

How to Be Content No Matter What

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Philippians Series
Philippians 4:10-13

This morning I want to talk about learning to be content in any and every situation. That no matter what faces you as a Christian, you can learn to be content. In many ways, today's talk is a natural extension of last week's talk. I talked about how to stop worrying. Today, I am going to talk about how to be content.

The apostle Paul says:

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

As we speak about contentment, one definition that is going to keep coming up is the idea of learning to be independent, learning to be free from outward circumstances so that your mood is not determined by what is going on around you. We are going to see that contentment is the opposite of being mastered by your circumstances. Instead, you become the master.

When you just consider this very simple idea of being independent of your circumstances so that you are not mastered by every situation that you face, I think all of us can immediately see how lacking in contentment we all are. Isn't it the case that your moods are regularly determined by even the most trivial of irritating circumstances? Let's just take the most trivial circumstance that Americans have decided to magnify to unbearable proportions: that is, the circumstance of simply having to wait. To wait in traffic or to wait in line. Driving to work in the morning and there is traffic. You are stopped for a period of time because of road construction they are doing this summer. Tell me, what is your inward mood when you are stopped in traffic or when someone in front of you is driving slowly, slower than the speed limit, much slower than the speed limit. Is your inward mood one of contentment where you say that the fact that you have had to slow down on the highway to a crawl has not mastered you? It doesn't control the way you are feeling right now. It hasn't ruffled your peace at all. Or do you find yourself chewing on the steering wheel, pounding on the dashboard while on the back of your car you have one of those nice Jesus bumper stickers that says something like: "I have a river of life flowing out of me."?

Or have you ever paid attention to your emotions in a fast food restaurant? You are standing in line at McDonald's and the person behind the counter has a completely blank look on her face. She can't figure out how to take off one large fry and replace it with two small fries. Gee, I don't know, maybe if we all just stood and stared, maybe that would get me my food.

Ever check your mood in the grocery store when you get in one of those lines where the person in front of you has purchased a \$120 worth of groceries, but only has \$14.00 in his wallet?

Can you say that in those moments that it would really be true before God and, even, in front of yourself if you were to look in the mirror and say: “Yes, I can say with Paul, I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation.”? The little things don’t ruffle my feathers. When the gasket tears on the dishwasher so that the water begins to run on the kitchen floor, it doesn’t take away my inner peace. It doesn’t ruffle my feathers. When I can’t start the lawnmower after pulling and pulling. When the dry cleaners ruins a few shirts, when you walk out to your car and there is a big scratch on the door, the paint is chipped—still content, right?

I have been using, of course, incredibly minor situations. Not the major pressure of mounting bills, where you are staring at bankruptcy or living in a really bad marriage. You have really just stopped communicating. Every conversation ends up in a fight. Or being single and desperately wanting to be married and not having the opportunity to get married. Your biological clock, gals, is running down or has run out.

I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation. This is the definition of a Christian. This is what uniquely marks a Christian, to be completely free of being mastered by our circumstances. Talk about a high bar, something that seems so far beyond us. Talk about having to look up so that it seems like our necks ache because this is so far above us.

And think about our society—you know, if we were to label modern America as we head toward the millennium, it would be that we are basically a society of incredibly discontented people. We have our cars and our televisions and our home computers and CD players, but how many people could say: I know what it is to be in need and I know what it means to have plenty, I have learned the secret of being content in every and any situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

I mean every day we are bombarded with thousands of messages basically designed to create in us discontent. You have a 386 computer, boy that is a dinosaur. You need more power. You need a larger screen TV Oh, those sneakers? Nobody wears those sneakers anymore.

It is like the movie, *What about Bob?* We are constantly having to walk around saying: I need. I need. I need. I need. I want. I want. I want. Politicians fuel discontentment. Religious leaders and demagogues know that the easiest way to gain a following is to rub folks’ discontentment. You deserve more. You are being ripped off. You are being mistreated. Your rights are being trampled on. You are not getting your fair share.

What a rare thing it is to find a truly contented individual. And yet, friends, that is part of the definition of being a Christian. That you would learn how to be content in any and every situation. That you would be completely different from everyone around you.

Well, that is what we are going to talk about today. How to be content, no matter what. Let’s pray.

