



Central Peninsula Church

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Philippians 4:8–13

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The Secret of Contentment

SERIES: Philippians: A People and A Place Transformed by the Gospel

Good morning CPC. If you weren't here last Sunday, let me tell you what you missed. You missed the first time in the 40-year history of Central Peninsula Church that people in the congregation threw things at the preacher while he was preaching. Last Sunday, two men from the 11:00 service who were sitting on the right side of the auditorium, threw projectiles at me shortly after I began my sermon. A minute or two into my sermon, as I proceeded to, in love, mock the other two men I share this pulpit with, those two men, Mark Mitchell and Rob Hall, both grabbed projectiles and threw them at me! First, Mark threw Kleenex at me. He was somehow under the impression that a wad of Kleenex could be thrown a distance of 20 yards. Then, Rob threw a crumpled up bulletin at me. What's important for all of you to know is that both of them missed; they didn't even come close to hitting me, and both Mark and Rob are now under church discipline. They have yet to repent.

What you *also* missed if you weren't here last week was a sermon about joy. Last week we looked at Philippians 4:4-7 and we talked about how those four verses invite us, command us, to enter into a joyful, worry-free life by giving up this idol of control in our lives and trusting the Lord and his control over our lives. Last week's sermon was about joy. This week's sermon is about a similar, yet distinct subject: contentment.

From that video that we just watched, it would seem that you and I live in a world where everybody wants contentment, yet nobody's quite sure what contentment is or how to go about getting it. What is contentment? Those people in the video said that contentment has to do with having "enough money," having "the perfect soul mate," having "a good job," having "inner peace," or feeling "complete in yourself." How would you define contentment? Are you content? What would it take for you to get there, for you to be content? Have you downloaded into your head and into your heart what the Bible says about contentment, about finding satisfaction in life?

If you're new to the Bible, new to Christianity, you need to know that the theme of contentment runs like a mighty river throughout the whole Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. And today, we come to a section of the river where the water runs deepest, where there's much

for us to discover and experience. We're in our second to last sermon on a letter written to a community of changed lives, a community of Christians living in the city of Philippi—a city similar to the Peninsula, and we're going to get wet today as we dive into six verses that hold what the apostle Paul, the writer of this letter, calls, the secret of contentment. Apparently there's a secret that unlocks what you and me and the rest of the world desperately want, but can't seem to find: contentment.

So, our question this morning is a big one, yet it's also a practical one: how do we find contentment? What's the secret? In 2007 on the San Francisco Peninsula, in this discontent culture, with our busy and broken lives, with the reality that the majority of us in this room are not content—and that includes myself, that's why this sermon was so difficult and convicting for me to prepare this week, because I'm just a kindergartner in the school of contentment and yet I'm supposed to preach on this—with all this in mind, our question this morning is how do we lay hold of, how do we experience, how do we find, contentment?

What I'm giving you this morning is a practical sermon, a "how to" sermon, because I believe that today's six verses are not just immensely deep, they're immensely practical. This text wasn't written for scholars, it was written for the blacksmiths and the bakers, the soldiers and the shepherds, the wives and the widows that lived in 1st century Philippi. What the apostle Paul does for the Philippians and for us in these six verses is give us a very "hands on" answer to the question, how do we find contentment in our discontent world? The answer to this question is a secret that Paul will share with us, but first he gives us two contentment commands that prepare us for the secret.

I. Think your way towards contentment (v. 8).

The first, very practical, step that Paul tells us to take in our pursuit of contentment is this: think your way towards contentment. This is what Paul says in the first of our six verses today, Philippians 4:8, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

Raise your hand if you have this verse on a refrigerator magnet, Bible bookmark, bumper sticker, coffee mug, Christian t-shirt, or any other cloth, plastic, or ceramic-based Christian merchandise that you may have collected over the years. This is a familiar verse for many of us here, but many of us have come to know this verse out of context, through a refrigerator magnet, rather than in connection with everything Paul says in this passage about contentment. Here at the shoreline of our passage, what Paul's teaching us through this verse is that contentment is connected to your thought life, connected to your mind.

