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Teaching Notes

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The Excellence of Christian Contentment

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.

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.

The Excellence of Christian Contentment

Basic Concept: The more we prize Christian contentment as a rare jewel and a treasure of inestimable worth, the more we will pursue it and sacrifice in order to attain it; the more vigorously we will fight every day to protect it from Satan's attacks.

We should see Christian contentment as a "treasure hidden in a field and a pearl of great price."

Matthew 13:44-46 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. ⁴⁵"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶ When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

This is so rich a treasure, it is worth whatever it takes to obtain it!

We should make Christian contentment a lifelong goal that we are pursuing.

"The worth and excellency of a soul is to be measured by the object of its love. He who loves mean and sordid things does thereby become base and vile, but a noble

and well-placed affection does advance and improve the spirit into a conformity with the perfections which it loves.”

— Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*

Q: How do the things we love and pursue shape our souls?

Q: How would seeing the excellence of Christian contentment shape our motives and actions every day?

How Excellent is Christian Contentment?

A. By contentment we give God his due worship... indeed, the MOST EXCELLENT worship we can give

- We were created by God to glorify him and worship him for his awesome person and his amazing works of creation and redemption... that’s what we were MADE FOR and that’s also what we were redeemed for

Isaiah 43:6-7 Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth--⁷ everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Ephesians 1:4-6 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love⁵ he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will--⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.

Ephesians 1:12 in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.

1 Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

- God is always deserving of praise and worship... always, in “any and every situation”
- We worship God MORE when we are suffering and when earthly conditions are miserable and praise him from the heart anyway

Burroughs: “You worship God more by this than when you come to hear a sermon, or spend half an hour or an hour in prayer, or when you come to receive a sacrament. These are the acts of God’s worship, but they are only external acts.... But this is the soul’s worship, to subject itself thus to God. You who often will worship God by hearing, and praying, and receiving the sacrament, and yet afterwards will be [irritable] and discontented—know that God does not accept such worship. ... In active obedience, we worship God by doing what pleases God, but by passive obedience we worship God by being pleased with what God does.”

In active obedience, you say “O that what I do may please God!”

In passive obedience, you say “O that what God does may please me!”

A true Christian does BOTH!

Augustine, in his *Confessions* said this to the Lord:

He loves You too little who loves anything together with You which He loves not for Your sake.

In other words, if we love God AND some earthly blessing, and if we don’t love the earthly blessing BECAUSE of God, or for the sake of a deeper love relationship with God, we love God TOO LITTLE... we are actually idolatrous. If we love the gift independent of the Giver, we don’t love either one properly.

Conversely, if we are able to say with Job:

Job 13:15 Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him

And with Habakkuk...

Habakkuk 3:17-19 Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, ¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. ¹⁹ The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.

This is the GREATEST, most EXCELLENT work of worship to which we shall ever attain!

Q: Why is God more glorified in us when we praise him in the midst of great suffering?

B. In contentment is much exercise of grace

- The “exercise of grace” means a strengthening in our souls of the work of grace God is doing
- All the graces of God are exercised in us during times of adversity and affliction

James 1:2-4 Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴ Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

1 Peter 1:6-7 now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that your faith-- of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire-- may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

- To be content in adversity actually strengthens greatly all the graces God has worked in your soul: faith, humility, submission, thankfulness, spiritual gifts, memory, etc.

Burroughs: “It is an argument of a gracious magnitude of spirit, that whatsoever befalls it, yet it is not always whining and complaining as others do, but it goes on in its way and course, and blesses God, and keeps in a constant tenor whatever befalls it. Such things as cause others to be dejected and fretted and vexed, and take away all the comfort of their lives make no alteration at all in the spirits of these men and women. This, I say, is a sign of a great deal of strength of grace.”

Q: How are our Christian virtues more strengthened by being content in the midst of trials rather than being frustrated, angry, and complaining?

