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Sermon Title: "The Secret of Contentment"

Rev. Dr. Larry Griffin

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Thanksgiving Day, 2019

The Secret of Contentment

Philippians 4: 10 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. 11 Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. 12 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. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Dear Christian Friends,

An airline pilot was flying over the Tennessee mountains and pointed out a lake to his copilot. He explained that when he was a kid, he used to sit in a rowboat down there, fishing. Every time he saw a plane fly overhead, he'd look up and wish he was flying it. Now every time he looks down, he wishes he was in a rowboat, fishing.

Contentment can be an elusive pursuit. We drive ourselves hard to pursue something we think will make us happy, only to find out it really doesn't. Growing up on a farm in North Dakota, we had a dog named Frisky. Frisky was very fast, he spent a lot of time running around for no particular reason. Occasionally, I would get him to run around in tight circles chasing his tail, round and round he's go and once in a while he caught it, he bit into it, yelped and let go of it.

Three questions I invite you to ask as we explore the idea that contentment is at the same time a lesson to be learned and a fruit of the Holy Spirit to be worked in our hearts as we go through the ups and downs of life.

First, why is it that we Americans are on the one hand, so very prosperous, and on the other hand, so very discontented?

A second question I've often wondered about - is it possible to be ambitious and contented at the same time?

A third question, what is the secret to being contented, according to Paul in our text for today?

Question #1 - why do we who are so very blessed have such a difficult time staving off this sinful desire to always have more. The simplest answer would seem to be a love of money, which Paul writes to Timothy is the root of all kinds of evil. Instead of being satisfied with having food and clothing enough for today, we find that every day this old adam inside of us rises up on the inside and takes us into all kinds of foolish and harmful directions. We forget

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that we came into this world with nothing, and we will all be leaving with nothing, in terms of money and the stuff that money can buy.

Just this past Saturday, about 30 or 40 of my cousin Bryant's family and friends gathered at his funeral to pay our respects. Bryant was 69 years old, and in terms of money and the stuff it can buy, he left this world with nothing. For 40 or more years of his adult he struggled mightily. His habit of drinking to excess cost him two marriages, it cost him countless relationships and family memories, and for a time, it cost him his faith in Jesus Christ. The pastor who preached at his funeral indicated that there was a time when he was rejecting the faith his parents and our grandparents had handed down to him.

Why was Bryant so blessed on the one hand in body and soul and yet on the other hand his old sinful nature rose up on his inside and wreaked all kinds of havoc? The simplest answer is that somehow and in some way, he took his eyes off Jesus Christ, the very source of his blessings.

Dear friends, as often as you and I take our eyes off the very source of our blessings, that often we invite discontentment into our souls. Along with discontentment comes a restlessness that chips away at the security the Triune God has given us by claiming us as sons and daughters in the waters of Baptism. Along with discontentment comes a sadness that diminishes the joy we possess in knowing that Jesus Christ loves us, our sins are forgiven, a mansion in heaven is ours. Along with discontentment comes the opposite of gratitude, which is a taking for granted our blessings.

A second question I've often wondered about - is it possible to be ambitious and contented at the same time?

The answer is yes, as long as we focus our ambitions on our Second and Third Article blessings instead of First Article blessings.

Today we first of all give thanks to God for first article blessings summarized by Luther as including our bodies and souls, eyes, ears, all our members, our reason and all my senses. First article blessings that God has created us wonderfully and marvelously, and he provides for us in countless ways day after day. They include clothing and shoes, meat and drink, house and home, wife and children, and today we add all to that list expensive lifestyles, spendy vacations, modern technology, incredible medical care, and the list goes on.

Chiefly today, we give thanks for Second and Third Article blessings, which include all that Jesus Christ did to redeem us, not with gold nor silver nor credit cards, but with holy precious blood / innocent suffering and death. They include all that the Holy Spirit does to call, to gather, to enlighten, and to sanctify us.

