

Christian Contentment

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

Session 4: How Christ Teaches Contentment and How to Attain It

How Christ Teaches Contentment

1. The Lesson of Self-Denial

"Just as no-one can be a scholar unless he learns his ABC, so you must learn the lesson of self-denial or you can never become a scholar in Christ's school, and be learned in this mystery of contentment."

"You know how when you strike something soft it makes no noise, but if you strike a hard thing it makes a noise; so with the hearts of men who are full of themselves, and hardened with self-love, if they receive a stroke they make a noise, but a self-denying Christian yields to God's hand, and makes no noise."

A person who has learned self denial, says Burroughs, knows that he is nothing and can do nothing apart from God: "A man who is little in his own eyes will account every affliction as little, and every mercy as great."

"There was never any man or woman so contented as a self-denying man or woman. No-one ever denied himself as much as Jesus Christ did: he gave his cheeks to the smiters, he opened not his mouth, he was as a lamb when he was led to the slaughter, he made no noise in the street. He denied himself above all, and was willing to empty himself, and so he was the most contented that ever any was in the world; and the nearer we come to learning to deny ourselves as Christ did, the more contented shall we be, and by knowing much of our own vileness we shall learn to justify God."

2. The Vanity of the Creature

"Many men think that when they are troubled and have not got contentment it is because they have but a little in the world, and that if they had more then they should be content. That is just as if a man were hungry, and to satisfy his craving stomach he should gape and hold open his mouth to take in the wind, and then should think that the reason why he is not satisfied is because he has not got enough of the wind; no, the reason is because the thing is not suitable to a craving stomach. Yet there is really the same madness in the world: the wind which a man takes in by gaping will as soon satisfy a craving stomach ready to starve, as all the comforts in the world can satisfy a soul who knows what true happiness means. You would be happy, and you seek after such and such comforts in the creature."

3. The "One Thing Necessary"

"Before, the soul sought after this and that, but now it says, I see that it is not necessary for me to be rich, but it is necessary for me to make my peace with God; it is not necessary that I should live a pleasurable life in this world, but it is absolutely necessary that I should have pardon of my sin; it is not necessary that I should have honor and preferment, but it is necessary that I should have God as my portion, and have my part in Jesus Christ, it is necessary that my soul should be saved in the day of Jesus Christ. The other things are pretty fine indeed, and I should be glad if God would give me them, a fine house, and income, and clothes, and advancement for my wife and children: these are comfortable things, but they are not the necessary things; I may have these and yet perish forever, but the other is absolutely necessary. No matter how poor I am, I may have what is absolutely necessary: thus Christ instructs the soul."

4. Our Relationship with the World

". . . we are all in this world but as seafaring men, tossed up and down on the waves of the sea of this world, and our haven is Heaven; here we are traveling, and our home is a distant home in another world."

"Consider what your condition is, you are pilgrims and strangers; so do not think to satisfy yourselves here. When a man comes into an inn and sees there a fair cupboard of plate, he is not troubled that it is not his own.- Why? Because he is going away. So let us not be troubled when we see that other men have great wealth, but we have not.-Why? We are going away to another country; you are, as it were, only lodging here, for a night."

5. All Good Things Come from God.

"If there is any good in wealth or in any comfort in this world, it is not so much that it pleases my sense or that it suits my body, but that it has reference to God, the first being, that by these creatures somewhat of God's goodness might be conveyed to me, and I may have a sanctified use of the creature to draw me nearer to God, that I may enjoy more of God, and be made more serviceable for his glory in the place where he has set me: this is the good of the creature"

"Suppose a man had great wealth only a few years ago, and now it is all gone-I would only ask this man, When you had your wealth, in what did you reckon the good of that wealth to consist? A carnal heart would say, Anybody might know that: it brought me in so much a year, and I could have the best fare, and be a man of repute in the place where I live, and men regarded what I said; I might be clothed as I would, and lay up portions for my children: the good of my wealth consisted in this. Now such a man never came into the school of Christ to know in what the good of an estate consisted, so no marvel if he is disquieted when he has lost his estate. But when a Christian, who has been in the school of Christ, and has been instructed in the art of contentment, has some wealth, he thinks, In that I have wealth above my brethren, I have an opportunity to serve God the better, and I enjoy a great deal of God's mercy conveyed to my soul through the creature, and hereby I am enabled to do a great deal of good: in this I reckon the good of my wealth. And now that God has taken this away from me, if he will be pleased to make up the enjoyment of himself some other way, will call me to honor him by suffering, and if I may do God as much service now by suffering, that is, by showing forth the grace of his Spirit in my sufferings as I did in prosperity, I have as much of God as I had before. So if I may be led to God in my low condition, as much as I was in my prosperous condition, I have as much comfort and contentment as I had before."