C. By contentment the soul is fitted to receive mercy

- No man or woman in the world is so prepared to receive more mercy as those who are content
- Like a vessel into which you want to pour a liquid must remain still, so we must be still under God’s hand to receive maximum blessing from his mercies.
- Turbulent souls are unready for the quietness of the blessings of God:

James 1:5-8 *If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. ⁶ But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.*

Isaiah 57:20-21 *But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. ²¹ "There is no peace," says my God, "for the wicked."*

Q: Why do we need to be steady and quiet under God's hand in order to receive his mercies during a trial?

D. Contentment is fitted to do service

- Unsteady, disturbed spirits are not fit for service... because they are not submissive to the master
- The essence of contentment is submission, quietness under God's wise fatherly disposal... discontent people are not that way; but the essence of service is also submission to God's purposes, decisions, commands
- Also content people are far better able to minister to others who are struggling with sin and with adverse circumstances

Burroughs: "Those who have unsteady, disturbed spirits which have no steadfastness at all in them are not fit to do service for God, but such as have steadfastness in their spirits are men and women fit to do any service. That is the reason why, when the Lord has any great work for one of his servants to do, usually he first quiets their spirits, he brings their spirits into a quiet, sweet frame, to be contented with anything, and then he sets them about employment."

2 Corinthians 1:3-5 *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.*

Q: Why are Paul and Silas as supernaturally content men much readier to answer the Philippian jailer's question "What must I do to be saved" than if they were angry, sullen, frustrated by the injustices they have experienced?

E. Contentment delivers from temptation

- People of discontented spirits are subject to a vast array of temptations. “The Devil loves to fish in troubled waters.”
- Discontent is of the essence of the devil’s wandering through the world, as well as that of the demons... Satan roams “to and fro over the surface of the earth” (Job 1-2); demons when they go out of people “go through arid places seeking rest and do not find it” (Matt. 12:43)
- The more discontent we are, the more susceptible to the devil’s temptations; the more content we are in God’s wise fatherly disposal, the harder we are to tempt

Burroughs: “Oh, if you would free yourselves from temptations, labor for contentment. It is the peace of God that guards the heart from temptation.”

- Closely related to thankfulness being the weapon of choice against soul-killing sins in Ephesians 5:

Ephesians 5:3-6 But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. ⁴ Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. ⁵ For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person-- such a man is an idolater-- has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. ⁶ Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient.

- Thankful people are content people and vice-versa; thankful people will be much harder to tempt sexually or toward greed or other forms of idolatry
- Conversely, discontent people are extremely vulnerable to shifting off the straight and narrow path to find some happiness and relief from the affliction they are enduring

Burroughs: “When men think thus, that they must live as finely as they were wont to do, they make themselves a prey to the Devil, but for such as can say, 'let God do with me what he pleases, I am content to submit to his hand in it', the Devil will scarcely meddle with such men.”

Tempting a contented man is as effective as firing a flaming arrow against a metal wall.

Q: Why is a roaming spirit of discontent often a prelude for sin?

F. Contentment brings abundant comforts

Burroughs: “Contentment will make a man’s life exceedingly sweet and comfortable, and nothing does this more than the grace of contentment.”

- First, the person realizes that he has whatever he has in his life, he has in a kind of independent way, not relying on any creature. His happiness, peace, security, joy, assurance, hope, purpose, energy, tasks... all are independent of the creature but wholly rely on the Creator
- If God raises the stature and earthly position of a contented person, he has the sweetness of knowing God’s love is in it; it is abundantly sweeter than if he had been discontented before that raise
- Everything is vastly more comforting when we see those things as having come through God’s wise and fatherly disposal toward us; it is so comforting to know that God has applied his vast wisdom and love to the details of our lives

Q: How does Christian contentment help us not to rely on earthly blessings God gives us (marriage, family, prosperity, good health, rich experiences) and therefore to enjoy them better? How are discontent people even dissatisfied when everything is going well?