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If we read between the lines in Philippians 4, Paul was ambitious regarding second and third article blessings, namely the spreading of the Gospel into the far corners of the world, but contented in terms of first article blessings, namely air to breathe, a little bit of bread to eat and water to drink. The context of this letter was that he had received a gift of money from this little church in Philippi. He expressed his joy not so much because of how their thoughtfulness improved his circumstances, but rather that their faith in Christ was obviously growing and bearing fruit. Ambitious he was with regard to the kingdom of God spreading, but contented with regard to the basic needs of life being met.

Dear Friends, today is a terrific day to step it up in terms of seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, even as we scale back in terms of chasing after all these other things. The stoics of Paul's day practiced the virtue of contentment in all circumstances by never letting themselves get high or low, they stayed in the middle. They made an effort not to let good times make them happy nor hard times depress them. Their idea was that they should be self sufficient instead of resting in the providence of God.

Through Paul, the Holy Spirit has a better idea for us here today, and that is to practice the virtue of contentment day after day by rejoicing in the Lord always, and again we say rejoice. Practice the virtue of contentment day after day by counting your blessings, writing down your blessings, thanking God in heaven above for your blessings, giving back for the glory of God and the benefit of your neighbors a firstfruit of your blessings, and avoiding the traps and the snares the devil and his nasty demons would set for you.

A third question, what is the secret to being contented, according to Paul in our text for today?

I read a story about a Jewish man in Hungary who went to his rabbi and complained, "Life is unbearable. There are nine of us living in one room. What can I do? The rabbi answered, "Take your goat into the room with you." The man protested, but the rabbi insisted, "Do as I say and come back in a week."

A week later the man returned looking more distraught than before, "We can't stand it," he told the rabbi. "The goat is filthy." The rabbi answered, "Go home and let the goat out, and come back in a week. He came back in a week and gushed, "Life is beautiful. We enjoy every minute of it now that there's no goat - only the nine of us.

Friends in Christ, perspective helps, doesn't it? As often as you focus on those who have life easier and better than you, you will not know God's contentment. Whenever you pay attention to those who have so much less than you, the Holy Spirit has a chance to work inside of you a new and improved attitude. As often as you try to slug your own way through your trials and troubles finding little or no

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time for God's Word and prayer, that often the joy of the Lord will be leaking out of you like a tire with a small hole in it, that often the contentment of being still and knowing that God is God will be eluding you.

The secret of contentment is for Jesus Christ to hold you close, it is for him to forgive your sins and wipe away your tears and tell you again and again that he loves you and that he will in fact be working everything out for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purposes. The secret of contentment is for you to fix your eyes on Jesus Christ, in whose strength you will be able to do all that he is asking you to do. Jesus Christ is the very author and the finisher of your faith, which is another way of saying that as often as Jesus Christ holds you close, that often there is the peace and the joy and the contentment and the happy endings only he can give.

In my cousin Bryant's case, there was a happy ending. Eventually, the prayers of his righteous aunts and uncles and cousins were answered. Eventually, a pastor reached out to him with the Gospel he had heard from his mother's knees, and he believed. Eventually, the promises of God were repeated and offered to him, and with the hand of faith, he received them. Eventually, he repented, and in that moment the very angels and archangels of heaven broke out in celebration. In the last years of his life, the grace of God swept over Bryant's soul in a way that was obvious and even contagious for those who were paying attention.

The kingdom of God is like a small group of Christians who go home on a national day of thanksgiving, and they rejoice in Jesus Christ holding them close. They sit down at yet one more feast knowing that contentment is at the same time a lesson to be constantly learned and a fruit of the Holy Spirit to be worked in their hearts as they go through the ups and downs of life. It is no secret that their cups are running over, and therefore their gratefulness is increasingly contagious and they are finding that their challenges and anxieties in life are more and more giving way to a mantra first written by St. Paul, we can do all that God is asking us to do through Christ who strengthens us.