

Phil 4:4

Title: I would be content if only I had...

1984, the singer Madonna released a song called “Material Girl,” which became her signature.

“the boy with the cold hard cash Is always Mister Right,
'cause we are Living in a material world
And I am a material girl

According to Madonna, material wealth is the key to happiness “because we live in a material world.”

When Deb and I went to Tanzania in 2010 we met people with a yearly income of roughly \$200 (compared to \$40,000 in U.S.) I have been to several countries and have met people who we would consider to be the materially poor. Interestingly enough, in all the places I have been, I have discovered something very interesting. “Being poor” is not the same as “being unhappy.” Not only that but, “being rich” is not the same as “being happy.” There are those who are materially poor but are content. And there are those who are materially rich but are NOT content with life. Being content with your life, is not equivalent to being materially rich. While this might very well be a material world, its material riches do not guarantee happiness.

In our epistle lesson from St. Paul to the Philippians, he tells us

“I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret [however] of being content in any and every situation”

We may know what it means to be happy. We may know what it means to be sad, anxious or mad. But what does it mean “to be content?” Or more to the point - Do you know the secret of being content in plenty or in need? Now, being content does not mean you don’t care about “what happens in life” or “pretending” that everything is fine... That is not true contentment.

Rather,

“true contentment” is
knowing that all your desires have been met...

“feeling” that
all your desires have been met...

“having a mind” which is not
stressed out by the problems of life.

That’s what contentment is.

True contentment is an anchor
amid the storms of life.

It is a power which protects us
from the temptations
which bombard us
in this world.

So where does True Contentment come from? Some people believe that “contentment” comes from “having one’s life under control.” They seek contentment by being financially secure, socially secure, emotionally controlled. Some say contentment comes from having control over their life. They say “I will reach contentment. if only I could get this one last bit of my life under control.” Others say contentment comes from “having every major desire met.” For people like that their life is nothing more than seeking after one personal pleasure after the next. They say “I will reach contentment after I experience this one last pleasure in my life.”

Yet, no matter the definition, of contentment one of the things which is constant IN THIS WORLD is that “we don’t always have it.” “We don’t always have contentment.” We may want it, but we don’t always have it. Life is not perfect. Life is never exactly how we want it. We constantly struggle with time management, to balance our work life and our home life, and for many of us, our church life. We struggle with balancing our finances. We struggle with relationships with our spouse with friends with neighbors. We struggle with raising children. So many things in our life are not ideal, and so we are not content.

Not only that but many times we don’t have contentment is because people can rob us of our contentment. People can rob us of contentment by putting their expectations upon us. We are constantly bombarded by expectations about how our life is but also how our life should be.

And the struggle to balance our own expectations of life with the expectations of our spouse, our children, our church, our jobs, and even of God, can rob us of contentment.

So some people simply accept that contentment is impossible. They believe that one has to accept “whatever happens in life” with equanimity: that is one should accept both the good things and bad equally and not care. They go so far as to say “there is no good or bad.” In the 60’s there was a very popular book called, "I’m OK - You’re OK" by Eric Berne. It sought to solve the contentment problem by removing all expectations. In a nutshell, his theory was that all the ills of the world stemmed from our lack of contentment with ourselves and with each other, His solution I’m ok -you’re ok. His theory was that every human being is born OK. If we would learn how to accept one another by realizing that basically I’m okay - You’re okay, it would solve many of our problems. That sounds good. Especially the part about accepting one another.

However, I have a problem. I have a problem with accomplishing the “accepting one another” part. For example, what happens if YOU are not ok? What happens if, in fact, you are not paddling with all oars in the water. Simply pretending that that you are ok is no help, if, in fact, there is something broken in you. It’s not even that simple. As it turns out, the reality is that, we are all a mixture, a potpourri. Within each of us is a mixture of ok stuff and not ok stuff. On average I may be ok. But within me are things which are not Ok. Within me are things which cause me to want to hurt other people, especially if they hurt me. Within me is my ego which wants to be the center of my life, which wants to be selfish. Oh! don’t get me wrong I got good stuff in me too. But I am both sinner and saint. Within me are the seeds of evil and sin which every once in a while sprout out. Trying to say “I’m okay - you’re okay” is insufficient because there are some days where I am NOT okay. I am bad! So “I’m Okay-You’re okay” is no permanent solution. It requires pretending. And “Pretending” does not bring “true contentment.”

