

Secrets of Contentment

by J.R. Miller

The secret of contentment is to find peace and tranquility in any state, regardless of external circumstances, by following the principles of patient submission, moderating desires, and living for the higher things of life.

Scripture: Philippians 4:11

Topics: "Contentment", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes the importance of contentment, illustrating that it is a learned behavior rather than a natural state. He reflects on Paul's declaration of contentment while imprisoned, highlighting that true contentment does not equate to complacency but rather a deep-seated peace that comes from within, independent of external circumstances. Miller encourages believers to moderate their desires, accept unavoidable hardships, and focus on spiritual growth to cultivate a heart of contentment. He warns against the dangers of discontent, which can sour one's spirit and affect those around them. Ultimately, he asserts that true contentment is found in a relationship with Christ and living for eternal realities.

Transcript

"I am glad to think

I am not bound to make the world go right,

But only to discover, and to do with cheerful heart,

The work which God appoints."

Someone has said, that if men were to be saved by contentment, instead of faith in Christ, most people would be lost. Yet contentment is a duty. It is also possible. There was one man at least who said, and said it very honestly, "I have learned in whatever state I am in, therein to be content." His words have special value, too, when we remember in what circumstances they were written. They were dated in a prison, when the writer was wearing a chain in prison. It is easy enough to say such things in the summer days of prosperity; but to say them amid trials and adversities, requires a real experience of victorious living.

But what did Paul mean when he said, "I am content"? He certainly did not mean that he was satisfied. Contentment is not an indolent giving up to circumstances. It does not come through the dying out of desire and aspiration in the heart. There is a condition of mind which some people suppose to be devout

submission to God's will, which is anything but Christlike. We are to make the most of our life. We are not to yield irresolutely and weakly to everything which opposes us. Ofttimes we are to resist and conquer what seem to be impossibilities. We are never to be satisfied with our attainments, or our achievements, however fine they may be. Satisfaction is undivine; it is a mark of death, not of life. Paul never was satisfied. He lived to the very last day of his life--looking forward and not back--forgetting things which behind--and stretching forward to things yet before, eager to do more and achieve more. When he said he had learned to be content, he did not mean that he had ceased to aspire and strive.

The original word, scholars tell us, contains a fine sense which does not come out in the English translation. It means self-sufficing. Paul, as a Christian man, had in himself all that he needed to give him tranquility and peace, and therefore he was not dependent upon any external circumstances. Wherever he went, there was in him a competence, a fountain of supply, a self-sufficing. This is the true secret of Christian contentment, wherever it is found. We cannot make our own circumstances; we cannot keep away the sickness, the pain, the sorrow, the misfortune from our life; yet as Christians we are meant to live in any and all experiences in unbroken peace, in sweet restfulness of soul.

How may this unbroken contentment be obtained? Paul's description of his own life, gives us a hint as to the way he reached it. He says, "I have learned to be content." It is no small comfort to us common people--to get this from such a man. It tells us that even with him it was not always thus; that at first he probably chafed amid discomforts, and had to "learn" to be contented in trial. It did not come naturally to him, any more than it does to the rest of us, to have peace in the heart, in the time of external strife.

Nor did this beautiful way of living come to him at once, as a divine gift, when he became a Christian. He was not miraculously helped to acquire contentment. It was not a special power or grace granted to him as an apostle. He tells us plainly in his old age--that he had "learned" it. This means that he was not always able to say, "I am content in any state." This was an attainment of his later years; and he reached it by struggle and by discipline, by learning in the school of Christ, by experience, just as all of us have to learn it, if we ever do, and as any of us may learn it if we will.

Surely everyone who desires to grow into spiritual beauty should seek to learn this lesson. Discontent is a miserable fault. It grieves God, for it springs from a lack of faith in him. It destroys one's own heart-peace--discontented people are always unhappy. It disfigures beauty of character. It sours the temper, ruffles the calm of sweet life, and tarnishes the loveliness of the spirit. It even works out through the flesh, and spoils the beauty of the fairest face. To have a transfigured face, one must have heaven in one's heart. Just in proportion as the lesson is learned, are the features brightened by the outshining of the indwelling peace. Besides all this, discontent casts shadows on the lives of others. One discontented person in a family, often makes a whole household wretched. If not for our own sake, then, we ought at least for the sake of our friends--to learn to be contented. We have no right to cast shadows on other lives--by our miserable complainings and discontents.

