

“The Secret to Lasting Contentment and Joy”

This is the last message in this series about moving from anxiety to joy. Over the last 4 weeks we have looked at this letter that the apostle Paul wrote from a dingy Roman prison cell to a small group of Christians in the city of Philippi. This is one of the most loved books in the entire Bible because of its practical teaching, especially its teachings about joy. Joy and rejoicing is mentioned 14 times in four short chapters.

Let's do a quick recap of the major themes so far. Through this letter we've discovered how we can have joy in the face of hardship, joy in the face of conflict, joy that comes from obeying Jesus out of love and relationship, not because of religious rules and regs, and how we can overcome worry, anxiety and depression with joy. I hope throughout your Christian journey you come back to this book in the Bible again and again and again, because there is so much to learn here and to keep applying to life.

If you've missed any of the messages or study guides from this series, I'd encourage you to go to our website and get a copy there. This is important stuff, joy is. It's a big theme in scripture; Paul lists joy second in line behind Love in the list of gifts God wants to give us. And who couldn't use a little more joy in their life? I haven't met anyone yet who has said to me, "I'm so filled with joy that I couldn't put any more in me or I'd just explode." But that's exactly what God wants to do...put so much joy in us that we explode and splatter joy everywhere! That's one of our church's values, that we would be filled with a consuming joy. So if you've missed any of these messages, please go to the website at www.spwired.com and check them out so you can gain greater insight to experiencing God's joy in your life.

Today we're going to look at the closing verses in the book of Philippians because in this last chapter we find clues to how we can find joy and contentment for the long haul—contentment when we have very little, and contentment when we have a lot.

So let's take a look at the scripture from Philippians 4:10-19 (TNIV):

10 I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. 11 I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 12 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. 13 I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

14 Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. 15 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 more than once when I was in need. 17 Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. 18 I have received full payment and have more than enough. 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 the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

There is a lot in this passage, and we're going to take a closer look in a minute, but the big picture is that one of the forms of God's joy in life is spiritual contentment. In the first part of the passage Paul describes his own contentedness and he ends the passage with a promise that the church will know the constant joy that comes from trusting God to provide; **“And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”**

So let's get into this notion of spiritual contentment? What is that like? I would define it like this: **Constantly experience the joy and peace of God's presence that sustain us through all aspects of life.** Now that's must Mark's made-up definition. Coming up with the definition wasn't really all that difficult, but I sure struggle with living this out. I think many of us do.

We struggle because contentment is connected to sufficiency, which means that the resources match up with or exceed the need. Spiritual contentment has to do with where we look to have the needs met. It's not so much a question of how do those needs get met, but rather asking who will meet those needs. If we look to self to supply those needs, then we move into discontentment. Self-sufficiency means that we have the resources to match up or exceed the need. Those resources could be monetary, physical or nutritional, emotional, whatever. And the truth is that we just don't have all the resources we need to get us through this thing called life and we know it. We may be able to ride out some storms on our own, but eventually life is going to bring a crisis and we will not have the physical, emotional or financial strength to endure. So it is

hard for us to experience contentment in life because we have this voice inside us that says, “enough is never enough”.

Spiritual contentment, or experiencing the joy that continually sustains us, means to trust God to provide; to trust that God is enough, even when you have nothing. It means trusting that God is enough. When you lose your job, God is enough. When you face off against cancer, God is enough. When you don't know if you can make it to the next paycheck, God is enough. When you're not sure you can swim any longer in the flood of grief, God is enough. When things are so difficult that taking your own life appears to look easier, God is enough.

It also means having a God-centered attitude in times of plenty; giving God praise and even credit for what we do have. It enables us to enjoy it even more because we are not possessed by the desire for more. It sees blessings as blessings, not earnings.

Spiritual contentment is a struggle for me, because even though I think I can describe it, I think I'm a long way from living it well. I received a note from someone this week and they were dealing with this very same issue, so with their permission, I'd like to share with you how they articulated this struggle. Maybe you can identify...

I am sitting here amazed at our God and how he is always there to help us through our situations. You would think that after all He has done for me, that I would trust Him better, but that is not the case. In my case, when I am succeeding and things are going my way, it's sad how quickly and how easily I start trusting in me and my capabilities. Having fallen into this trap more than once, I should know better than to trust myself.

Is your life like that? My life can get there in a heartbeat. When we move there, we begin to push God out of our life...and joy and lasting contentment get pushed out too.

