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Sermon Notes

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The Secret of Christian Contentment

Philippians 4:10-4:13

Alexander Dumas's The Count of Monte Cristo

Two prisoners became friends, both imprisoned unjustly on the Chateau D'If for supposed crimes against the French government. Edmund Dantes the younger man, and the aged Abbe Faria the older. Abbe Faria became Edmund Dantes's mentor...almost like an adopted father, teaching him everything he knew... about logic, history, languages, chemistry... meanwhile they plotted their escape from the Chateau D'If.

However, the Abbe Faria was sick and it soon became apparent that he could never escape that rocky island. One day, at a time near his death, the Abbe Faria pulled out a small scrolled-up piece of paper and entrusted it to Edmund. "This paper is the secret to the treasure of Monte Cristo... a vast, immense treasure and it will all be yours." Edmund Dantes looked at the map, with its strange symbols and ancient figures, unable to decipher its meaning. Then, patiently, Abbe Faria showed him the secret to the treasure.

After the death of Abbe Faria, Edmund Dantes escaped from the Chateau D'If and made his way to the small Island of Monte Cristo off the coast of Italy, between Corsica and Elba... there, following the secret map, he found a treasure of incalculable value, made up of a thousand gold ingots (each weighing two to three pounds), rare jewels, diamonds and coins—worth over 13 million francs—and he was instantly a rich man.

However, the wealth Edmund Dantes, acquired by the whispered secret of Abbe Faria, is nothing compared to the secret the aged Apostle Paul wanted to bequeath to his children in the faith—the Philippian church.

Philippians 4:12 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.

People all over the world can relate to the lust for physical treasure... for riches beyond your wildest dreams

But Paul here points to a far greater treasure... the rare jewel of Christian contentment

Paul says it's a secret to be learned... its part of advanced Christianity,

Woe is me, I am ruined... for I am a man of a discontent heart, and I live among a people of discontented hearts!!!

- Discontent while driving behind a truck that is driving too slowly, and we can't pass
- Discontent while at work, thinking our boss should recognize our contributions better
- Discontent when doing the bills, wishing we made more money
- Discontent as children with our parents, or as parents with our children; or as husbands with our wives or as wives with our husbands
- Discontent on sunny days that are too hot, or on cloudy days that are too cold
- Discontent waiting for the new girl at the McDonald's counter to figure out how to push the right button to get our combo meal in the system... such that our whole experience at McDonald's took six minutes rather than five!!
- Discontent with our homes, our cars, our clothing, our food, our weight, our intelligence, our credentials, our shoe size, our hairstyle...
- Discontent about almost every area of our lives from time to time

Even more poignantly for Christians, the kind of contentment Paul mentions here is so rare... when was the last time we were supernaturally at peace and content in the middle of a serious trial??

I. Paul's Credentials: A Life of Extreme Suffering

Illus. If you are going to a basketball clinic, would it not excite you to learn that your personal tutor was a coach that has won five national championships, and been to the Final Four twelve times?

If you are taking a course on creative writing, would it not excite you to read the brochure and learn that your personal tutor has won three Pulitzer Prizes?

If you are signed on for a course on gardening, would it not excite you to find out that your personal tutor has written six best-selling guide books on gardening, and has a nationally renowned television program?

So we come to Paul and say, "What are your credentials for teaching us on learning the secrets of being content in any and every situation?"

A. Rejected... Even HATED, by His Own Countrymen

Acts 22:22 The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!"

B. Persecuted Savagely and Physically

2 Corinthians 11:23-27 Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, 26 I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. 27 I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.

C. Deeply Distressed Over the Status of Churches

2 Corinthians 11:28-29 Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. 29 Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

Galatians 4:19-20 My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!

D. Plagued by False Christians of the Circumcision Group

E. Afflicted by a "Thorn in the Flesh"

F. Yet Speaks Lavishly of Joy in this Letter

1. Five times he says he rejoices
2. Three times he says he is laboring for their joy
3. Five times he commands them to rejoice
4. AND he gave them an unforgettable example as a role model

Acts 16:22-25 The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. 23 After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. 24 Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. 25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.

