

**Core Seminar**

**Suffering for the Glory of God**

**Class 12: The Secret of Contentment**

***\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_***

***Finding joy in Christ in any and every situation***

**Introduction**

Well, we’ve spent 12 weeks together considering this issue – thinking about our experience and what the Bible says about suffering. We’ve looked at the purposes God has in our suffering; talked about how the call to suffer well is really a fight for faith – and we spent several weeks looking at different ways we can practically fight for faith; we’ve looked at suffering unique to being a Christian; and considered how suffering well as a Christian is actually a witness to a watching world of the hope we have in Christ.

Now, I’m not sure everyone’s motivation for taking this class; there could be a lot of different reasons why you’ve come. But with all the tools we have to suffer well, the problem with suffering…is that it’s *suffering*…there’s often no way around it; we simply have to go through it. This is clear in the fact that as we read Scripture, we find that *waiting* is the normal posture this side of heaven.

* Abraham was promised offspring, but he had to *wait* 25 years before Isaac came.[[1]](#footnote-1)
* Israel was left to wander in the wilderness for 40 years before they could enter the Promised Land.
* The Psalms are filled with the reminder to *wait* for God.
  + **Ps 25:3** "Indeed, none who *wait* for you shall be put to shame…”
  + **Ps 27:14** "Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage…”
  + **Ps 62:5** "For God alone, O my soul, *wait* in silence, for my hope is from him."
  + **Ps 130:5** "I *wait* for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope."
* Those who are children of God wait in hope for our redemption (**Rom. 8:23**)
* Creation itself is *waiting* to be set free from its bondage to decay (**Rom. 8:19-22**)
* This side of heaven we *wait* for Jesus’ return, saying with John in **Revelation 22**, “Come, Lord Jesus!

But one challenge that comes with waiting is discontentment. We get tired of waiting, and before long find ourselves fretting, distracted, and complaining or grumbling. *How many here have ever felt that way*? It might be that we face discontentment in our job, our singleness, our marriage, our church, our friends (or lack thereof), our budget, the gifts, talents, spiritual gifts or ministry opportunities we have. There is no lack of things to be discontent about.

Live long enough and you will suffer. So as we seek to suffer well, to suffer in a way that honors God, we need not only to learn how to fight for faith, but how to wait well; to not wait with a disgruntled, complaining, or distracted heart; but to wait with contentment. To wait with hope. With that in mind we’ll end our class looking at contentment: what it is, and how to find it.

1. **Contentment – *What it is***

One of the key passages on this topic is found in Philippians 4.

**Philippians 4:10-12** **"I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need."**

Paul explains that he was thankful for the Philippians generous gift, yet in thanking them, he didn’t want to be misunderstood - he didn’t want His ‘thank you’ to come across as subtle request for *another* gift. So he was clear - he wasn’t in need – he had learned the secret of being content in every situation; whether he had much or little.

So what is it? Contentment here in **v10** can be defined as *having sufficiency independent of circumstances or conditions or surroundings. It is an expression of being satisfied*. With that definition in mind, it is also helpful to note what contentment *is not.*

1. *It is not anti-ambition*
   * + 1. Paul had ambition
          1. It was his ambition to preach the gospel where Christ had not yet been named (**Rom. 15:20**).
          2. It was his ambition[[2]](#footnote-2) to please God in all things (**2 Cor. 5:9**).
          3. Paul said if a man aspires to the office of overseer, if it is his ambition, he desires a noble task (**1 Tim. 3:1**).
       2. But Paul attacked *selfish* ambition
          1. **Phi. 2:3** “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.” (also Rom. 2:8).
     1. *It is not an indifference to circumstances*

It is not an emotional indifference. Instead Paul is talking about not being mastered by, controlled by circumstances. If someone is able to improve their circumstances by *fair and legitimate means*, they can do so. We see Paul doing this in **Acts 16:37-39**,

“But Paul said to them, “They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out.” The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city.”

Rather than being indifferent to being mistreated, he appeals to his Roman citizenship to improve his circumstances. The thing to recognize though is that *before* they let him out of the prison, *while* his circumstances were far from comfortable, what were Paul and Silas doing? Moping? Complaining? No! We’re told in **v25,** “About Midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.” There joy was not held hostage by circumstances and the prisoners and the jailers who had the chance to listen in must have been astonished.