G. Contentment draw comfort from things not possessed

Two Categories: 1) Blessings that God is choosing to withhold from us and may never give to us; 2) Blessings God has promised to us in the next world but which we do not have in the present world

Burroughs: “Certainly our contentment does not consist in getting the thing we desire, but in God’s fashioning our spirits to our conditions. ... A man has more comfort in being content without a thing, than he can have in the thing that he in a discontented way desires. You think, if I had such a thing, then I should be content. I say, there is more good in contentment, than there is in the thing that you would fain have to cure your discontent.”

- You should think that perhaps my earthly circumstance could be improved, but would my soul be improved by it? Do lands and titles and possessions actually improve the condition of my soul
- It takes a powerfully mature perspective to delight in all the things God thought it best NOT to give you! God was wise to not make you richer, or more successful, or having this or that blessing you prayed for fervently... it was wise and loving of God to say NO to you!

2 Corinthians 12:7-9 To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Matthew 26:42 He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

In the end, a quiet and contented heart is a far greater blessing than anything earthly thing you could ever receive!

Burroughs: "So be satisfied and quiet, be contented with your contentment. I lack certain things that others have, but blessed be God, I have a contented heart which others have not. Then, I say, be content with your contentment, for it is a rich portion that the Lord has granted you. If the Lord should give you thousands in this world, it would not be such a rich portion as this, that he has given you a contented spirit. Oh, go away and praise the name of God, and say, 'Why, Lord, it is true that I would be glad if I had these and these comforts which others have, but you have cut me short. Though I lack these, yet you have given me what is as good and better, you have given me a quiet, contented heart, to be willing to be at your disposal.'"

Q: How can we learn to thank God genuinely for blessings that he is choosing to withhold from us?

H. Contentment is a great blessing on the soul

Burroughs: “It is the blessing of God which gives us all things to enjoy, and it is God who through his blessing has fashioned your heart and made it suitable to your circumstances.”

I. A contented man may expect reward

Burroughs: “God will give them the good of all the things which they are contented to be without. This brings an abundance of good to a contented spirit. There is such and such a mercy which you think would be very pleasant to you if you had it; but can you bring your heart to submit to God in it? Then you shall have the blessing of the mercy one way or another; if you do not have the thing itself, you shall have it made up one way or another; you will have a bill of exchange to receive something in lieu of it. There is no comfort that any soul is content to be without, but the Lord will give either the comfort or something instead of it. You shall have a reward to your soul for whatever good thing you are content to be without. You know what the Scripture says of active obedience: the Lord accepts of his servants their will for the deed. Though we do not do a good thing, yet if our hearts are upright, to will to do it, we shall have the blessing, though we do not do the thing.”

J. By contentment the soul come nearest the excellence of God

Burroughs: “For this word, this is translated 'content', signifies a self-sufficiency, as I told you in opening the words. A contented man is a self-sufficient man, and what is the great glory of God, but to be happy and self-sufficient in himself? Indeed, he is said to be all-sufficient, but that is only a further addition of the word 'all', rather than of any matter, for to be sufficient is all-sufficient. Now this is the glory of God, to be sufficient, to have sufficiency in himself. El-shaddai means to be God having sufficiency in himself. And you come near to this. As you partake of the Divine nature by grace in general, so you do it in a more peculiar manner by this grace of Christian contentment, for what is the excellence and glory of God but this? Suppose there were no creatures in the world, and that all the creatures in the world were annihilated: God would remain the same blessed God that he is now, he would not be in a worse condition if all creatures were gone; neither would a contented heart, if God should take away all creatures from him. A contented heart has enough in the lack of all creatures, and would not be more miserable than he is now. Suppose that God should keep you here, and all the creatures that are in the world were taken away, yet you still, having God to be your portion, would be as happy as you are now. Therefore contentment has a great deal of excellence in it.”

Ephesians 4:22-24 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ²³ to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.