Alright, we are satisfied... our personal tutor and mentor on abiding contentment is well-qualified to teach us and has demonstrated before our very eyes the fruits of his advanced technique

This leaves only the question: what is your secret, Paul? Can you teach us, too?

II. Immediate Context: Thanks for Their Gift

A. All of Philippians a “Thank You” Note

vs. 10 I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it.

B. Their Concern a Cause for Joy... BUT NOT BECAUSE HE WAS NEEDY!!!

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

Paul’s Eye is Always on the Eternal

C. Paul’s Desire: The Philippians Wealth on Judgment Day

vs. 17 Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account.

More on that, God-willing next week

III. Paul’s Spiritual Mindset: The Key to His Unshakeable Joy

A. A Whole Epistle of Modeled Attitudes

1. Attitude toward his imprisonment: It has really served to advance the gospel

2. Attitude toward his enemies stirring up trouble by preaching the gospel: what does it matter... the gospel is being proclaimed, and because of this I rejoice!!
3. Attitude toward his possible release: For myself, I would rather die and be with Christ, but for your sake, I would rather be released... and that is what I would like
4. Attitude toward life and death: For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain
5. Attitude toward persecution: stand firm with joy, as a sign to your enemies
6. Attitude toward other Christians: Unity in love, with Christ's servant heart... considering other's needs as more important than your own
7. Attitude toward Christ: He is truly God, and I will worship Him by bending my knees to Him
8. Attitude toward salvation: something to be worked out with fear and trembling, in the power of the Lord
9. Attitude toward everyday troubles: do everything without complaining or arguing
10. Attitude toward self-righteousness in religion: everything I once lived for I count as dung, garbage, refuse
11. Attitude toward the greatest treasure in his life: I want to know Christ, even if it costs suffering to do it
12. Attitude toward the Christian life: I press on day after day to know Christ and be found in Him
13. Attitude toward pagans who live for earthly sensual things: their destiny is destruction
14. Attitude toward our physical life in the body: our citizenship is in heaven... we're just passing through this world, and someday we'll come to our true home, and then we'll have glorious resurrection bodies
15. Attitude toward stability in the Christian life: rejoicing always, trusting God in prayer, free from anxiety over everything
16. HERE: Attitude toward their financial gift

B. Following Spiritual Mindset

1. "I rejoice greatly that your concern is renewed"... that I have new evidence of your ongoing faith in Christ
2. Their concern never wavered... but no opportunity to show it

3. MOTIVE: Not Paul's great need, amazingly enough!!
4. Paul reveals the existence of a hidden secret: joy not tied to physical circumstances
5. Joy reveals incredibly stability: feasting or fasting... wealthy or poverty stricken: I am always content in Christ
6. True secret: the power of Christ working in him

C. Paul Rehearses Their History

vs. 15-16 *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 again and again when I was in need.*

1. It was good of you to share in my troubles now
2. You have always been like this... it's good to see that you are still the same
3. You have always shared with me, even in ways other churches didn't

D. Paul's Central Desire: Their Eternal Wealth on Judgment Day... Not Paul's Immediate Physical Comfort

More about that next week, God willing

E. Paul's Practical Statements Too

vs. 18-19 *I have received full payment and even more; 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 his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.*

1. I am fully supplied
2. God will fully supply YOU as well

IV. The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment

Jeremiah Burrough's timeless classic:

A Puritan minister in the first half of the seventeenth-century, had seen his share of suffering in the persecution of Puritans under Archbishop Laud. In the late 1640's, he wrote this classic meditation, "The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment" on Paul's statement in Philippians:

Philippians 4:12-13 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 everything through him who gives me strength.

Burrough's Doctrine: To be well-skilled in the mystery of Christian contentment is the duty, glory, and excellence of a Christian.