Now, in talking about contentment in any and every situation I want to share with you what contentment is not. This is a funny concept, this idea of

being free from outward circumstances. You know the whole notion of Christian contentment has led to the Marxist critique of Christianity that Christianity is just opium for the soul. It is basically a way of telling down trodden people to just allow tyrants and abusers to keep on abusing them and that it shouldn't affect down trodden people at all.

Here I am, I am suffering under an unjust government and I should never protest, I should never try to organize; I should just simply live with my present terrible situation.

Here I am, a Christian housewife, and my husband is slapping me around. I just need to learn how to be content.

Here I am, a Christian worker and my boss comes in and curses at me and verbally abuses me every day. Just roll over. Just be a doormat for everyone to wipe their feet on.

Marx said, "Opium for the masses; that is what Christian contentment is. It is just opium for the soul."

Well, Christian contentment is not opium for the soul. The message of Christianity has never been: If you are in poverty, just continue to live in poverty. If you are being abused, just continue being abused. Christianity has always had this incredible power to lift people up because it has given people the dignity of a new identity. In fact, it is a sociological law that whenever the gospel has entered a society, in one generation the society will be prosperous. Alcoholism rates will lower; there will be fewer children born to unwed mothers; folks will be more productive; houses will be cleaner; educational levels will soar – the principle is called redemption lift, and it has been studied for decades.

Right from the start, I want you to hear what Christians have always said to people who are suffering. If you have the power to change your circumstances, change them for the better as long as you can do so while remaining obedient to God. If you can better yourself and your situation by getting an education so that you can make more money and provide better for your family, do so. If you can take another job where you are not being abused, take the other job. If you can improve your marriage so that it is more pleasant, so that you are relating more kindly and more lovingly to each other, then improve your marriage. Christianity has always been a message of uplift and hope for improvement.

At the same time, Christians are realists and we recognize that we cannot always change our circumstances. Either because we don't have the power to change them or if we did have the power to change them, changing the circumstances would be disobedient to God. I don't have the power to get myself out of traffic, how am I to feel? In the vast, vast, vast majority of cases, you will be disobedient to God and to God's Word to obtain a divorce and to break your marital vows. Divorce is often just sheer disobedience to the Word of God.

Again, rather than opium for the masses, the Bible teaches us that if we can better our circumstance under the will of God, do so. And if we can't, then we need to learn the secret of contentment in difficult circumstances. This just echoes the apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7 where he writes to slaves: "Were you a slave when you were called, don't let it trouble you." Hey, man, if you cannot change your situation, then you have to learn the secret of contentment. On the other hand, Paul goes on and says, although if you can

gain your freedom, do it. If you can better yourself, then just don't lay down. Improve your situation. Get your degree. Make more money. Exercise, eat right. Get some marital counseling. Go on a marriage weekend. Get prayer.

Contentment also doesn't mean that you don't feel the pain. Boy, if I really were content, then this circumstance where I am in need, where I am sick, where someone who I love is sick and in the hospital, that wouldn't bother me at all. Christian contentment is not stoicism where I just become totally dull and indifferent to pain. No, quite the contrary. I feel the pain. I feel the difficulty at the moment, but I am not mastered by the circumstance.

The cross that we are called upon to bear in our families with a child, in a work setting, in a marriage, in our bodies, with the government, with a boss, those things are going to be painful. But according to the teaching in Philippians 4, they never destroy our inward peace.

Contentment is not opium. Contentment is not insensitivity to pain. And contentment is not complacency with our sin or our present level of spirituality.

Well, I know that I have this life-controlling habit, but God calls me to be content.

Not with your sin, brothers and sisters. Not with the fact that you can't control your speech and you are always slipping into gossip. Or you just find it really impossible to sacrifice even a little bit of time to serve in the church. To serve someone in need or to give money away. We never become complacent with our sins or with our present level of spirituality. Contentment does not mean that what I currently possess of God is enough for me. The people in the Bible were always discontented with their spiritual state. The people in the Bible were like Moses who, after he had a revelation of God, said, "More." Moses heard God's voice, he saw God's hand, but he said: "Now, God show me your glory. I want to see your face."