And this teaching isn't anything startling or new. For thousands of years many different religions and philosophies have said this, that if you want contentment, if you want satisfaction in life, you've got to start with your mind. What most all religions and worldviews say about the relationship between contentment and your mind is one of two things. Either you're told to empty your mind in pursuit of contentment—this is what most Eastern religions teach, that to find contentment or nirvana or inner peace you must meditate until your mind is empty and still. Or, on the other side of things, in Western circles you're taught that contentment is found through keeping, not an empty mind, but an open mind, a forever open, forever tolerant mind that's accepting of all viewpoints and values.

But Christianity makes an entirely different connection between contentment and the mind. What this verse calls us to do is *not* to keep our minds empty and *not* to keep our minds endlessly open, but to keep our minds full, to keep our minds full of a particular sort of content in our pursuit of contentment. And this is because, according to the Bible, according to Jesus, we are what we think. What do you think about that?

Jesus taught very clearly that what we think affects who we are. In the most well known sermon that Jesus ever delivered, his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that the reason a murderer is a murderer is because of a thought life consumed with hate. Jesus taught that the reason an adulterer commits adultery is because of a thought life dripping with lust. If you want to begin to taste a life of contentment, you need to adjust the life of your mind. As Christians, any emptying or opening that we do with our minds ought to be for the purpose of properly filling our minds. As G.K. Chesterton once said, "The object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid."

In this opening verse Paul gives us eight solid somethings, eight qualities, that we're commanded to shut our mind on, to fill our mind with, to think about, in our quest for contentment.

Before we take a quick tour of these eight qualities, you need to hear me say that Philippians 4:8 is not a command to *only* think about and engage these eight qualities. That's how this verse is often misinterpreted and misapplied. I've heard more than one preacher say that you should never watch a movie, listen to music, or read a magazine unless it passes the Philippians 4:8 test, unless that piece of culture you're interacting with is true, pure, and lovely, and so on.

Now, what's the problem with that understanding of this verse? Well, if Paul's point here were that everything your mind comes into contact with must be true, pure, and lovely, then you couldn't live in the Bay Area. If this were Paul's point, then we'd all be very ineffective missionaries to this Peninsula. Honestly, if this were Paul's point you couldn't even hang out with yourself because our lives aren't exactly museums of loveliness and purity.

The command in this verse isn't that *everything* we think about, engage, and come into contact with must pass the Philippians 4:8 test and be brimming over with these eight qualities. The command is that our thought life is to have a very regular orbit around these qualities. Part of the reason that you haven't found contentment is that your thought life is out of orbit.

What does your thought life orbit around? Do your thoughts orbit around "whatever is true" or do your thoughts often drift to the black hole of falsehood, lies, and doubts? Let me tell you something that's true, something that should be at the center of the solar system of your thought life: the gospel. The gospel is true. The good news is true, that sinners like you and me have a Father in heaven who loved us so much that instead of punishing us for our sins, he sent his Son Jesus to be punished on the cross in our place: to pay for all of our sins—past, present, and future, to write into the Bible incredible statements like Romans 8:1, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," and to saturate our thought life with awe over what a great Savior and Father we have.

Do your thoughts orbit around the truth of this gospel, or do you spend more time thinking thoughts that are false, thoughts like: "the gospel is too good to be true; Jesus couldn't really have forgiven me for all of my sins." Or thoughts like, "God couldn't possibly still love a failure like me." Or thoughts like, "I've got to do something today that impresses God, I can't just trust that his love for me is secure solely because of the cross." You'll never find contentment until your thought life begins to orbit around the

truth, especially the greatest truth of all, the gospel.

How about the other seven qualities? Do you think about “whatever is honorable,” or do you spend more time thinking dishonorable thoughts that you wouldn’t want to share with the person sitting next to you right now? When you reflect on your thought life from this last week, did your mind orbit around what’s just, what’s pure, what’s lovely, what’s commendable, what’s excellent, and what’s praiseworthy, or did your thoughts gravitate towards the opposite of these qualities?

If we want to think our way towards contentment, if we want to change the orbit of our thought life, we simply need to obey this verse and make a practical adjustment to what we do up here in our heads from 6am to 11pm every day, or whenever it is that you wake up and go to bed.