A. Initial Observation: Christian Contentment is Possible, But Not Guaranteed

1. Paul says it is a secret to be learned: thus Christian contentment is not guaranteed
2. Paul says he's learned the secret: therefore Christian contentment is possible

Do we not testify to this in our Christian lives? Do we not murmur and complain under trials far more than reveal a grounded, supernatural contentment?

Is it not truly a RARE jewel??

B. The Nature of Christian Contentment: What It Is

Definition: Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.

1. Inward

"If the attainment of true contentment were as easy as keeping quiet outwardly, it would not need much learning."

2. Quiet

What it is opposed to

- murmuring and repining at the hand of God
- vexing and fretting
- tumultuousness of spirit
- unsettled, unstable spirit which distracts from spiritual duties
- heart-consuming cares
- sinking discouragements
- sinful shirkings and shiftings to get relief
- rising against God in rebellion

3. Frame of spirit

"Contentment is a soul-business: an inward, quiet, frame of spirit."

"Contentment is not merely one act, just a flash in a good mood.

4. Gracious

- Not the natural quietness of certain personalities
- Not a sturdy resolution of the will
- Not from the strength of natural reasoning

It is a GRACE from GOD!!

5. Freely submits to God's disposal

It is a matter of submission... of the yielding a subject does to His King

“A contented heart looks to God's disposal, and submits to God's disposal, that is, he sees the wisdom of God in everything. In his submission, he sees God's sovereignty, but what makes him take pleasure is God's wisdom. The Lord knows how to order things better than I. The Lord sees further than I do.”

- No reluctance, no great persuasion needed to submit gladly to God... not grudging
- Not by constraint... not forced to be content
- Not by stupidity or ignorance of the afflictions facing them

It is a FREE act by rational people based on spiritual judgment of God

6. Gladly submits to God's disposal

- Here is where rejoicing in the Lord ALWAYS means the most
- This person is not irritable, angry, and frustrated... they GLADLY submit to God's wise ruling... glad that God has so ruled

7. It does so in any and every situation

Philippians 4:12-13 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 everything through him who gives me strength.

True Christian contentment is circumstance proof... that's what makes it both RARE and a JEWEL

Paul knows how to be content at all times

Two different skills to learn:

C. How to Be Abased and How to Abound

1. To be godly while in need is a real spiritual skill to be learned

The world is full of needy people, and at some point in our lives all of us play this role

- a. some are looking for a job or are struggling financially
- b. others are looking for a spouse or even a friend and are struggling emotionally
- c. still others are in need of health, suffering affliction

Paul says he knows how to be in need and still content!!!

The temptation is overwhelming to complain, to murmur against God; to forsake all happiness until this need is met

- 2. To be godly while having plenty is ALSO a real spiritual skill to be learned
 - a. America is full of wealthy Christians who face the temptations of self-indulgence constantly
 - b. Paul says he's learned how to have plenty and still be content
 - c. he's learned the secret of the times of plenty as well... to enjoy the good gifts of God without feeling guilty, but also knowing all the while that God will hold him accountable for remembering the poor
 - d. like Christ, who knew how to fast for forty days in the desert without murmuring against God BUT ALSO knew how to sit at a banquet table and enjoy it, giving thanks to God AND YET not being a glutton or a drunkard
 - e. thus also it is a skill to be learned how to be godly and content while feasting... this is true treasure, says Paul:

1 Timothy 6:6-9 But godliness with contentment is great gain

D. The Mystery of Christian Contentment

- 1. How is this possible? It seems so difficult!!
- 2. Note: the RARE jewel of Christian contentment
- 3. Character put on display: behavior that seems to make no sense
- 4. Burroughs' insights
 - a. a Christian is content, yet unsatisfied: there is always more of Christ and His character to gain
 - b. the principle of subtraction

“Not so much by adding to what he would have, or to what he has, not by adding more to his condition; but rather by subtracting from his desires, so as to make his desires and his circumstances even and equal.”