6. Knowing Your Own Heart

"It is similar to the case of a little child who is very awkward in the house, and when a stranger comes in he does not know what the matter is. Perhaps he will give the child a rattle, or a nut, or something of the sort to quiet it, but when the nurse comes she knows the temper and disposition of the child, and therefore knows how to calm it. It is just the same here: when we are strangers to our own hearts we are powerfully discontented, and do not know how to quiet ourselves, because we do not know wherein the disquiet lies, but if we are very well versed in our own hearts, when anything happens to unsettle us, we soon find out the cause of it, and so quickly become quiet."

"Suppose one of your little children of three or four were crying for the coat of her sister who is twelve or perhaps even twenty, and said, 'Why may not I have a coat as long as my sister's?' If she had, it would soon trip up her heels, and scratch her face. But when the child comes to understanding, she is not discontented because her coat is not as long as her sister's, but says, 'My coat fits me,' and therein she is content. So if we come to understanding in the school of Christ we will not cry, Why have I not got such wealth as others have?, but, The Lord sees that I am not able to manage it and I see it myself by knowing my own heart. There are some children who, if they see a knife, will cry for it because they do not know their strength and that they are not able to manage it, but you know they are not able to manage it and therefore you will not give it them, and when they come to sufficient understanding to know that they are not able to manage it, they will not cry for it. Similarly we would not cry for some things if we knew that we were not able to manage them. When you vex and fret for what you have not got, I may say to you as Christ said, 'You know not of what spirit you are.'"

7. The Burden of Prosperity

"I cannot think of anything better to compare it with than to traveling in some open country, where round about is very fair and sandy ground, and you see a town a great way off in a valley and you thin, Oh how well situated that town is; but when you come and ride into the town, you ride through a dirty lane and through a lot of fearfully dirty holes. You could not see the dirty lane and holes when you were two or three miles off. In the same way, sometimes we look upon the prosperity of men and think, this man lives well and comfortably, but if we only knew what troubles he has in his family, in his possessions, in his dealings with men, we would not think his position so happy. A man may have a very fine new shoe, but nobody knows where it pinches him except the one who has it on; so you think certain men are happy, but they may have many troubles that you little think of."

8. The Dread of Being Given Over

"Think thus: Lord, you have laid an afflicted condition upon me, but, Lord, you have not given me the plague of a hard heart."

How To Attain Contentment

Contenting the Heart in Any Affliction

1. Consider the greatness of mercies and the lowliness of things we lack.

"The things we lack, if we are godly, are things of very small moment in comparison to the things we have, and the things we have are things of very great moment. For the most part, the things for the want of which people are discontented and murmur are such things as reprobates have, or may have. Why should you be troubled so much for the want of something which a man or woman may have and yet be a reprobate? as, that your wealth is not so great, your health not so perfect, your credit not so much; you may have all those things and still be a reprobate! Now will you be discontented for what a reprobate may have?"

"It is a saying of Luther: 'The sea of God's mercies should swallow up all our particular afflictions.'"

2. Consider the way of God towards all creatures.

"There is a vicissitude of all things in the world: the sun does not shine always on us here, but darkness comes after light. Now seeing God has so ordered things with all creatures, that there is a mixture of conditions, why should we think it much that there should be a vicissitude of conditions with us, sometimes in a way of prosperity, and sometimes in a way of affliction?"

3. Consider we have but little time in this world.

"If you are godly you will never suffer except in this world. . . These afflictions are but for a moment . . . Consider, we have not long to live, it may be over before our days are at an end. But supposing it should not, death will put an end to all, all afflictions and troubles will soon be at an end by death."

4. Consider life before your conversion.

"If you yourselves were content with the world without grace, there is reason you should be content with grace without the world. Certainly there is infinitely more reason. You see that many men of the world have a kind of contentment; they do not murmur or repine with the world, though they have no interest in God and Christ. Then cannot you have as much contentment with God and Christ, without the world, as they can, with the world, without God and Christ?"