We are never content with however much of God we presently have. We always, as Christians, ought to want more. Maybe you are beginning to know about God's general provision for you, but you need to press on because you don't know God as your friend. I want to know God as a really good friend. Someone you could just talk with and relate to and enjoy their company. Someone with whom you would never be alone. Somebody who could be your companion when you are just in an apartment by yourself.

If I get to know God as my friend, I want to know God as my lover, my spouse. I want to know that God likes me. That he enjoys my company.

Never, never become complacent either in our sin or in our spirituality. And part of not being complacent in your spirituality is to never be content with your present level of functioning in spiritual gifts.

Oh well, I have the opportunity every so often to share my faith and I get to teach the Bible a little bit in a small group. Press on. Paul says: Eagerly desire. Cry out for more spiritual gifts, God. Give me gifts of healing. God, give me the interpretation of tongues. Give me, God, the gift of miracles. How many of you have ever prayed for that? Are we allowed to? Of course, we are. James says: We have not because we ask not. Isaiah says: Come let us know the Lord. Let us press on to know the Lord. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear. He will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth.

Contentment is not opium where we just lay down under abuse. Contentment is not an indifference to pain. And contentment is not complacency in our sin or in our present level of spirituality. Well, what is Christian contentment, then?

Well, let me approach this negatively up one side of the mountain and then we will approach it positively up the other side because this really is a lofty thing, as I mentioned earlier in the talk. Contentment is such a rare jewel. It is such a rare quality to find in anyone.

In looking at Christian contentment, I would say you know you haven't got it when you are grumbling. When you walk around complaining, in a funk, or you are inwardly, you are not talking about it, but you are inwardly raging at your situation or your circumstances. You know you haven't got Christian contentment when you are grumbling. Simply angry with your circumstance, upset with the hand that you have been dealt in life in big things or in little things.

Now, brothers and sisters, we are completely out of touch with how serious a sin grumbling is in the Bible. When we walk around complaining about our marriages and our jobs and about harsh treatment by our boss, or how awful something is that was just said to us, how horrible our financial situation is, or our neighbors or our ex-spouse—we believe that is a relatively minor wrong. Most of the time we are not even conscious of the fact that it is sin. We don't see how our grumbling relates at all to our relationship with God.

Well, let's see how the word of God just flushes our grumbling to the surface and reveals what it is according to God. If you have a Bible and you can flip over to Jude, which is the last book in the Bible before Revelation. It is a short book. Jude 14 writes: "See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way and all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him." Four times he uses the word "ungodly" and then we say: How would we know when we are ungodly and when we are acting against God? What would be the sign for us that we are ungodly? Would it be that we are thieves or we are worshiping false gods?

Jude says here is the first way you can know there is something contrary to God in your life. These men are grumblers. Whenever you see a complaining spirit, raging against your outward circumstance, raging against your spouse, your work, finances, your health, your body and how it is constructed that is the opposite of Christian contentment.

But you could ask: Well, how is my complaining, my grumbling—what the old King James Version used to call "murmuring". How is my murmuring a sin against God?

How is your complaining and your grumbling raging inside about what life has given you—how is that a sin against God?

I want to underline this for you. I want you to walk out of here today saying: Whenever I am grumbling about my situation, I am shaking my fist at God. I want that to be absolutely clear in your mind. And I want you to be able to communicate that to your children. Because many kids are radical grumblers. We live in a culture of discontent where most people, most of the time are committing this sin of grumbling. I believe we first must be convicted by the word of God and I hope the Holy Spirit will assist here in saying this is really wrong in

our lives. It just sours the whole tone of our relationship in the church, in our families, in the workplace.

What you see in the desert wanderings of the Israelites in the Old Testament is this constant sin of grumbling. They grumbled about the fact that they didn't have water in the desert. They grumbled about the provision of manna. They grumbled about the fact that they had to eat the same thing all of the time. They grumbled about Moses' leadership. In C.S. Lewis' words, the Israelites were almost reduced to a grumble. And God says in Numbers 17 after wiping out a large part of the people because of their continual complaining and grumbling, disciplining the nation of Israel because they were grumbling against Moses and against Aaron, he said: "They have grumbled against me."