Non-Christians think to come to contentment by ADDITION

“The way to be rich is not by increasing wealth, but by diminishing our desires. Certainly that man or woman is rich, who have their desires satisfied.”

1 Timothy 6:6-9 But godliness with contentment is great gain. 7 For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. 8 But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. 9 People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

c. the principle of addition

“The world thinks the way to contentment in affliction is to be rid of your burdens (i.e. to have the affliction removed). No...the way to contentment is to add another burden (beyond your present difficult circumstances), that is, to labor to load and burden your heart with your sin; the heavier the burden of your sin is to your heart, the lighter will become your affliction to your heart, and so you shall be content.”

This runs so contrary to our nature... we all think so highly of ourselves that we are shocked whenever trials and adversities come. We all have PhD's in self-esteem and nursery school in humility. Charles Simeon, a godly minister in England in the early 19th century, spent each of his birthdays in self-humiliation and fasting... and found that he needed it MORE as he got older. In one classic passage on the need for humility before God, he said:

“I do not see, so much as I could wish, a holy reverential awe of God. The confidence that is generally professed does not sufficiently, in my opinion, savor of a creature-like spirit, or of a sinner-like spirit. If ninety-nine out of a hundred, of even good men, were now informed for the first time that Isaiah in a vision saw the Seraphim before the throne; and that each of the Seraphs had six wings; and then were asked, ‘How do you think they employ their wings?’ I think their answer would be, ‘How? Why they fly with them with all their might; and if they had six hundred wings they would do the same, exerting all their powers in the service of their God.’ They would never dream of their employing two to veil their faces, as unworthy to behold their God, and two to veil their feet as unworthy to serve Him; and devoting only the remaining two to what might be deemed their more appropriate use... I confess that this is the religion which I love; I would have a conscious unworthiness to pervade every act and habit of my soul...” [Hugh Evan Hopkins, *Charles Simeon of Cambridge*, p. 157]

Because we have so little of this humility before God, we are much more likely to murmur at Him when trials come

We must add to our trials a sense of our sinfulness and creatureliness before an awesome almighty God, and we will be content

d. changing the affliction to something else

You make the affliction a positive good rather than a negative evil... a wise stroke from a master craftsman on your soul

Luther: "A Christian becomes a mighty worker and a wonderful creator, to create out of heaviness, joy; out of terror, comfort; out of sin, righteousness; out of death, life."

"Two men may have the same affliction; to one it shall be as gall and wormwood, yet it shall be wine and honey and delightfulness and joy and advantage and riches to the other."

e. thinking about the Kingdom of God above all

"A Christian thinks, 'Well, how shall I come to be satisfied and content?... What is the duty of the circumstances God has put me into?'"

"You should labor to bring your heart to quiet and contentment by setting your souls to work in the duties of your present condition."

God has done this for a purpose... ask "What duties are required of this condition? How can I make the most of this situation for the glory of God and His Kingdom?"

f. melting your will into God's will

"It is not by having his own desires satisfied, but by melting his will and desires into God's will. So that, in one sense he comes to have his desires satisfied though he does not obtain the thing he desired before; still he comes to be satisfied with this, because he makes his will to be at one with God's will."

Psalm 37:4 Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.

E. The Secret Unfolded

"I can do everything through Christ who strengthens me."

1. Christ is the teacher of contentment

a. Christ teaches by precept

Luke 6:22-23 Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. 23 "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.

Luke 10:20 "However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

John 15:11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

John 14:27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

John 16:33 "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

b. Christ teaches by example

Hebrews 12:2-3 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

2. Christ is the source of contentment

"I can do everything through Christ who strengthens me."

NOTE: it takes STRENGTH to be content!!!