In another example, Paul says in **1 Corinthians 7:20-21 “Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.)”** In context he’s arguing that the position we were in when God called us to be a Christian is not what’s *ultimately* important (circumcised or not; slave or free; married or single, etc.). It would be wrong to say that those conditions have to change *in order* to be a Christian. But, Paul also acknowledges the injustice of slavery and says, if you have legitimate means to gain freedom…do it! The point is that contentment is not an indifference to circumstances, but seeing them in perspective of what matters for eternity and making changes when there are legitimate means to do so[[3]](#footnote-3). It’s not *necessarily* wrong to leave a job you don’t like, get married when you’re tired of being single, or turn on the air conditioner when you’re hot. The question is *do I have to have this in order to be happy?*

QUESTIONS?

1. **Contentment – *How to find it***

It’s one thing to understand what contentment is – that’s the easy part – it’s another thing to *experience* true contentment. So how do we find it? Go back to Philippians 4 for a moment. Notice that in **v11** that Paul says, “I have *learned*…to be content,” and in **v12** that he “*learned* the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.” Now, I don’t know about you, but I find that incredibly encouraging: Paul, the Apostle who wrote 13 of the books we have in the NT, had to *learn* contentment; he wasn’t always like that anymore than any of us. It’s something he had to learn and it’s something that we too can learn. How did he come to learn it? Let’s consider four ways that Paul learned and we too, by God’s grace, might learn to be content: regardless of our circumstances, not fearing what the future may hold or what may be *withheld*.

* 1. *By experience*

Consider **2 Corinthians 12:7-10** where Paul writes,

“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9 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. 10 That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in [I am content with[[4]](#footnote-4)] weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

We don’t know exactly what the “thorn in the flesh” was in **v7**, but whatever it was, Paul didn’t like it; he struggled against it – three times he asked God to take it away but it wasn’t. At first, it was something he couldn’t be content with; but *through* the experience, God taught him the great lesson; namely, that “My grace is sufficient for you.[[5]](#footnote-5)”

Sometimes we are simply slow to learn and God in His kindness will allow for an experience through which we learn contentment; where we learn to trust Him. Look back on some of the greatest lessons you’ve learned about God; times where you’ve grown the most. *Most* of those times were a challenging season, a time of suffering. Though it was painful to go through them, we can look back and thank God for that experience because of how we have grown through it. Even if we’re in the midst of it (as Paul was), we can by God’s grace, thank Him as we learn that His grace *is* sufficient for us; that often times those times of suffering become God’s platform to display His strength.

We see the same thing in **James** **1:2-4** “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” The wonderful experience of ‘not lacking anything’ (can you imagine that?) comes as James’ readers face trials of many kinds – it comes as a fruit of perseverance.

* 1. *By doing the work in front of you*

At times the temptation in a season of discontentedness is to go inward; to dwell on the possibility of change such that we convince our self if I *only* had this, if *these* circumstances were different…*then* I’d be okay. More and more the focus becomes our self and less on God; still less on others. Before long, God seems small, our problems seem insurmountable and we are enslaved by the idea that we cannot be content without our circumstances or surroundings changing.

In a time like this, one thing we can do rather than becoming introspective and dwelling on what is disturbing us is asking, “What does God require of me in the circumstances He has brought me into?” and then to get busy whether it has to do with our responsibilities at work, in a relationship, or a task we have at church. In **Philippians 2**, Paul calls the church to get busy doing that which God called them to; in other words to obey God or work out their salvation with fear and trembling[[6]](#footnote-6). As they step out in faith feeling weak or not wanting to do so, Paul then goes on to remind them they are able to do so, “for it is God who works *in you* to will and to act according to his good purpose.[[7]](#footnote-7)” When we move from dwelling on ourselves and doing the work in front of us that benefits others and pleases God, we’ll find working in us – giving us both the strength and will to persevere even if it’s something *we* don’t feel like doing.

* 1. *By listening to truth rather than emotions*

If you could somehow connect a computer to your emotions so you could see what your emotions where telling you throughout the day, what would they say? We’ve talked about functional theology vs professed theology and one reason they’re often different is because we listen to our emotions more than we do truth. In pain, emotions can often sound louder than truth. Emotions are not bad…they’re just not always reliable.

I may *feel* like God is unconcerned. But the truth is, He *is* concerned for me as my loving Father and *nothing* happens to me apart from God - even the hairs of my head are numbered (Matt. 7:11; 10:30). Conditions may change, but God is unchanging.