Complaining about our circumstances, about what life has dealt us, is really complaining against God. And friends, we live in a society that is so disconnected from God that we don't realize on a moment by moment basis that the circumstances that we have been placed in have been sovereignly ordained as part of the permissive will of God. We think we are just grumbling against our spouse when really we are complaining against God who gave us our spouse.

Let me keep rubbing this. When you complain, what happens? When you complain and grumble, what happens? Well, you lose your ability in the moment to say "thank you" to God for what you do have. One of the characteristics of a fallen world is that Romans 1 says: Although we knew God, we didn't honor him as such and we didn't give thanks. In our grumbling and complaining, very often we are like kids on Christmas who open up the presents that they were given by their parents and who look at whatever was given to them and say: Is that it? You are just giving me this cheap thing? Well, I expected you to spend more. This sweater is pretty worthless. That is a pretty thoughtless and worthless gift.

We complain about our lives—about little and big things. We are like those kids and we are looking at God and saying: God, is that it? Boy, at this moment I have nothing to thank you for. What you have given me in life is pretty cheap and worthless. Complaining always causes us to lose our thanksgiving. Complaining always causes us to think that we had it better without God. The children of Israel were always glamorizing what they had back in Egypt. Oh, if only we were back there, that was the land of milk and honey. They forgot that they were in incredible torment in Egypt. In bondage, and then God reached out and delivered them.

Could you really say that life was so pleasant for you without God? That your life hasn't changed for the better because God has delivered you? And don't you see how grumbling just magnifies the pain of your situation? Instead of somehow bringing it under God, your grumbling is just holding a magnifying glass up to the horror of your situation. It is just picking away at the scab continually bringing more infection.

Friends, I will go even further in saying that our grumbling and complaining in all situations opens us up to the demonic. I really believe that a major source of infection and infestation demonically, in families, in churches, in work situations—a major source of warfare is a complaining spirit that we are opening ourselves up to all the time. Because Satan is the most discontented of all creatures. He hated his assigned role in heaven. He hated the sovereignty of God and what God had appointed. It is nothing less than Satan and the demonic

that we are continually opening our homes up to and our hearts up to when we either verbalize complaining and grumbling to others and share it. Or when we complain in our spirits. We are just opening the door and whistling for the demonic.

Of course, if I had the time, I could point out other ways that we could find the absence of Christian contentment. Biblically, there are so many, but certainly envy is one of them. Whenever you see envy in your life: why is that person advancing? Why have they gotten that ministry position? Why are they climbing over me at work? Why do they have a bigger house and better car? A better spouse?

Or covetousness: where you find yourself really desiring and wanting what rightfully belongs to someone else: either their praise or their reputation, their possessions—that is a good indicator that Christian contentment is lacking in your life.

James 4:1, 2 is a perfect text for pointing out to us our lack of Christian contentment when it says: What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet because you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. Aren't so many of the fights we have, so many of the quarrels, simply grounded in our inner lack of contentment?

Let me share with you my definition of contentment—that quality that makes us independent and free of our outward circumstance so that we are not dominated by it. Here is the definition that I would use of Christian contentment. Christian contentment means that in every situation I have learned the secret of submitting joyfully to God and to God's will. Let me say that again: Christian contentment means that in every situation I have learned the secret of submitting joyfully to God and to God's will.

So, let's break this down and step by step say how can we have contentment that replaces our grumbling and our envy and our covetousness? Well, Christian contentment is a quality that ought to apply in every situation. In getting back to Philippians in verse 11, Paul says: "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances..." and verse 12 says: "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation..."

Now in describing "any and every" situation, Paul uses the example of poverty and wealth. Literally, that word for "need" means to be humbled, to be lowered, to be put down either by external circumstances or by one's own choice. Paul is saying: I have learned how to bend low without grumbling or complaining about my situation. I have learned how to submit joyfully to God and to God's will when I am forced to bend low.