It is a sign of weakness and spiritual frailty to be easily tossed back and forth by circumstances

Circumstances have a certain FORCE to move us from joy, peace, and contentment

Only Christ can give us a strong, immovable spirit, a character to trust and rejoice and be at peace NO MATTER WHAT the circumstances

Example:

You are contented and filled with the Spirit, praising God as you drive to an important meeting at work... suddenly you hear a strange sound coming from your engine... a mile or more down the road, the noise gets so loud you are compelled to pull over. That sound means one thing without a doubt: MONEY

It will take spiritual strength to face that trial and continue praising the Lord, contented in Christ. You have to LEARN the SECRET at that moment of talking to yourself

"God gave me this car, God is responsible to care for it. All my possessions are His, including the money God will use to repair this problem. My true treasure is in heaven and nothing can touch that today."

Thus is your attitude for the first five minutes, and you're doing well... but when you call your boss on the cell phone to explain why you'll be late to the meeting and he chews you out, it will take more strength to maintain a contented attitude. And when it takes an hour to get a tow truck to get your car, and the tow costs \$75; and when your spouse gets frustrated when you call and let her know what's happening, and when the repair costs twice as much as you were anticipating and when you leave your briefcase at the repair place and have to go back and get it, and when you spill juice on yourself as you eat quickly in the car to save time...

And so on and so on and so on...

You will need immense spiritual strength to maintain a peaceful, trusting, contented attitude through it all

- a. through the active strength that Christ gives we can be content always

Psalms constantly appeal to the Lord for strength in trials

Psalm 18:1 I love you, O LORD, my strength.

Psalm 28:7 The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song.

Christ is the one who strengthens us for unshakable stability... a contented spirit no matter what

John 15:5 "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

- b. through the fellowship of Christ standing by our side, we can be content always

Philippians 3:10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,

2 Timothy 4:16 At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth.

F. The Excellence of Contentment

Consider with me how excellent is the character of a man or woman who has learned this secret in Christ's school

Consider that this humble, trusting, constantly contented spirit is at the pinnacle of Christian character

1. By it we give God his due worship, setting our hearts on Him above all His earthly gifts

By it we say "I love you, Lord, more than any of the good gifts you give me. If you take them away, I will still love you, I will still trust you, I will still treasure you."

2. By it the soul come nearest the excellence of God

By it we behave most like God, who is ever at peace, ever serene, ever in control... never flustered, never anxious, never irritable

3. Thus is this quality the crown jewel of Christian character... and rest assured God will often test it and put it on display!!!

G. The Evils of a Murmuring Spirit

1. By murmuring, we say the opposite: “I love the gifts you give more than I love you, Lord. I love the money, and the car, and the family, and the good weather, and the good food, and the successful job, and the comfortable furniture, and the beautiful scenery, and the pleasing entertainment, and the good health... I love these THINGS more than I love you, Lord... and if you take them away, I will murmur at you.
2. By murmuring, we behave least like Christ... who was content to take even a cup of God’s wrath from His hand and drink it to the bottom

V. Questions for Application

1. Have you learned the secret of true Christian contentment?
2. Are you characterized by consistent joy in Christ, regardless of the circumstances?
3. What does your reaction to trials and adversity reveal about what you consider to be your true treasure?
4. Is it necessary for God to feed you constantly with good circumstances or you will growl at Him?
5. If you are more characterized by discontent, complaining, and murmuring, are you willing to repent and to begin a new life of constant trust in Christ?
6. Do you desire a mature Christian character of which this rare jewel of Christian contentment is a visible radiant display of God’s glory?
7. What are you willing to pay to learn the secret of true Christian contentment? For this secret is only taught through a coupling of a concept: “I can do everything through Christ who strengthens me” with a series of painful trials specially crafted for you by the Master. No one’s set of trials is exactly like anyone else’s... but they have the same goal... teaching you the secret of true Christian contentment. Are you willing to pay the price of suffering to learn this secret, then are you willing for God to put you on display in more suffering so that others, like the Philippian jailer and his family can be saved?