

Christian Contentment

Based on *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* by Jeremiah Burroughs (1646)

Session 2: The Mystery and Excellence of Contentment

The Mystery of Contentment

The “mystery” according to Burroughs is a mix of 1) a keen sense of awareness of affliction (so keen that it is indistinguishable from that of those who do not have contentment) and 2) gracious joy and peace and trust in God’s goodness in your heart.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. . . .What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:7, 9)

“Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.” (Psalm 73:25)

1. Addition and Change, Not Subtraction

“What, do you think that there is no way for the contentment of your spirit, but to get rid of your burden? O you are deceived. The way of contentment is to add another burden, that is, to labor to load and burden your heart with your sin; the heavier the burden of your sin is to your heart, the lighter will the burden of your affliction be to your heart, and so you shall come to be content. If your burden were lightened, that would content you; you think there is no way to lighten it but to get it off. But you are deceived; for if you can get your heart to be more burdened with your sin, you will be less burdened with your afflictions.”

“Have you ever got alone and said, 'Come, Oh let us go and humble our souls before God together, let us go into our chamber and humble our souls before God for our sin, by which we have abused those mercies that God has taken away from us, and we have provoked God against us. Oh let us charge ourselves with our sin, and be humbled before the Lord together.'? Have you tried such a way as this? Oh you would find that the cloud would be taken away, and the sun would shine in upon you, and you would have a great deal more contentment than ever you had.”

“Two men may have the same affliction; to one it shall be as gall and wormwood, yet it shall be wine and honey and delightfulness and joy and advantage and riches to the other. This is the mystery of contentment, not so much by removing the evil, as by metamorphosing the evil, by changing the evil into good.”

2. Personal Responsibility, Not Making Up for the Lack

“A carnal heart thinks, I must have my wants made up or else it is impossible that I should be content. But a gracious heart says, 'What is the duty of the circumstances God has put me into? Indeed, my circumstances have changed, I was not long since in a prosperous state, but God has changed my circumstances. The Lord has called me no more Naomi, but Marah. Now what am I to do? What can I think now are those duties that God requires of me in the circumstances that he has now put me into? Let me exert my strength to perform the duties of my present circumstances. Others spend their thoughts on things that disturb and disquiet them, and so they grow more and more discontented.”

3. Purging from Within, Not Bringing in from Outside

“A Christian makes over his will to God, and in making over his will to God, he has no other will but God's. Suppose a man were to make over his debt to another man. If the man to whom I owe the debt be satisfied and contented, I am satisfied because I have made it over to him, and I need not be discontented and say, 'My debt is not paid and I am not satisfied'. Yes, you are satisfied, for he to whom you made over your debt is satisfied. It is just the same, for all the world, between God and a Christian: a Christian heart makes over his will to God: now then if God's will is

satisfied, then I am satisfied, for I have no will of my own, it is melted into the will of God. This is the excellence of grace: grace does not only subject the will to God, but it melts the will into God's will, so that they are now but one will. What a sweet satisfaction the soul must have in this condition, when all is made over to God."

"Suppose a man has a fever, that makes what he drinks taste bitter: he says, 'You must put some sugar into my drink'; his wife puts some in, and still the drink tastes bitter. Why? Because the bitterness comes from a bitter choleric humor within. But let the physician come and give him a bitter portion to purge out the bitterness that is within, and then he can taste his drink well enough. It is just the same with men of the world: Oh such a mercy added to this mercy, then it would be sweet; but even if God should put a spoonful or two of sugar in, it would still be bitter. The way to contentment is to purge out your lusts and bitter humours."

4. Live in God's Blessings, Not Just in "Good Things"

"For example, Take these four or five considerations with which a godly man finds contentment in what he has, though it is ever so little:"

1. Because in what he has, he has the love of God to him.
2. What they have is sanctified to them for good.
3. A gracious heart has what he has free of cost; he is not likely to be called to pay for it
4. A godly man may very well be content, though he has only a little, for what he does have he has by right of Jesus Christ, by the purchase of Jesus Christ.
5. Every little that they have is but as an earnest penny* for all the glory that is reserved for them; it is given them by God as the forerunner of those eternal mercies that the Lord intends for them.

"The truth is that the afflictions of God's people come from the same eternal love that Jesus Christ came from. Jerome said, 'He is a happy man who is beaten when the stroke is a stroke of love.' All God's strokes are strokes of love and mercy, all God's ways are mercy and truth, to those that fear him and love him (Psalm 25:10)"

5. Strength from the Mediator, Not in Self

"You will say, Can I have the strength of Christ? Yes, it is made over to you by faith: the Scripture says that the Lord is our strength, God himself is our strength, and Christ is our strength. There are many Scriptures to that effect, that Christ's strength is yours, made over to you, so that you may be able to bear whatever lies upon you, and therefore we find such a strange expression in the Epistle of St. Paul to the Colossians, praying for the saints: 'That they might be strengthened with all might according unto his glorious power', unto what? 'Unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness' - strengthened with all might, according to the power of God, the glorious power of God, unto all patience, and longsuffering with joyfulness. You must not therefore be content with a little strength, so that you are able to bear what a man might bear by the strength of reason and nature, but you should be strengthened with all might, according to the glorious power of God, unto all patience, and to all longsuffering."