Let me ask you: How do you respond, how do I respond, when we are forced to bend low? When I think about the apostle Paul and what God put him through that was thoroughly counter to Paul's natural temperament, that was counter to his background, that was counter to his wiring—I mean, certainly much of what Paul accomplished for God was consistent with his background, gifting and wiring. And so he was able to write these great letters because he was so logical and so reasonable. But so much of what Paul went through was this process of having to get low without complaining. Here he was a Roman citizen, born a Roman citizen, in an intellectually stimulating Jewish family, a

family that cared deeply about their son's education and sent him off to the best university where he had the opportunity to study under the best tutor of the day, Rabbi Gamaliel. Paul, by natural temperament, was a very active kind of person. I believe he was very extroverted. He had an active mind, a curious mind. He loved to read. He loved to relate. I think he was a high type "A" personality. This was a guy who was extremely intense. Not somebody who was hard to motivate. I mean, even before he was a Christian, he was going full bore and he never stopped until his head was cut off.

So you have this intensely active, intellectual person who enjoyed relating to people, who enjoyed interaction, who was born a Roman citizen, who by nature was somewhat proud, who was also very sensitive and he is forced by circumstance to spend years in prison basically alone, relating to slaves, not his social class, spending most of his life in a situation in a context which was very different from his background and his natural wiring. Paul is saying: Contentment for me had to be pressed out in a situation where I was forced to lower myself. Contentment for me meant that I wasn't permitted to grumble or to hold a grudge against God or to rail, even though this is so different than what I am about.

And, by the way, bending low for you, poverty for you, may not have anything to do with not having a lot of material possessions. Maybe like me it would be not having any books, or having failing eyesight so I couldn't read. Will I be content then? Have you ever been put in a situation which is just counter to your wiring, like a cross-cut saw – circumstances you never would have chosen? You are a people person and you are forced to administrate and deal with paper. You are a creative person and you are forced into bureaucratic rules. You are a leader and you are forced to follow bad leadership. Bending low means circumstances that cut across the grain. Maybe you are just a lot brighter than the job you currently have. Or you spend a good part of the day around people that you don't naturally have an affinity toward. Or your financial situation is just different than the way you were raised. You were raised in a much higher class home and you had many more provisions. And you find yourself having to learn to be lower. Christian contentment is something that works there.

And Christian contentment works also when we are abounding. Whether well fed or hungry, not only in need but in times of plenty. Many people think that it would be easy to be content if they weren't just continually lowered and having to stoop down all the time. If I could only be raised up, then I would be content. Well, that shows us that that person never has been raised up. Because I believe that at least biblically, wealth and high position carries with it even greater temptations and more serious challenges regarding contentment than does poverty or lack. The Bible continually says that having a great deal is an obstacle in a relationship with God. The mounds of stuff that we have tend to wall us off from God and creates in us an independence from the Lord. You may never have been around really powerful people, but in the situations where I have been able to relate to politicians and people who had some power or professional athletes and who know how to speak to you in order to get from you what they want—I have found in myself a great temptation to bend and to compromise and to be determined by them and flattered by their attention. It is extremely difficult to not want what powerful people have when you are traveling

in that circle and to just simply be content to be a Christian, to be independent of their opinions and behaviors. Paul says in 1 Timothy simple godliness with contentment is great gain.

Let me put it a little differently. You are sitting around in a very fancy dinner party; everyone is so well dressed; beautiful china; fresh cut flowers; great service; fine wine; steaks cooked to perfection – are you sufficient for that? To not conform, to not give way? When we are speaking about any and every situation, what we are talking about is this notion that Christian contentment has nothing to do with what is going on around us. Whether we are surrounded by powerful people who with their champagne glasses or we are surrounded by people who are very much unlike us and we find ourselves having to bow down and stoop low or our situation is somewhat galling to us because it is counter to what we wish—Christian contentment has nothing to do with outward circumstance or situation.

See, it is a matter of what is going on inside of us. With our ambitions, with what we really want and what we are desiring and what we are after in life, what we dream about and what we fantasize about, what we think we deserve, what are our rights. See, to use a really crass example, think about a really tall man who has one leg that is three inches longer than his other leg. You know, that is the picture of a person who is wealthy, who is abounding, who has everything you would think anyone would want, but whose ambition, whose heart and desire out-strips their current situation.

When I look at most prosperous people, most powerful people, I have found very few, only the rarest of people, who I would say: that person is content. Because most are like the man who is very tall, but their one leg is longer than their other. Their inner desire goes farther than even the abundance of what they have.

And on the other hand, if we took a very short person whose legs were even, that is whose heart and ambition and sense of self and what they deserve and what their rights are were proportionate to what they had, that person will live more comfortably and be able to walk more evenly than the very tall person.