5. Consider what you've done when given your heart's desires before.

"When God has let you have your heart's desire, what have you done with your heart's desire? You have not been any the better for it; it may be you have been worse many times. Therefore let that satisfy you-I meet with crosses, but when I had contentment and all things coming in, God got but little or no glory from me, and therefore let that be a means now to quiet me in my discontented thoughts."

6. Consider God's goodness to you in affliction.

"[Y]ou yourselves have found it so by experience, that God has made former afflictions to be great benefits to you, and that you would not have been without them, or without the good that came by them for a world, such experiences will exceedingly quiet the heart and bring it to contentment. Therefore think thus with yourself: Lord, why may not this affliction work as great a good upon me as afflictions have done before?"

Directions for Working Our Hearts Toward Contentment

1. Temper the heart by God's grace.

"All the rules and helps in the world will do us little good unless we get a good temper within our hearts. You can never make a ship go steady, by propping it outside; you know there must be ballast within the ship, to make it go steady. And so, there is nothing outside us that can keep our hearts in a steady, constant way, but what is within us: grace is within the soul, and it will do this."

2. Do not take in more of the world than God calls you to.

"Do not be greedy of taking in a great deal of the world, for if a man goes among thorns, when he may take a simpler way, he has no reason to complain that he is pricked with them."

3. Make your calling in life sure.

"Though it is the least business, be sure of your call to it; then, whatever you meet with, you may quiet your heart with this: I know I am where God would have me. Nothing in the world will quiet the heart so much as this: when I meet with any cross, I know I am where God would have me, in my place and calling; I am about the work that God has set me. Oh, this will quiet and content you when you meet with trouble."

4. Walk in obedience in your calling.

"Now be willing to be a vassal to God, to be absolutely under God's command, and then, I say, all things in the world are under you. 'All things are yours,' says the Apostle, 'life and death, every thing is yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.' All things in the world are serviceable to that man or woman who is serviceable to God.

5. Exercise much faith.

"Exercise faith, not only in the promise that all shall work together for good to them that fear God, but likewise exercise faith in God himself; as well as in his Word, in the attributes of God. It was a saying of Socrates, a heathen: 'Since God is so careful for you, what need you be careful for any thing yourselves?'- it was a strange saying for a heathen."

"Therefore, when reason can go no higher, let faith get on the shoulders of reason and say, 'I see land though reason cannot see it, I see good that will come out of all this evil.' Exercise faith by often resigning yourself to God, by giving yourself up to God and his ways. The more you in a believing way surrender up yourself to God, the more quiet and peace you will have."

6. Fix your mind on things above.

"Those who are bitten or struck by a snake, it is because they tread on the ground; if they could be lifted up above the earth they need never fear being stung by the snakes which are crawling underneath. So I may compare the sinful distemper of murmuring, and the temptations and evils that come from that, to snakes that crawl up and down below; but if we could get higher we should not be stung by them. A heavenly conversation is the way to contentment.

7. Do not promise greatness for your future self.

"So if we would not pitch our thoughts high, and think that we might have what others have, so much and so much, we would not be troubled so much when we meet with disappointments. So Paul says, 'If we have but meat and drink and clothing, let us therewith be content.' He did not soar too high aloft. Those who look at high things in the world meet with disappointments, and so they come to be discontented. Be as high as you will in spiritual meditations; God gives liberty there to any one of you to be as high as you will, above angels. But, for your outward estate, God would not have you aim at high things."

8. Mortify yourself to the world.

"It is very noteworthy in those soldiers who came to break the bones of Christ, that they broke the legs of one who was crucified with him, and of the other, but when they came to Christ, they found he was dead, and so they did not break his legs; there was a providence in it, to fulfill a prophecy, but because they found he was dead, they did not break his bones. Let afflictions and troubles find you with a mortified heart to the world, and they will not break your bones; those whose bones are broken by crosses and afflictions are those who are alive to the world, but are not dead to the world. But no afflictions or troubles will break the bones of one who has a mortified heart and is dead to the world; that is, they will not be very grievous or painful to such a one as is mortified to the world."

9. See God's ways as *good* to you.

"Thus, when an affliction befalls you, many good senses may be made of God's works towards you. You should think thus: it may be, God intends only to try me by this, it may be, God saw my heart was too much set on the creature, and so he intends to show me what is in my heart, it may be, that God saw that if my wealth did continue, I should fall into sin, that the better my position were the worse my soul would be, it may be, God intended only to exercise some grace, it may be, God intends to prepare me for some great work which he has for me: thus you should reason."