Here’s one practical but absolutely radical way that you can apply this verse and begin to think your way towards contentment: talk to yourself instead of listening to yourself. I’ve been working at this for a few years now, ever since I read a paragraph from one of my heroes, Martyn Lloyd Jones, where he wrote that our main trouble in life and in the pursuit of contentment is that, “we allow our self to talk to us instead of talking to our self...Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them, but they start talking to you, they bring back the problem of yesterday, etc. Somebody is talking. Who is talking to you? Your self is talking to you. The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself. You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself...You must say to yourself: ‘Hope in God’—instead of muttering in this depressed, unhappy way. And then you must go on to remind yourself of God, who God is, and what God is, and what God has done, and what God has pledged himself to do.”

Talking to yourself instead of listening to yourself is Philippians 4:8 in action. What this looked like in my life this last week, just to give you an example, is that as I woke up on Wednesday and Thursday morning with a mind full of untrue thoughts about God’s power and full of dishonorable, doubtful thoughts about God’s call and gifting on my life as a pastor, I caught myself listening to myself, I paused, and I began to talk to myself instead—to tell myself what I know to be true about God’s character, God’s power, and God’s fatherly care over my life. I want to think my way towards contentment, I want to change the orbit of my thought life, and so I’m learning to stop listening to myself and start talking to myself. Starting tomorrow morning, I encourage all of you, I ask

all of you, to begin doing the same thing: talk to yourself instead of listening to yourself.

II. Practice your way towards contentment (v. 9).

The first command Paul gave us was to think our way towards contentment. Now, the second command he gives us is to practice our way towards contentment. Throughout the Bible we see a perfect marriage between pondering and practicing, between learning and living, between thoughts and actions. The Scriptures teach that as helpful as it is to fill your mind with the right information, you can’t stop there. You’ve got to do something with that information, you’ve got to apply that information to how you live your life. If you’re out of shape and you know in your head that to get back into shape you must eat less and exercise more, as helpful as that information is it does you no good unless you put it into practice, unless you apply it, unless you actually begin to eat less and exercise more.

As followers of Jesus, we don’t *merely* value truths and doctrines and information about God, we value applying those truths and doctrines to our everyday lives. This is how most all of the apostle Paul’s letters are structured. The first half of his letters are full mostly of lofty truths about God and the gospel, and then the second half of his letters are full of concrete commands that show us how to put the lofty doctrine into practice. What Paul says in this next verse is that he’s already put all this stuff that he’s writing about, this whole concept of contentment, into practice, and so he asks the Philippians and he asks us to do the same, to begin practicing what’s being preached. Paul says in v.9, “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”

Paul knows nothing of the mentality so prevalent today that says, “Do as I say, not as I do.” Paul says “do as I say *and* as I do,” “follow my talk *and* my walk.” When it comes to contentment Paul can write a verse like Philippians 4:9, he can say “practice the things you’ve heard *and* seen in me,” because unlike some of us, Paul’s found contentment. And he wants us to practice having what he already has.

I love the way this command is worded in verse 9, “practice these things.” Paul doesn’t say, “do these things perfectly.” Paul doesn’t say “master contentment by the end of the day.” He says, “practice—practice your way towards contentment.” What Paul’s telling us is that you become a content

Christian the same way you become an artist, an athlete, or a musician: practice.

How many of you took piano lessons as a child? As a little boy or little girl when you went to piano practice, when you sat down on that wooden bench and read the notes on the page and tapped your fingers on the keys, you weren't attempting to master the art of piano in an hour, in a year, or even in a few years. You were just practicing piano. The point of practice was to have fun tapping the keys in hopes that each week you got a little bit better at playing the notes.

Pursuing contentment ought to have a similar feel. Sometimes it's going to feel challenging and discouraging to be learning to do life in this new way. But much of the time it ought to feel like you're tapping keys and like every few weeks you get a little bit better at playing the notes of contentment.

Practice your way towards contentment. You might find that you need a lot of practice. You might find that you have years of practice ahead of you in this department of the Christian life. I believe that I have a number of years of contentment practice ahead of me, like probably fifty of them. Maybe when I'm 89 I'll discover that I've arrived. But that's okay. It's okay because, as Paul will tell us in a few sentences, it took him years to learn contentment. And it's okay because the practice really does pay off, even if you feel like you can't see the results.

I see this with my son. For months now my 11-month-old son has been practicing a number of very important skills: crawling, talking and standing. Last week my son could stand up by himself for exactly 25 seconds. Yesterday, a whole week later, my son stood up by himself for exactly: 25 seconds. In a whole week's time I haven't observed any progress in my son's standing. But two months ago, Cru "Tornado" Buzzard was able to stand up by himself for only 2 seconds. When I take a step back as a father and survey a larger stretch of my son's life, I see that his practice has paid off. And as you practice your way towards contentment, though you might not see progress from your practice in the short run, you'll see it in the long run.