So the issue of Christian contentment is never “if only I had a little bit more”. The issue of Christian contentment is almost always “if only I could deal with what was inside of me”. This raging sense of personal rights that says I ought not to have to sit in traffic. And I deserve to have my bills paid. I ought not to have to bow low. How can we master every circumstance so that our mood is not controlled by what is going on around us, but we, internally, are joyfully submitting to God and God’s will?

Christian contentment, as I said, is in every situation learning the secret of joyfully submitting to God and God’s will. I believe that Paul is teaching that contentment is something that we learn. Verse 11: “For I have learned to be content” and verse 12: “I have learned the secret of being content.” Notice that the text doesn’t command you to be content. It doesn’t simply say: Friend, in every and any situation be content. No, Christian contentment is not a matter of simple obedience. It has to do with a learning process that God puts you through in the school of life. Through the school of life, God instructs us in this great riddle, in the incredible mystery of contentment.

Before somebody can write great poetry, they have to learn their ABC's. And after they learn their ABC's, they will begin to read some simple books. "See Dick Run" and "Go Spot Go". And then they begin to read literature. And then they learn how poets wrote in the past and they read poetry. And finally, they are able to write poetry.

Before we learn the poetry of contentment, God does put us through this process of learning our ABC's as Christians. It is not an automatic that just because you have accepted Christ into your life, that you are ever going to get to this point of not having circumstances master you. That you would get to the point of being able to joyfully submit to God and God's will in every situation.

What are some of the ABC's? Well, I believe very early on in a Christian's life, God begins to put them through the lessons of self-denial. He will continually place you in situations where you need to learn how to say "no" to yourself. If you have a strong temper, very early on God will put his finger on that. And put you in galling situations to break your anger and to break your temper. Where you learn how to say "no" to your violent impulses.

If you have a tendency to slander, there are going to be all kinds of opportunities and temptations where you will be tested, put in a position of having to say "no" to your tongue. It will be right there and you will be so tempted to speak, but God will say to you "No, I want you to put a watchman at the door of your mouth that you may not sin against God."

Whatever your particular issues are, if it is self-pity, God will put you in some oppressive situations, things that are really hard to bear, things that are seemingly unfair where you can practice how to say "no" to yourself. Say "no" to self pity.

He will put you through these lessons. There is no one who doesn't have to learn the ABC's of self-denial. And there is no one who God doesn't put through the learning process of recognizing that we deserve nothing from God. The more advanced lesson after self denial is to learn that you and I deserve nothing from God. At our worst, in our sins, we deserved to go to hell.

Now, I know what I am about to say is tough talk, but I am getting at a fundamentally rooted issue in the American Christian temperament which is this constant railing about our circumstance and how badly we are treated by everyone and by everything. Is it any wonder that we need so much counseling because in our human-centered universe we never get what we think we deserve? But the truth is that from a God-centered perspective, God owes us nothing and at our worst, we deserve to go to hell. At our best, we are simply servants of God who do not deserve thanks. And Jesus is the one who taught this. Someone who loves our souls and dealt with our feelings of mistreatment. In Luke 17 where he exhorts Peter to not just forgive people 7 times, but 70 times 7. What a galling statement that would be. That I just have to keep yielding and giving ground. What a violation of my rights and my sense of self. He follows up that galling statement where he undercuts any thought in our minds that we deserve anything from God. And Jesus said: Suppose one of you had a servant, plowing and looking after the sheep, would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat' would he rather not say, 'Prepare my supper. Get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink and after that you may eat and drink' would he thank the servant because

he did what he was told to do? So also, when you have done everything that you were told to do, should say: we are unworthy servants. We have only done our duty.

Jesus is just reaching into the chest of American Christians by this statement and then he is saying: Now, I am going to pull out of you every belief you have that you have a right to be treated a certain way by God.

How do I attain to contentment—this mastering of circumstances, this idea that I could in every and any situation learn the secret of joyfully submitting to God and God's will? It is something I will have to learn. I don't have contentment in me by nature; no one has it. Well, God's going to teach me. He is going to teach me self denial. And he is going to teach me that, at least, from him I deserve nothing. No pats on the back. No thanks. All that I get is simply a matter of grace. It is simply a matter of his charitable heart because I have earned and merited nothing. At best, I am a servant.