6. Hope in God's Promises, Not in Present Situations

"If a king meets with a great deal of trouble when he is abroad, he contents himself with this: 'I have a Kingdom of my own.'"

"Therefore when you look into the book of God and find any promise there, you may make it your own; just as an heir who rides over a lot of fields and meadows says, This meadow is my inheritance, and this corn field is my inheritance, and then he sees a fine house, and says, This fine house is my inheritance. He looks at them with a different eye from a stranger who rides over those fields. A carnal heart reads the promises, and reads them merely as stories, not that he has any great interest in them. But every time a godly man reads the Scriptures (remember this when you are reading the Scripture) and there meets with a promise, he ought to lay his hand upon it and say, This is part of my inheritance, it is mine, and I am to live upon it."

"He has the kingdom of Heaven as present, and the glory that is to come; by faith he makes it present. So the martyrs had contentment in their sufferings, for some of them said, 'Though we have but a hard breakfast, yet we shall have a good dinner, we shall very soon be in heaven.' 'Do but shut your eyes', said one, 'and you shall be in heaven at once.' 'We faint not', says the Apostle (2 Corinthians 4:16). Why? Because these light afflictions that are but for a moment, work for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. They see heaven before them and that contents them."

7. Crying Out Toward God, Not Cursing Toward Others

"A godly man has contentment by opening and letting out his heart to God. Other men or women are discontented, but how do they help themselves? By abuse, by bad language. Someone crosses them, and they have no way to help themselves but by abuse and by bitter words, and so they relieve themselves in that way when they are angry. But when a godly man is crossed, how does he relieve himself? -He is aware of his cross as well as you, but he goes to God in prayer, and there opens his heart to God and lets out his sorrows and fears, and then can come away with a joyful countenance. Do you find that you can come away from prayer and not look sad? It is said of Hannah, that when she had been at prayer her countenance was no more said (1 Samuel 1:18), she was comforted: this is the right way to contentment."

The Excellence of Contentment

1. Contentment Leads to Giving God Due Worship.

"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 of worship, to hear and pray and receive sacraments. 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 sacraments, and yet afterwards will be froward and discontented-know that God does not regard such worship, he will have the soul's worship, in this subjecting of the soul unto God."

2. Contentment Exercises Much Grace.

"There is a great deal of strength of grace in contentment. It argues a great deal of strength in the body for it to be able to endure hard weather and whatever comes, and yet not to be much altered by it; so it argues strength of grace to be content"

"The glory of God appears here more than in any of his works. There is no work which God has made-the sun, moon, stars and all the world-in which so much of the glory of God appears as in a man who lives quietly in the midst of adversity. That was what convinced the king: when he saw that the three children could walk in the midst of the fiery furnace and not be touched, the king was mightily convinced by this, that surely their God was the great God indeed, and that they were highly beloved of their God who could walk in the midst of the furnace and not be touched, whereas the others who came only to the mouth of the furnace were devoured. So when a Christian can walk in the midst of fiery trials, without his garments being singed, and has comfort and joy in the midst of everything (when like Paul in the stocks he can sing, which wrought upon the jailor) it will convince men, when they see the power of grace in the midst of afflictions. When they can behave themselves in a gracious and holy manner in such afflictions as would make others roar: Oh, this is the glory of a Christian."

3. Contentment Fits Us For Service.

"No man or woman in the world is as fit to receive the grace of God, and to do the work of God, as those who have

contented spirits.”

“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.”

4. Contentment Delivers from Many Temptations.

“This is the maxim of the Devil, he loves to fish in troubled waters; where he sees the spirits of men and women troubled and vexed, there the Devil comes. He says, 'There is good fishing for me', when he sees men and women go up and down discontented, and he can get them alone, then he comes with his temptations: 'Will you suffer such a thing?' he says, 'take this shift, this indirect way, do you not see how poor you are, others are well off, you do not know what to do for the winter, to provide fuel and get bread for you and your children', and so he tempts them to unlawful courses. This is the special disorder that the Devil fastens upon, when he gets men and women to give their souls to him: it is from discontent, that is the ground of all who have been witches, and so have given up themselves to the Devil: the rise of it has been their discontent.”

5. Contentment Gives Abundant Comforts.

“I may compare this grace of contentment to a sailor's lantern: when a sailor is at sea, no matter how much provision he has in his ship, yet if he is thousands of leagues from land, or in a route where he will not meet with a ship for three or four months, he will be in a sad state if he has no lantern on his ship, nor anything by which to keep a candle alight in a storm. He would give a great deal to have a lantern, or something that might serve instead of one. When a storm comes in the night, and he can have no light above board, but it is puffed out at once, his state is very sad. So, many men have the light of comfort when there is no storm, but let any affliction come, any storm upon them, and their light is puffed out at once, and what can they do now? When the heart is furnished with this grace of contentment, this grace is, as it were, the lantern, and it keeps comfort in the spirit of a man, light in the midst of a storm and tempest.”

6. Contentment Blesses the Soul.

“It is the Lord who gives us all things to enjoy; we may have the thing and yet not enjoy it unless God comes in with his blessing. Now whatever you have, you enjoy it; many men have possessions and do not enjoy them. 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.”

7. Contentment Draws Us Near to God.

“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.”