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Teaching Notes

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The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment, Week 3

Jeremiah Burroughs

Philippians 4:12-13 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

Initial comments: Christian contentment is not a natural state, but a mystery whose secrets must be learned.

Burroughs's Four-fold Outline:

- I. The Nature of Christian Contentment: What It Is
- II. The Art and Mystery of Christian Contentment
- III. What Lessons Must Be Learned to Achieve Christian Contentment
- IV. The Glories and Excellence of Christian Contentment

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

I. Christian Contentment Described

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

- A. Frame of spirit = heart disposition, attitude, demeanor
- B. Descriptions

1. Sweet: as opposed to bitter or sour
 2. Inward: Burroughs—“If the attainment of true contentment were as easy as keeping quiet outwardly, it would not need much learning.”
 3. Quiet: not roiling, churning, rebellious, murmuring... but subdued and peaceful under God’s hand
 4. Gracious: can only be produced by sovereign grace working in the soul... it is a supernatural state of being
- C. God’s Disposal: God’s sovereign decrees/decisions concerning you and your life... down to the smallest detail
- D. Wise and Fatherly disposal
1. God’s decisions are made in view of his fatherly love for you
 2. It could have been “kingly” and been true... but “fatherly” is more tender; a king always does what is best for his Kingdom; a father what is best for his child
- E. It **freely** submits to God’s disposal
- No reluctance, no great persuasion needed to submit gladly to God... not grudging
 - Not by constraint... not forced to be content
 - Not by stupidity or ignorance of the afflictions facing them
- It is a FREE act by rational people based on spiritual judgment of God
- F. It **submits** to God’s disposal

Burroughs: “What, it says... will you be above God? Is this not God’s hand and must your will be regarded more than God’s? O under, under! Get you under, O soul! Keep under! Keep low! Keep under God’s feet! You are under God’s feet, and keep under His feet! Keep under the authority of God, the majesty of God, the sovereignty of God, the power that God has over you! To keep under is to submit!”

Two key examples: Jonathan and Sarah Edwards and George Mueller:

Example #1: Edwards

Jonathan Edwards died of a smallpox inoculation. Sarah heard of it and wrote their daughter Esther:

"What shall I say: A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. O that we may kiss the rod, and lay our hands on our mouths! The Lord has done it. He has made me adore his goodness that we had him so long. But my God lives; and he has my heart. O what a legacy my husband, and your father, has left to us! We are all given to God: and there I am and love to be. Your ever affectionate mother, Sarah Edwards."

WOW!! "O that we may kiss the rod..."

But amazingly, Jonathan Edwards also showed the same kind of Christian contentment in HOW he died. Dr. Shippen, the attending physician, wrote to Sarah of how her husband carried himself through the illness right unto death:

"And never did any mortal man more fully and clearly evidence the sincerity of all his professions, by one continued, universal, calm, cheerful resignation, and patient submission to the divine will, through every stage of his disease, than he; not so much as one discontented expression, nor the least appearance of murmuring through the whole. And never did any person expire with more perfect freedom from pain; - not so much as one distorted hair - but in the most proper sense of the words, he really fell asleep. Death had certainly lost its sting, as to him"

Example #2: Mueller

George Mueller's beloved wife, Mary, died after he had prayed many prayers for her recovery. He preached her funeral message from Psalm 119:68, "You are good and do good."

He had three main points: 1) God is good and did good to bring Mary into his life to begin with; 2) God is good and did good to allow Mary to live as long with him as she did; 3) God is good and did good to take Mary home to heaven when and how He did.

Mueller said:

"'The Lord is good, and doeth good,' all will be according to His own blessed character. Nothing but that, which is good, like Himself, can proceed from Him. If he pleases to take my dearest wife, it will be good, like Himself. What I have to do, as His child, is to be satisfied with what my Father does, that I may glorify Him.

After this my soul not only aimed, but this, my soul, by God's grace, attained to. I was satisfied with God."

Questions:

- 1) What do these examples teach you about Christian contentment?
- 2) What do you think of Sarah's statement "kiss the rod"?
- 3) How was George Mueller's attitude a display of humility and healthy thankfulness before God? How would such an attitude cut off all bitterness?

G. It **takes pleasure** in God's disposal

Not just "I see the justice in what God is doing"

But "I see the **goodness** in what God is doing, and I am delighted with it!"

Note Paul's example: Philippians 4:18 "But I have all, and abound! I am full!" "Alas, poor man! What did Paul have that could make him say he had all? Where was there ever a man more afflicted than Paul was? Many times he had not tatters to hang about his body to cover his nakedness. He had no bread to eat, was often in nakedness, and put in the stocks and whipped and cruelly used. 'Yet I have all,' say Paul, for all of that!"

2 Corinthians 6:10 sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

H. It does this in every condition

- Whatever the kind of affliction
- Whatever the time and duration of the affliction
- Whatever the varieties of our condition

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

II. "God's Disposal": This is the doctrine of PROVIDENCE

Grudem: We may define God's providence as follows: *God is continually involved with all created things in such a way that He (1) keeps them existing and maintaining the properties with which He created them; (2) cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do; and (3) directs them to fulfill His purpose.*

Louis Berkhof: Providence is *the provision which God makes for the ends of His government, and the preservation and government of all His creatures.*

John Calvin: *God rules not only the whole fabric of the world and its several parts, but also the hearts and even the actions of men. . . . We mean by providence not an idle observation by God in heaven of what goes on in earth, but His rule of the world which He made; for He is not the creator of a moment, but the perpetual governor. Thus the providence we ascribe to God belongs not only to His eyes but to His hands.* Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God, 162.