I may *feel* like God is not there and my situation is out of control - or if He is there, He’s cruel to let it happen. But the truth is that for the child of God, every situation in life is in some way the unfolding manifestation of God’s love and goodness. I may not understand all of His ways, but all things work together for good (Rom. 8:28).

I may *feel* like this will never end. But the truth is that whatever my conditions may be right now, they are only temporary. This too shall pass and *nothing* can rob me of the joy and hope that ultimately await me with Christ (Rom. 8:35-39; 1 Pet. 1:6-7).

Emotions are a wonderful gift of God. We’re not called to be stoics without feeling. But we must let the truth of God’s word inform and give life to our emotions.

* 1. *By being truly satisfied in Christ*

For this last point, let’s revisit **Philippians 4** one more time. In **v12**, Paul writes, “I have learned the *secret* of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or want.” So what was the secret? In **v13**, he explains, “I can do everything through him who gives me strength.” The secret was Christ! When Paul wrestled with the thorn in his flesh in 2 Corinthians 12, the solution was not removing the thorn, it wasn’t getting rid of his weakness but experiencing the grace of God *in* his hardship; the power of God *in* his weakness.

How does this happen? If we turn back to **chapter 3,** we see something very helpful. In **3:8**, Paul writes, “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.” Notice what he says – that in comparison with the surpassing value of Christ, he counts *all things* as rubbish…as garbage. Not some things, but *all* things. Now to be clear, he’s not saying those things like a job, a spouse, a friend, his health have no value – they do! But in *comparison* to the value he’s found in knowing Christ, its garbage.

We are tempted towards discontentment when we lose something of value. But none of us are sitting here worried that someone is stealing our garbage!

The secret to being content in any and all circumstances is to find your true satisfaction in Christ. The things of this life come and go – they aren’t worth banking our joy on. But Christ is a sure foundation, and when our joy, our hope, our satisfaction is in Him, *nothing* can take it away – even if the world is crashing down around us. So, when our hope and contentment are based in knowing Him, we can be in a trying situation and *wait* because we’ve found Him trustworthy.

This is why Jesus describes Himself the way he often does in the Gospels. In **John 7:37-38,** we’re told that “Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.’” This is more than just knowing the argument. This is laboring to taste and see that God is good (Ps. 34:8); and having that be so important that you refuse to stop until you know what Jesus is talking about. He *really* is the living water that truly satisfies. What is your thirst this morning? For recognition or honor? Comfort? Companionship? Whatever your thirst, Jesus declares, if we come to Him, see Him for who He truly is, if we trust Him we will not only drink and be satisfied, we will also find streams of living waters flowing from within us!

So when we’re faced with the reality of discontentment (and we will all have to wrestle with this), we read and meditate on God’s word which reveals who Jesus is. We pray for God to open our eyes to see Him and ears to hear him. And in our discontentment, we pray with the psalmist in **Psalm 90**, “Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.[[8]](#footnote-8)” And then we wait, knowing that none who wait on God shall be put to shame.[[9]](#footnote-9)

1. Conclusion

Suffering is real, and it is a painful experience. Yet, God is sovereign even over our suffering – nothing goes to waste, *including* our suffering. There are many questions we have that will go unanswered, but we can trust God, we can wait on Him, we can be content. How? Because of what we learn at the foot of the cross; what we learn about His unchanging character from the gospel. He *is* good; He *is* trustworthy; He *is* in control; and He *is* for us! One day, He will wipe away every tear. One day there will be no more death, or mourning, or crying or pain. We will see the old order of things pass away and we will rejoice as God makes *all things* new. With that hope in mind, we now face suffering knowing our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed.

**Pray**

1. Gen. 12:4 (75 years old) when the promise was made; Gen. 21:5 (100 years old) when Isaac was born [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As in the NASB (translating φιλοτιμέομαι) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. One question with this might be, is it wrong then to rebel against unjust systems? What ways are right/wrong? We’re called to submit to the government in Romans 13 and we’re told to submit by an author who is not under a perfect Roman government. We see examples of civic disobedience (Acts 5:27-29) when government rule opposes God’s. There may be some examples where it’s not explicit in Scripture but unjust laws may call for peaceful, non-violent protest as we speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves (Prov. 31:8-9), but this calls for prudence. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As in ESV; translating the word, “εὐδοκῶ“ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 2 Cor. 12:9 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Phi. 2:12 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Phi. 2:13 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ps. 90:14 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ps. 25:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)