One very practical way that I'd encourage all of you to apply this verse and to begin practicing your way towards contentment is this: hang out with content people. Hang out with content Christians, or Christians who are at least further along in pursuit of contentment than you are, and let them rub off on you. If you stand outside in the sun for long enough, you'll get a sunburn. And if you hang out with content people long enough, you'll find the pigment of contentment showing up in your own life. So something very practical that you could do this week in your pursuit and practice of contentment would be to target one or two people here in our church whose contentment stands out to you and start hanging out with

those people. Watch them, talk to them, stalk them if you have to! Find a contentment mentor who can hang out with you and rub off on you. There are many longtime believers here at CPC who exhibit contentment in their walk with Christ. Detect, target, and start hanging out with such people.

III. Believe the secret of contentment (vv. 10-13).

So far Paul's commanded us to think our way towards contentment, to practice our way towards contentment, and now he calls us to believe the secret of contentment. Verses 10-12, "I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned *the secret* of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need."

Paul's preparing to tell us the secret. He hasn't yet revealed the secret to us; he will in the next verse, but in preparation for the secret Paul tells us this: true contentment is independent of circumstances. For Paul, contentment is not circumstantial; contentment is circumstance-less. And this is upside down from how you and I tend to perceive and pursue contentment. You believe, and your next-door neighbors believe, that finding contentment means finding a certain set of circumstances. We have it branded into our minds that in order to find contentment we must find more money, the right relationship, that new promotion, a solution to that big problem, or an end to that suffering that's been going on for so long now.

What are your circumstances of contentment? You've told yourself, the Bible hasn't told you this, you've told yourself this, "that if only these circumstances were true—fill in the blank—then I'd have contentment." What fills in your blank? Have you ever had the experience of having that blank line filled, of receiving those circumstances you wanted so badly, and then realized that you still didn't have contentment? Have you ever experienced the truth of what the philosopher Immanuel Kant said when he wrote, "Give a man everything he wants and at that moment everything will not be everything"? Paul is quite clear here that circumstances, even very wonderful circumstances, don't guarantee contentment.

Now, this is fairly radical teaching in 21st century America, that true contentment is to be found

independent of circumstances, but this teaching wasn't anything new in Paul's day. The Greek and Roman philosophers of Paul's day also taught this. Seneca taught this. You know Seneca, the famous Roman statesman who was born in the year 4 B.C., which according to some calculations was the same year that Jesus was born. Seneca famously taught that, "the happy man is content with his present lot, no matter what it is, and is reconciled to his circumstances." Seneca taught verses 11 & 12; he'd agree with Paul that contentment is to be found independent of circumstances.

Digging deeper though, what Seneca and the philosophers taught was that your circumstances didn't determine contentment because you could find within yourself sufficient resources to handle your circumstances. They taught that contentment is found in self-sufficiency. They taught that contentment is entirely independent of circumstances, but entirely dependent on yourself, entirely dependent on self-sufficiency. That was the 1st century secular secret of contentment, a secret that this church of Roman citizens living in this city of Philippi would've been very familiar with.

But that secret didn't deliver. It didn't work. In the year 65 AD, just a few years after Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians, Seneca, out of great discontent, took his own life. Seneca's secret led to suicide, not contentment. Once Seneca found himself in some difficult circumstances and once he found that he didn't have the self-sufficiency to sustain himself through those circumstances, he took his own life. He died a discontent 70-year-old man.

And even though the secret didn't work for Seneca, this old secret has resurfaced today. It's been repackaged for a new century, for a new generation of people in search of contentment. Ten months ago it was published as a book that quickly climbed the bestseller charts. It's sold over 6 million copies. Right now it's being translated into over 30 different languages. This book claims to unlock the great mystery of contentment. What book am I talking about? *The Secret*. The secret of *The Secret* is—here's 214 pages in one sentence—that contentment is found through relying on yourself to think good thoughts that will then attract good things to come your way. The secret of *The Secret* is no secret; it's simply Seneca's old secret repackaged for a new generation.