So how can we begin to live this out better every day, beginning today?

That's exactly what we're going to deal with today. It's a process: how do we get from wherever we are to experiencing the fullness of joy that Paul has. Paul gives us some clues in this passage – if we get better at living out these clues, then we'll be on the journey toward lasting contentment and experiencing joy that sustains us in all things.

The first step in experiencing lasting contentment and joy is **stay on mission**. One of the reasons we talk so much about our mission as a church is because we want to stay on it! **Our mission is to lead people to an active faith in Jesus Christ**. We believe that God has given us this mission and that when we are on it, we are moving into God's presence and working with God's power and we experience God's joy. Conversely, when we get off mission, we are straying from God's presence and working outside of his power. The same is true for our lives as Christians.

So as a church, we want to lead people into an active faith. Well, what exactly is that? Well, active faith means having more than a belief in Jesus, it means moving from belief into action...into doing the things that Jesus would do and going the places that Jesus would go. We want to help people follow Jesus' model for life, which was basically three things; actively love God, actively love others, and actively serve the world for God.

Aside from Jesus, no one in the New Testament was more on mission than Paul. He dedicated his life to sharing the Good News of Jesus by starting churches throughout the Roman world. Paul had a laser-beam focus on his mission and he put it above everything else. He knew that as long as he was on God's mission, God would meet his needs. That's why he is able to say that he is content whether in plenty or in need. He trusted God in all situations, and that trust or faith was the source of his joy.

Take a quick look at verse 13;

I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

We never get a picture of Paul taking any credit for all his accomplishments. Rather, he is always grateful for the things that Christ has accomplished through him. And in this verse we see him take that same attitude. He's basically saying, “no matter what comes my way, I trust God to see me through. It's not by my own strength of power, it is the power I receive in my relationship with Jesus.” That kind of trust in God grows from being “on mission” with God. So what's the mission that permeates all you do? What mission brings the deepest meaning and significance to your life?

The next clue in being fully satisfied in Jesus Christ comes from understanding why Paul loved the Philippian church. As you read his writings it seems very clear that he loved this church more than any other. He loved all the churches that he started and had contact with, but this one he loved more than any other. In Philippians 4:1 Paul talks about them with deep love. He says, “my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown...” But why did Paul love this church so much? The answer to that question is the

clue to having contentment and joy. The reason why he loved this church so much is that they were willing to sacrifice a great deal to invest in the lives of other people.

This church in Philippi was **outwardly focused, not inwardly focused**. So many of the other New Testament churches became inwardly focused. They got to a point where they were only concerned about their needs and their wants and their issues. They were so inwardly focused that they forgot about the outside world and they forgot about the people they were called to reach and teach about Jesus. But, the Philippian church wasn't like that. This group of people constantly remembered that its mission was outside the church. It sacrificed its time, and talent and resources to reach out into the world. We know this because Paul wrote to other churches about the Philippian church! He bragged about them (2 Corinthians 8:1-4) how they excelled in giving to people who were in need.

That's what Paul loved about this church. They were not focused on just their own needs, they had the deep desire to reach out into the world and care for people who were in need. And not only did they reach out to others in need, but they supported Paul's mission to reach the entire Roman Empire. The passage we read earlier talks about how, when nobody else helped Paul, when nobody else seemed to care, this church in Philippi sent help...and they did it more than once. This little church wanted to support Paul as a missionary, teaching and preaching about Jesus. This little group of Christians, maybe 40 or 50 people, were sacrificing so they could send people out into the world so others could meet Jesus Christ.

Other churches had turned inward and didn't seem to care about the rest of world. And this can happen today. It can happen to us, if we're not careful. We can get inwardly focused on our needs and our wants and our agendas and not care about others. Both as a church and as individuals, the more our lives are less about us and more about others, the more we will experience the joy and peace of being in God's presence.

Jesus was always going to the people. His life was not about meeting his needs, it was about meeting the need for God in others. Do you remember his parable about a shepherd and 100 sheep? When the shepherd returns there are only 99, and is he content to focus on the 99 that remain? No, his vision is outward in pursuit of the one that is lost. If that reflects God's heart, it should also reflect our hearts. Jesus also said something like, "if you want to be great, then be the servant of all". People who are pursuing God's heart live out God's desire to be in relationship with everyone – they keep an outward vision. They are prepared to put the needs of others over their own desires. And what comes from that sacrifice is joy and lasting contentment.