But Rich, are there no encouraging words? Are there no positive thoughts that would spur us on? Is it all just self-denial and cutting away our ambitions?

Now, I spent a great amount of time on the negative side of it because, friends, I really believe that we must be convicted about the depth of how wrong we have been in this area. But there are some positive words and incredible encouragements. God doesn't simply want us to mutely submit to him. To just be put under this yoke where we say: Okay, I will just take it and take it and take it. I will grin and bear life. God says: No, I want you to joyfully submit to your circumstance. If you can't change it, then I want you to joyfully submit to God and to God's will.

How might I do that? Well, I have three last lessons. The first is to learn to distinguish between the passage that you go through and the portion you are offered. Learn to distinguish between the passage and the portion. What you are going through right now is just the passage, man, woman, boy, girl. This is just the passage. It is not the portion.

You know, I have in recent years done a tremendous amount of flying where about every month or two I am in an airplane going somewhere. It is not as bad as some of your jobs where you are flying every week, but it is quite a bit. And I have had the opportunity because of accumulated miles to fly up in business and first class, but mostly I fly in coach. And you know there is a big difference between flying in coach especially on a long international trip and flying in business class. Business class, from the moment you sit down in one of those big easy chairs that actually have a foot rest, they come out and give you champagne if you want it. I don't like champagne, so they will give me a big glass of orange juice. They come out with heated nuts, not just peanuts, but macadamia nuts and almonds and they are all warmed. They will ask you what you would like for your appetizer. You have a choice of shrimp or some other really nice appetizer and several different entrées to choose from. They mix your salad. It just goes on and on like that. They just keep waiting on you hand and foot. For your feet they give you little booties to wear for when you take off your shoes so your toes won't get cold. That is flying business class.

Now, when you fly coach, they come back in the back and throw peanuts at you, a bag of peanuts. You are sitting in a seat that is 18" wide, usually the person in front of you has thrown their seat back so that they are leaning on your

knees. Even though I am short, I mean literally I have no room. Normally, I am placed next to a person who is fairly large and maybe perspiring profusely. This last flight, I kid you not, when we went over to England, they spilled a glass of coke on my son, Daniel, three times. Three times she bumped a glass of coke and dumped it on his lap. Once she entirely drenched his seat. She was angry and surly.

Now, what am I driving at? However you fly, that is just the passage. The portion is what awaits you at the end of the trip. The portion is what you are looking forward to, what you are going to experience. Do you understand that there are a lot of people who are flying now business class and first class for a very brief flight? Who are looking forward to at the end of the trip, at least in their minds, nothingness, oblivion, annihilation? Or at worst, hell. I think about it as being like this:

Imagine two travelers, one is flying back in coach. He is getting peanuts thrown at him. He is getting coke dumped on his lap. But the trip is only a few hours and at the end of the trip he is looking forward to reuniting with his fiancée and in a few days they are going to be married. Or he is flying out to California where a lawyer is going to present him with an enormous check from an inheritance from his dearly beloved favorite uncle who just died. Do you think peanuts are going to bother him? Do you think he can handle it?

Now, picture the man up in first class. He has this incredible flight. They are serving him lobster and caviar. It is a four hour flight at the end of which he knows a warden is going to get him and immediately drive him to jail where he will be executed. How good do you think the meal is going to taste?

What I am driving at is that our outward circumstances right now is just passage. It is not our portion. And if you can keep that in mind when you are sitting in traffic: this is just the passage, okay, I am flying in coach. Somebody says something negative to you: okay, so you are flying in coach. You are getting the peanuts. So what?

And what is my portion, Rich? If I am a Christian what is my portion? By the way the analogy breaks down because we get to enjoy some of the portion now and it is not just at the end of the flight. You need to sit down, as I did this week, with a blank sheet of paper and say: what do I have as a Christian? What does the Bible tell me that I have as a Christian? Because the pie is huge. And we don't enjoy the portion because we are so concerned about the passage. I have God. That is what I wrote at the top of the page. I have God as my portion.