Pretending everything is fine, doesn’t bring contentment because it is precisely the lack of contentment which causes all the problems in the world. Since the dawn of time “lack of contentment” has been the scourge which drives all sorts of evil in our world. It is lack of contentment which drives a married person to leave their spouse It is lack of contentment which drives a person to use terrorism to change the world. It is lack of contentment which drives a nation to declare war and take control of another. “The Lack of true contentment,” is in fact, the source of all the world’s problems. To ignore it, to pretend it is not there, is to allow yourself to become a victim of it.

So, what do we do about it? What does God tells us about it? Well first of all Scripture tells us why we lack true contentment. We lack true contentment because our lives are not focused on the source of true contentment and peace – God. You see, before the fall of Adam and Eve, there was true contentment. Adam and Eve were naked and they were not ashamed. Their life was defined by God, who was the center. They worshipped God. They were content. But when Adam and Eve turned their backs on God through disobedience, they broke their relationship with Him, You see, “Mankind” was created to worship something. God.

Mankind was created to define their lives by God... to have God upon the altar of their hearts. So, when their relationship with God was broken, the altar of their heart became empty.

Since the Fall, Mankind's efforts to seek contentment, have been nothing more than vain efforts to fill the altar of their hearts. Because we had lost our relationship with God, because we were blind to God, we attempted to fill the empty altar of our hearts with the things of this world.... we looked to each other, to things, to our work. And this is where it got worse... As we placed the things of this world on the altar of our hearts as we defined ourselves by the world's expectations... we became burdened by the world's expectations. In seeking to be perfect in an imperfect world, with imperfect sinful bodies our contentment with ourselves, our contentment with our lives, was lost. That is why since the fall of Adam, true contentment has been lost to this world. This is why the lack of contentment continues to be the source of so many evils in this world. "Lack of contentment" is a constant in this world, and there seems to be nothing we can do about it... nothing, at least, of this world.

In our lesson from Philippians St. Paul hints of a solution. He hints of a secret to being content. Philippians, chap 4, verse 11 ...

"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances."

Cool!!! St. Paul says he knows what it means to be content. But interestingly enough, it is not because he has had all his earthly desires met. It is not because he is in control of his life. It is not because he decided he just wasn't going to care anymore. In verse 12 he says quite the opposite.

¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty.

Paul has felt the pain of need. Paul understands this sinful world which randomly brings good times and bad times into our lives. It is despite these things... it is despite the fact that his earthly needs are not met... it is despite the fact that he is not in control of his life, that St. Paul can say

"I am content."

Continuing Verse 12

"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."

St. Paul has the secret which this world has been searching for since the fall of Adam. The secret of true Contentment. Verse 13, St Paul gives that secret.

¹³ I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

The key to Paul's contentment is in "the one who gives him strength." the one, the person, who gives him strength – God. St. Paul found the true object of contentment, the true person to place upon the altar of his heart - Jesus.

Because of Jesus, God now offers us His strength. God now offers us lives of true contentment. Because Jesus died for our sins, the sins which separated us from God, which blinded us to God have been removed. For those who put their faith in Christ, the altar of their heart is now filled with God. Their focus is now on God. God is now the true center and definition of our lives. And as we center our focus upon God, when we look to God -"true contentment" will come. It comes because we place our lives in God's hands. We put our expectations in God's hands. With true contentment we will also be able to say with St. Paul

"I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

Now I want to make a point. This does not mean that if I have my focus on God, all things will start working perfectly for me... and that it will only be as all things start working perfectly for me that I will be content. No, rather, this is the key. This is what Paul meant by ¹³ I can do everything through him who gives me strength. Paul's secret? Be content with your life. Be content with who you are, not because you have everything you need, not because you can meet everyone's expectations. Be content because God is content with you "just as you are." You are valuable to Jesus "just as you are." You are loved by God "just as you are." Do not seek after contentment. You already have it. Rather simply live out the life which you already have as a child of God. You have the power of true contentment within you.

The power you have, does not keep you away from all the problems of this world. The power you have does not bring you all the material desires of your heart. The power you have brings contentment not because of having the things you need. Rather it brings contentment despite the problems, despite the lack of material things. It brings contentment because we know that God has provided all that we need in this world. God has provided all that we need in this and the next. This is the power, which can keep you firm in times of trouble and suffering. You have the power of true contentment within you. Live it out. Amen