The good news for us today is that in the last verse of our passage, the apostle Paul shares with us the true secret of contentment. Here's the secret, Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through him (Christ) who strengthens me." The secret of contentment is that contentment has nothing to do with your self-sufficiency and everything to do with Christ's sufficiency. The secret of contentment isn't being self-sufficient, but being

Christ-sufficient.

Philippians 4:13 shouts the secret that we have a Christ, we have a Savior, we have a Strength-giver, who gives weak people like you and me the strength we need to navigate whatever circumstances come our way. The secret is that though our circumstances change, our Christ does not change. The secret is that though we are weak, our Christ is strong.

Philippians 4:13 is often taken out of context to suggest that God will give us strength to do whatever we want to do. That's how I used to understand this verse. Back when I was 13, when I was 6ft. tall and a skinny 120 lbs., back when my friends used to make fun of me and say I had the perfect woman's body, back then I used to walk into the weight room wearing a t-shirt with a graphic of the strongest looking football player you've ever seen, and under him was printed this verse, Philippians 4:13. And as I lifted weights in my Philippians 4:13 t-shirt I used to believe that the secret of this verse was that God could turn skinny me into the strongest football player that the world had ever seen.

I believed this verse was a genie lamp that, if I rubbed it enough, could grant all my self-sufficient wishes and bring me contentment. But that's not what this verse says. In its context Philippians 4:13 teaches that Christ gives us strength *not* to do all things that we might wish to do, but strength to handle all things that might come our way. This verse teaches that Christ is so faithful, so kind, and so strong, that he will give us the strength we need to endure and navigate and handle whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, no matter how weak or tired or desperate we might be.

That's the secret to finding contentment.

The secret of contentment is the secret of the whole Christian life. The whole Christian life is a movement from self-sufficiency to Christ-sufficiency. When you become a Christian what happens is you recognize your insufficiency, you recognize that you don't have it all together, that you're discontent and weak—you recognize that you're a broken sinner who needs a Savior to atone for your sins, put you back together, and meet your craving for contentment. That's how you begin the Christian life *and* that's how you continue the Christian life.

These banners behind me quote words that Jesus Christ spoke to the apostle Paul after Paul had been a Christian for at least a decade or two: "My grace is *sufficient* for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." And in response to these words of Jesus, Paul spoke the secret, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me." And the verse

continues, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am *content* with weakness...For when I am weak, then I am strong." The Christian life, finding contentment, isn't about making yourself strong and sufficient; it's about seeing and celebrating the fact that Christ is strong and sufficient.

How do you find contentment? Well, you think your way towards contentment by talking to yourself instead of listening to yourself. You practice your way towards contentment by hanging out with content people who can rub off on you. But above all, you've got to believe the secret of contentment. Do you believe this secret? Do you believe that finding contentment doesn't depend on your circumstances? Do you believe that finding contentment doesn't depend on you, that contentment has nothing to do with your self-sufficiency? Do you believe that contentment depends on Christ, on trusting Christ the Strength-giver who walks with you in your weakness and in your circumstances to give you the strength you need as you need it, when you need it, how you need it? Do you believe this secret or do you think you need something more than this to be content? In a world that can never have enough, I think this is enough. We have Christ and we have his strength and with that we can be content.

There's one more practical way that you can apply what we're talking about today. A practical way of working at actually believing this incredible secret which runs opposite of what we see and hear every day regarding contentment: I want you to view this secret, to view Philippians 4:13 as a heat lamp for your unmet desires, dreams, and longings. Finding contentment in Christ doesn't mean that you and I are to get rid of all of our desires and dreams. The apostle Paul was perhaps the most driven type A personality, full of big dreams kind of a guy that's ever lived and he remained this way even as he found contentment in Christ's sufficiency. But what I think he would've done and what I think we need to do as a way of practically believing and learning this secret of contentment is this: this week, when you think about and feel those unmet desires and dreams that rest deep inside of you, let that be a trigger for you to come and place those desires and dreams under the warmth of this verse, under the heat lamp of this secret. As we do that I think we'll come to see that some of our desires need to incubate and some of our desires need to melt. As we let the warmth of this secret of contentment, this warmth of Christ, this heat of Philippians 4:13, have its way with us, I think we'll discover that however the Lord chooses to refine our desires, whether he incubates some of them or melts some of them, he's refining us towards contentment, showing us that the secret is true, the secret is enough: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

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