You know where this flight is ending. Revelation 21:22 says that in heaven there is not going to be any sun or moon. There won't be any need for external lights because God is going to be our light. Our portion is God. This is the lesson that God has always tried to teach his people. That he is enough as a portion. He is enough. If you look at Lamentations, in the darkest days in Jerusalem's entire history, never a worse time, the Babylonians invaded and slaughtered everyone and pulled the temple down. A time that could only be compared to, perhaps, the time of the Romans when again the city was sacked. People were reduced to cannibalism. They were starving.

Jeremiah the prophet looking around at his outward circumstance: How shall I find contentment when all of this horror is going on around me? The Lord reminds him that God is enough. And so in Lamentations 3 Jeremiah writes: I

remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall, I well remember them and my soul is down cast within me. Oh, I feel the pain of the cross that has been placed on me. I feel it. How shall I be content? He goes on and says: Yet, this I will call to mind and therefore I have hope because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed. For his compassion never fails. They are new every morning. Great is his faithfulness and I will say to myself: The Lord is my portion, therefore, I will wait for him. The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him. To the one who seeks him. It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for a young man to bear the yoke while he is young. I will say to myself: the Lord is my portion.

You been short-changed? But you have God as your portion. This is what God tried to teach every one of his anointed leaders in the Bible that he was enough. The end of Habakkuk said: You know, so the fig tree doesn't blossom and there is no fruit on the vine, yet I will rejoice in the Lord.

Christian, I will challenge you to do this one exercise. You sit down with a blank piece of paper and you say: what do I have as a Christian that would cause me to joyfully submit to God? What do I have now so that I say God is my portion? I would say I have God's comfort and his love. I have an incredible future. [This is what I wrote on my page.] I have an incredible future and I am just experiencing a little of it now as a down payment. Every once in a while, God sneaks some stuff back in coach to me and I get to enjoy it. But I have a bright future. I know I have God with me. I regularly sense the hand of the Lord on me.

I have an incredible position. I am seated with Christ right now in heavenly places. No one can touch me. I have Jesus as my spouse, eternally. And I am closer to him than I could be to any spouse because he is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. I am a member of his body.

What kind of encouragement can you have to be content? Think about what you have as a Christian and distinguish between the passage and the portion.

And also distinguish between the particular situation you are in and the plan that God has for you. So much of our trouble is that we look at every situation and every circumstance we are in in isolation. We look at it like a pin-point on a piece of paper, totally in isolation rather than a series of points that would make a line and create a drawing. I have used this example before, but friends, I believe most of us tend to look at things through a telescope. Where we are looking at the horizon and we are staring at one particular little boat out on the horizon and what is going on in that particular boat. That is all we can see. If we see something bad happening on the boat, we think that takes into account the entire horizon.

But if you realize that God has a wide-angle lens and not only looks at that one moment in your life, but has the ability to span the whole horizon, and if you will allow yourself to at least realize that there is a wider angle beyond this one situation and the wide angle is the preparation of your soul for heaven. He is preparing you, also, for greater kingdom ministry in this world. This is just one of the learning lessons that you are going to have to go through, but it is not all there is. It is so much easier to be content.

Okay, right now, bills are tight and we are having to struggle to make ends meet. But this is not all there is. This is just the ABC's. And if I were to look through the wide angle lens, I would be able to see the promise again that God will work everything together for my good and that he has an enormous horizon for me. So you failed in ministry once, twice or three times things didn't work out. Have you learned any lessons? Are you stronger as a person? More passionate about Christ? Are you closer to Jesus now than you were a year ago? Five years ago? Then you pick yourself back up and put yourself back in the saddle and say: Okay, God has a bright future for me. Learn to distinguish the particular situation from the plan of God.

Learn to distinguish self-sufficiency from sufficiency in Christ. Paul says: I have learned the secret. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

I go to the gym and lift weights. I get on the bench press and every once in a while I will bring the weights down on my chest, especially if it is pretty heavy, and I find that I just maxed out my strength, I simply can't lift this. But fortunately, there is always a spotter and I never lift really heavy without a spotter. And the spotter adds his strength to mine and lifts that bar right off my chest and back on the bench.

So it is with Christ. Our strength is often too weak to bear what is coming toward us. But his strength is enough. His life in us is enough. To be a Christian means to have the life of God in our souls.