of the apostles.

How were the Philippians supposed to copy him? Paul meant that they were to have the same attitude as he had. If he could experience the peace of God as a prisoner, how much more would the Philippians be able to do so in the freedom they enjoyed!

What does this mean for us today, who never met Paul, heard him preach, or had the opportunity to observe at first hand the manner of his life? When the apostle told the Philippians to copy him, he meant, ‘Live like me, because I am seeking to live like Christ.’ Paul’s great model was the Lord Jesus Christ Himself (*cp.* 2:5). We should strive to have the mind of Christ and to live as He lived. If we do so, then we shall truly be blessed.

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B. Learning Contentment (Phi. 4:10-13)

The apostle has been urging the Philippians to rejoice. Now he tells them that he himself has a particular reason to rejoice – their care for him. In these verses, Paul shares the secret of contentment. There are at least three lessons we can draw from what he tells us about his situation. Firstly, we ought to be grateful for what we have. Secondly, we should be content with our situation. Thirdly, we ought to be confident in the source of our strength.

1. Gratitude for What We Receive (4:10)

Despite all of his discomfort, Paul was grateful for the little he did have. He had his Lord – and He was right there with him in his prison cell. Secondly, he had many happy memories of his friends at Philippi. Nothing could deprive him of the joy he experienced whenever he remembered them and prayed for them (1:3-4). He was encouraged because he knew that the believers over there in Macedonia were concerned about him. He knew that they were praying for him and, on top of all their other kindness to him, they had sent him a gift (4:18).

The tone of these words has sometimes been misunderstood by readers of this letters. Isolated from other considerations they might be read as a none-too-veiled rebuke. ‘At last’ suggests a harsh and sinister implication as though Paul were chiding the Philippians for forgetfulness or dilatoriness in sending the money to him. But this idea is absent from the Greek (*ede pote*). It is inconceivable that Paul is here rebuking his dear friends; he does not mean that he was hurt by the delay. He knew that there was some good reason why this gift had taken so long to reach him. It may have taken a long time to save up the money. It may have been difficult to find a reliable messenger. But it is more likely that the delay was caused because the Philippian believers did not know where the apostle was being held as a prisoner.

Paul did not want to give the impression that he thought the believers were slow in helping him. In 2 Cor. 8:1-2 he commends the Macedonian churches (*i.e.*, the churches in Thessalonica and Philippi) most highly for their generosity in sustaining his ministry through their financial support. In 2 Cor. 11:8, Paul speaks about having ‘robbed’ the Macedonians (presumably the Philippians in particular) in order to continue his ministry to the Corinthians. We know, too, that he was concerned that he should not profit personally from the finances supporting the apostolic mission, lest an accusation of self-seeking damage his integrity. In addition, he was probably very concerned lest he should give the Philippians the impression that he expected further gifts from them. He was not ‘in need’ (v. 11). The sense of uneasiness results from a conflict between his desire to express sincere appreciation of the help given and a concern to show himself superior to questions of money.

Nonetheless, Paul was very pleased to receive this gift. ‘Your concern for me’ translates *phronein* (lit. ‘to think’), a verb used frequently in this letter. ‘Renewed’ or ‘flourished’ (*anethalete*) is used only here but is also found in the LXX. It is an interesting word which Paul borrowed from the horticultural practice of his time; it denotes plants and flowers ‘blooming again’ (*cp.* Ez. 17:24). Thus, Paul is saying, ‘Your concern for me has bloomed again.’

All the time the Philippians have been ‘concerned’ (*ekaireisthe*), *i.e.*, had a thoughtful desire and intention to aid the apostle; but what they lacked was the ‘opportunity’ (*kairos*) to give expression to their concern. Whether it was the apostle’s situation in some inaccessible place, or the Philippians’ own poverty, which prevented this gift reaching him, no blame is attached to this failure. It was something outside their control.

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We need to learn the generous spirit of the Philippians, even if we cause embarrassment to those to whom we are generous! We must respect their sensitivity; but we must also be given the opportunity to discover that it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35).

2. Contentment with Our Situation (4:11-12)

Although he was glad of the gift, he wanted his readers to know that his happiness did not depend on his circumstances. Paul was content because he had been set free from relying on mere ‘things’ for his satisfaction. The Lord Himself said, ‘A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions’ (Luke 12:15).

Paul lived a contented life, whether he had a huge amount of material things, or whether he was deprived of the basic necessities of life. He had learned how to cope even when he had very few material possessions. This was because he knew that the Lord would always supply his basic needs (*cp.* Ps. 37:25). Paul knew all about every kind of moral and physical danger, but he had learned how to rise above the temptations of living in plenty or in want. Whatever happened to him, he was never going to complain. He was satisfied, whatever his situation.

Paul has ‘learned’ the secret of deep peace based on detachment from his outward circumstances. In whatever conditions of life he finds himself, he discovers the will of God for his situation. This is not a fatalism or indolent acquiescence. It is, on the contrary, a detachment from anxious concern about the outward features of his life. This, in turn, arises from his concentration upon the really important things.