NOTE: The English word "providence" comes from the Latin, *provideo*, which meant literally "foresight." Theologically, however, this doctrine goes much deeper than God's knowledge (foresight) of events to His actual arrangement of the circumstances, materials, and people necessary to bring them about. Calvin elegantly says *the providence we ascribe to God belongs not only to His eyes but to His hands.*

John Flavel: "It is a great support and solace of the saints in all the distresses that befall them here, that there is a wise Spirit sitting in all the wheels of motion, and governing the most eccentric creatures and their most pernicious designs to blessed and happy issues. And indeed, it were not worthwhile to live in a world devoid of God and Providence."

"Providence has a universal, effectual, beneficial, and encouraging influence upon the affairs and concerns of the saints....

"Universal: Providence acts in and upon *all* the concerns and interests of the saints. It not only has its hand upon this or that, but in all that concerns them. It has its eye upon everything that relates to them throughout their lives, from first to last. Not only the great and more important, but the most minute and ordinary affairs of our lives are transacted and managed by it....

"Effectual: Providence not only undertakes but perfects what concerns us. It goes through with its designs, and accomplishes what it begins. No difficulty so clogs it, no cross accident falls in its way, but it carries through its design. Its motions are irresistible and uncontrollable; He performs it for us.

“Beneficial: All its products are exceedingly beneficial to the saints. It performs all things for them. It is true we often prejudge its works and unjustly censure its designs, and in many of our straits and troubles we say ‘All these things are against us.’ But indeed providence neither does nor can do anything that is really against the true interest of the saints... There is nothing but good to the saints in God’s purposes and promises, so there is nothing but good in all his providence.

“Encouraging: What life and hope will providence inspire in our hearts, and what prayers will it cause to rise in us when pressures are against us!”

John Flavel, *The Mystery of Providence*

“Ignorance of providence is the ultimate of all miseries; the highest blessedness lies in the knowledge of it.” John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*

The Heidelberg Catechism:

What do you mean by the providence of God? (Question 27)

The almighty and everywhere present power of God; whereby, as it were by his hand, he upholds and governs heaven, earth, and all creatures; so that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, and all things come, not by chance, but by his fatherly hand.

What advantage is it to us to know that God has created, and by his providence does still uphold all things? (Question 28)

That we may be patient in adversity; thankful in prosperity; and that in all things, which may hereafter befall us, we place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father, that nothing shall separate us from his love; since all creatures are so in his hand, that without his will they cannot so much as move.

Scriptural Support:

Here are examples of God’s complete providence in governing the world:

- “I have commanded the *ravens* to feed you there” (1Kings 17:4)
- “The Lord God appointed a *plant* and made it come up over Jonah” (Jonah 4:6).
- “God appointed a *worm* that attacked the plant, so that it withered” (Jonah 4:7).

- “I will send swarms of *flies* on you and your servants” (Exodus 8:21).
- “He summoned a *famine* on the land and broke all supply of bread” (Psalms 105:16).
- “He gave them *hail* for rain” (Psalms 105:32).
- “He spoke, and the *locusts* came” (Psalms 105:34).
- “The Lord will whistle for . . . the *bee* that is in the land of Assyria” (Isaiah 7:18).
- “The *lot* is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord” (Proverbs 16:33).
- “Even the *wind* and the *sea* obey him” (Mark 4:41).
- “He removes *kings* and sets up kings” (Daniel 2:21).
- “Even the unclean *spirits*, and they obey him” (Mark 1:27).
- “He upholds the *universe* by the word of his power” (Hebrews 1:3).

Romans 8:28-29 *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*

Ephesians 1:11 *In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will*

Isaiah 14:26-27 *This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations. ²⁷ For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?*

Proverbs 19:21 *Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.*

Proverbs 21:1 *The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.*

Matthew 10:29-31 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. ³⁰ And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

[Joseph to his terrified brothers] *Genesis 50:20 As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.*

Challenging Aspects to Providence:

- 1) The Problem of Evil: a comprehensive doctrine of providence brings us face to face with the problem of God's activity and purpose in the devastating events of earth. We cannot avoid facing how a good and loving God can bring about/permit a hurricane or an earthquake or a seemingly random drive-by shooting resulting in the death of a twelve-year-old girl. The more detailed is God's involvement in the tiniest details of human life, the more poignant this question becomes.
- 2) Scriptural texts: some bible verses seem to indicate that God isn't in any way responsible for or connected with the evil actions of sentient beings...

Jeremiah 7:31 They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire-- something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind.

- 3) Free will: if God orchestrates everything down to the slightest detail, where is there room for real decisions? How are human beings not mere robots?
- 4) The ultimate issues of salvation: clearly God privileges some people more than others in access to the gospel; some are born in nations previously saturated with the gospel, others are born in an unreached people group far from the nearest Christian church. How is there justice in that? The overwhelming percentage of people in the world follow the religion of their parents. How can we understand the goodness of God in a world in which gospel riches are not evenly distributed?

Questions:

- 1) How is embracing a doctrine of providence essential to Christian contentment?
- 2) If we believed in mindless chance (good luck vs. bad luck), why would it be hard to be content in any and every circumstance?

- 3) What is most delightful about the doctrine of providence to you?
- 4) What is most challenging?
- 5) How could we develop more and more Christian maturity in being able to embrace a vigorous sense of the providence of God?
- 6) How would you relate prayer to providence?