

Cross-cultural Perspectives



Back to School: Learning to be Content

I'm back in school. Come to think of it I'm not sure I've ever left school. Now, I've enrolled in the "Master's" degree in learning to be content. I can go to class right here in my own backyard, in my office, or take my course work with me wherever I go.

Paul had it right on. Regardless of the circumstances: "I have learned in *whatever situation* I am to be content" (Philippians 4:11, ESV, Emphasis mine). It is a learned skill—an attitude.

It works on deputation as well: "for I have learned in *whatever state* I am, to be content" (Philippians 4:11, NKJV, Emphasis mine).

Day to day activities of life—especially on the mission field—can easily throw life out of balance. The center of attention shifts resulting in a lack of spiritual growth, a lack of peace, and an increasing lack of trust in God and His ability to take care of the situation. Discouragement, depression, despondency, and disillusionment set in and enchain us in discontentment.

The secret to contentment is still to trust God and His promises: "Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything in the One who makes me who I am" (Philippians 4:13, MSG). Or as the King James Version familiarly puts it, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."

Paul's faith and focus remained on Christ. He never said, "I can't do this. It's just too hard!" He spoke the opposite. His circumstances were far from optimal. He wrote the verses about contentment, forgetting those things that are behind, and putting trust in Christ from a chilly damp, dirty prison cell. Contentment is not dependent on life's circumstances. It is where we become confident in the source of our strength. Earlier in life Paul testified of being beaten, wounded, shipwrecked, imprisoned, and starved. Yet, he concluded: "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4:8-9).

Scripture is replete with verses about trusting God. Let's settle for a couple: "For the which cause I also suffer these things: nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded

that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day” (2 Timothy 1:12). “And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform” (Romans 4:21).

It’s senseless to sit and daydream about the grass being greener on the other side of the fence or life being better on the other side of the world. Just remember, what Erma Bombeck said, “the grass is only greener over the septic tank.”

Charles Bigg reveals three places where one tends to wallow in discontent: **possessions, potential, and position**. In keeping with the alliteration I would also add **past-prime**. At times we grapple with fear that time is slipping away from us; that we won’t be able to accomplish all we want in our ministry. Dr. Steven C. Riser says all of this requires God’s: presence, power, and peace.

Tom Shepard tells us that some never do become content. They are unfulfilled, unsatisfied, and unhappy. He asks, “How can I find joy in the jungle of life? How can I find contentment in catastrophe?” He claims, “The situations of life are the school house of learning contentment.”

Shepard provides a few exercises to try in learning the fine art of contentment. They are adapted here:

1. **There are things I can control and should** place my efforts here. There may be some things that can be done to improve the situation. By all means, do it!
2. **There are things I can control but don’t**. There are some situations where it would be wise not to react. One must carefully choose the battle and where to expend energy.
3. **There are things I cannot control**. That is where contentment comes into play. I learn to trust God. I place the situation at His feet. Contentment becomes an issue of trust.

Contentment isn’t settling for a life of mediocrity, nor is it selecting a life of laziness. “It is being satisfied with whatever place in life God has us at, while trusting that He does have our interest at heart and that He does want to bless us and see us succeed” (Christianpf.com).

Consider Contentment College. I have. Let’s all go back to school. It’s the only way to go—and stay spiritually sane.