Paul had learned to be content in Christ particularly in the sense that possessing Christ had brought him a contentment which was independent of his immediate situation. Paul was content to have Christ – period. For Paul contentment is not found in creating our own security, but by abandoning our security to Jesus Christ! When he was weak, Christ made Paul strong; when he was empty, Christ filled him with His power; when he was poor, Christ made him rich. In ‘whatever situation,’ in Christ he had learned to be content (*cp.* 2 Cor. 12:9-10).

The Greek word for ‘content’ (*autarkes*) (v. 11) is found only in this verse in the New Testament. It is the term used in stoic Greek philosophy for the virtue of self-sufficiency or independence. That was regarded as the highest of personal attainments, since it seemed to involve freedom from needs and weaknesses which might make us dependent on others. For example, Socrates is held up by Diogenes Laertius in the third century AD as an example of a ‘self-sufficient’ man who faced, with equanimity and resolution, all that life brought to him. Paul’s use of the term is, however, quite distinct from the stoic ideal; he is not speaking about his sense of self-sufficiency. He was completely dependent on another, Jesus Christ.

Verse 12 is an eloquent description of the apostle’s detachment. His abasement (*tapeinousthai*) reflects that of his Lord (*cf.* 2:8: ‘He humbled himself,’ *heauton etapeinosen*) and corroborates his teaching to others (*cf.* 2:3: ‘lowliness,’ *tapeinophrosyne*). It carries the thought of a voluntary acceptance of lowly station, even poverty, for Christ’s sake.

The opposite of *tapeinousthai* is ‘to have plenty’ (*perissuein*, lit. ‘to overflow’), which suggests a life of prosperity. The turn of phrase, ‘I have learned the secret’ (*memyemai*) uses a technical expression of the pagan mystery cults which employed it of the initiation of their adherents. It is found only here in the New Testament. This word might suggest that as ritual initiation was no easy matter, the school in which he was learning how to face life victoriously was a hard one.

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3. Confidence in the Source of Our Strength (4:13)

Poverty and plenty had both been Paul's companion during his Christian life. But he knew the secret of being content (vv 11-12) in such diverse conditions. What was – and is – this secret? 'I can do all things through Him who strengthens me' (v. 13). Do not isolate these words from their context. Exegetical considerations require that the 'everything' must be related to the foregoing verses 11-12. Paul is not saying that he could do anything to which he set his mind. The 'all things' refers in the first place to coping with need or plenty.

Paul is not claiming here to be a popular wonder-worker. He means, 'I can do everything provided God wants me to do it.' That was the secret of his contentment. He could live knowing the strength of God was flowing through him, enabling him to carry out God's will. That was all he wanted to do. He knew that, whatever God called him to pass through, the Lord would give him the strength to bear a good witness to Him in it. This was because he knew that God's grace was sufficient for him in every situation (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

The apostle is insisting that in every conceivable circumstance, 'in any and every situation,' he finds the strength which vital union with Christ supplies to be adequate for maintain his apostolic work and for the fulfillment of his desire to accelerate the progress of the gospel. This statement, then, does not make Paul a wonder-worker, a spiritual 'super-man,' who towers so far above the rest of us that his life is no encouragement to lesser mortals. 'Although he was an apostle, he was also a man' is Chrysostom's timely reminder. And this means that the triumphant assertion 'I can do everything through him who gives me strength' can be true of every Christian today.

These are rich words of encouragement; they teach us that it is possible, by the grace of God, to be content, even in a world like this where we face trial, difficulty, and deprivation. They are also words of experience, indicating that the contentment Paul describes is not to be confused with our natural temperament. No; spiritual contentment needs to be *learned*, and usually is so through hard or testing experiences. These words teach us that the contentment we may experience in this world does not depend upon anything that it alone has to offer to us. It is only 'in Christ' that we can learn to be content.

Although God's people are called to be diligent in ministering to their brothers and sisters in Christ, they sometimes fail. When others fail us, we should be glad that the Lord never fails. And when we do not receive ministry from others, we should be content ourselves with God and his sufficiency. The secret of living a contented life is to live trusting in God and seeking to please Him in everything.

Paul's 'self-sufficiency' and equanimity in meeting all life's demands has not come through a mechanical self-discipline of fixed resolution such as the stoic practiced. The modern counterpart of this stoic sentiment is found in the poem *Invictus* by William Ernest Henly. *Invictus*, was the entire last written statement of Timothy McVeigh before his execution in Terre Haute, Indiana on June 11, 2001.

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Invictus (L. unconquered)

by William Ernest Henley; 1849-1903

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul.

C. Application & Discussion Questions

- *'We need to learn the generous spirit of the Philippians, even if we cause embarrassment to those to whom we are generous' (p. 107). Respond to this comment.*
- *What are some of the things that make us discontented? How does Paul's teaching help us to be delivered from that spirit?*

For next time: Read Philippians 4:14-23 and Ferguson chapters 26-27