Many of you may know my family, but maybe not all of you, so I'd like to introduce them to you again. **Insert picture of Mark's family.** The tall handsome guy is me. Did I say handsome, I meant to say hairless. My wife, Jennifer. Our children, Caroline, Andrew and Macie.

We believe that the time has come for us to begin getting Macie connected to the African-American community. We believe that it's important that she grows up with a positive self-image and we think that strong, positive African-American role models are going to be an important part of that. And, of course, the community we want to connect her with needs to be Christian.

Now Jennifer has really taken the initiative with all of this. For the last several weeks, Jennifer comes to Saint Paul's for worship, then she and Macie head over to Shiloh Baptist for worship together. She's been very impressed with the welcome and the friendliness of this church, but I need to be honest and tell you that there is a definite level of sacrifice on Jennifer's part to make this happen. See, Shiloh doesn't have a nursery, so Macie is with Jennifer for the entire service – over 90 minutes long. And Macie is not one (at 2 years old) to sit for very long. She likes to wander. And if she can't wander too far, she likes to elevate the volume of her voice. Let me tell you, she can elevate!

Of course all of this causes Jennifer great stress. She comes home and her nerves are shot and she's exhausted from trying to keep Macie occupied. But she doesn't give up. I thought that maybe we should wait a little longer, but Jennifer says that she gets such joy from taking Macie and knowing that she is doing this for her.

Being outwardly focused is about putting the needs of others above your self-interests or desires. Sometimes it is about seeing the needs in family members or friends or people you know and putting those needs above your own. Often, it is about seeing the needs in perfect strangers and still putting those above your own. This is why we are constantly inviting you to find a place to serve in ministry through our friendship form. We want to help you find a place to practice that selfless servanthood that Jesus both talked about and demonstrated, so you can also experience the joy and lasting contentment that goes with it.

A third key to finding joy and contentment is through the ministry of giving and receiving. To illustrate this, let's look back at the scripture. You can find it at the top of your outline or you can check it out on the screen. In verses 14-19, Paul is talking about the gifts that he has received from the church in Philippi.

14 Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. 15 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, [stop and ask congregation to circle giving and receiving]. except you only;

Why does Paul use this phrase of "giving and receiving" when he's talking about the gifts that they have sent? Because he wants them to realize how joy works. At one point in their relationship it was Paul who was doing most of the giving as he worked to share the gospel with them. He is very careful to let them know that he does not consider this as any kind of pay-back, in fact he wants them to be sure to see that what they are doing is not just for Paul, it is for Jesus' mission...

16 for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. 17 Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account.

Circle "credited to your account". What does he mean? These are business terms. He's saying, "You've got an account and the more you give away the more the balance in your account grows. And it's the balance in this account that allows you to claim contentment. It allows you to enjoy the things you have because you're no longer focusing on getting more. Because instead of focusing on getting more you are focusing on how to accomplish God purposes in your life with what you have." Paul says to the Philippians, "Your account is full because you have given so much away.

18 I have received full payment and have more than enough. 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 the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

Circle "amply supplied" and "God will meet all your needs" then draw a line between them. Paul is not talking about quid pro quo, something for something, you take care of me and I'll take care of you. The ministry of giving and receiving is much bigger than paybacks, because God is involved. So they have served God by helping to meet Paul's needs. Now God is going to use others to help meet their needs.

The more we let God use us to help provide for the needs of others, the more aware we become of the ways that God uses others to help meet our needs. It's great to be in the position of helping others, but sometimes we find ourselves in the position of need, and being a gracious receiver of God's provisions for our life that come through someone else is just as important to experiencing the joy of God's presence as is giving to others in their need.

Here's the bottom line, where the rubber hits the road. As church, if this is to be a place of joy, we stay on God's mission. That draws us deeper into God's presence. We focus on others more than on ourselves. The more we focus on others and the more we try to reach out to them, the more joy we have. We are not only to reach out through the church, but we are to use our hands and our words and our resources to encourage other people. And the more we seek to do that, the more contentment we find in our own lives. Third, trust the mystery of the ministry of giving and receiving. We experience the joy of God's presence when we give ourselves to God to help meet someone else's needs, and we graciously receive the gifts of God's provisions for us that comes through others.

Jesus never said that following him would be easy. In fact, he cautioned that it would be a journey filled with challenges and sacrifice. There's a price you will pay to keep your life on mission, outwardly focused and ready to give and receive. But the price you pay directly corresponds to the joy and contentment you receive. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.