But how can we learn contentment? One step toward it is patient submission to unavoidable ills and hardships. No earthly lot is perfect. No mortal ever yet in this world found a set of circumstances without some drawback. Sometimes, however, it lies in our power to remove the discomfort. Much of our hardship is of our own making. Much of it would require but a little energy on our own part to cure it. We surely are very foolish, if day after day we live on amid ills and frets--which we might change for comforts if we would. All removable troubles we ought therefore to remove. Too many people are indolent in resisting hard circumstances and conditions. They give up too readily to what they miscall divine providences. Obstacles

are not always meant to block our way; oftentimes they are intended to inspire us to courage and effort, and thus to bring out our hidden strength. We must not be too quick in submitting to hardness, nor too limp in yielding to circumstances. Some of the things which we find in our way--we are to lift out of our way.

But there are trials which we cannot change into pleasures, burdens which we cannot lay down, crosses which we must continue to carry, thorns in the flesh which must remain with their rankling pain. When we have such trials, why should we not sweetly accept them as part of God's best way with us? Discontent never made a rough path smoother, a heavy burden lighter, a bitter cup less bitter, a dark way brighter, a sore sorrow less sore. It only makes matters worse. One who accepts with patience that which he cannot change--has learned one secret of victorious living.

Another part of the lesson, is that we can learn to moderate our desires. "Having food and clothing," says Paul again, "let us be content with these." Very much of our discontent arises from envy of those who seem to be more favored than ourselves. Many people lose most of the comfort out of their own lot--in coveting the finer, more luxurious things which some neighbor has. Yet if they knew the whole story of the life they envy for its greater prosperity, they probably would not exchange for it their own lowlier life, with its more humble circumstances. Or if they could make the exchange, it is not likely they would find half so much real happiness in the other position as they would have enjoyed in their own.

Contentment does not dwell so often in palaces--as in the homes of the humble. The tall peaks rise higher, and are more conspicuous--but the winds smite them more fiercely than they do the quiet valleys. And surely the lot in life which God makes for us--is always the best which could be made for us for the time. He knows better than we do--what our true needs are. The real cause of our discontent is not in our circumstances; if it were, a change of circumstances might cure it. It is in ourselves, and wherever we go we shall carry our discontent heart with us. The only cure which will affect anything--must be the curing of the fever of discontent in us.

Envious desires for other people's places which seem finer than our own--prevent our getting the best blessings and good out of our own. Trying to grasp the things which are beyond our reach--we leave unseen, unappreciated, untouched, and despised--the many sweet bits of happiness which lie close about us. Someone says, "Stretching his hand to catch the stars--man forgets the flowers at his feet, so beautiful, so fragrant, so multitudinous, and so various." A fine secret of contentment, lies in finding and extracting all the pleasure we can get from the things we have--the common, everyday things, while we enter upon no mad, vain chase after impossible dreams. In whatever state we are in--we may find therein enough for our need.

If we would learn the lesson of contentment, we must also train ourselves to live for the higher things of life. One of the ancient wise men, having learned that a storm had destroyed his merchant ships, thus sweeping away all his fortune, said, "It is just as well, for now I can give up my mind more fully to study." He had other and higher sources of enjoyment than his merchandise, and felt the loss of his ships no more than manhood feels the loss of childhood's toys. He was but a heathen philosopher; we are Christians. He had only his studies to occupy his thought when his property was gone; we have all the blessed things of God's love. No earthly misfortune can touch the wealth which a Christian holds in the divine promises and hopes.

Just in the measure, therefore, in which we learn to live for spiritual and unseen eternal realities--do we find contentment amid earth's trials and losses. If we would live to please God, to build up Christlike

character in ourselves, and to lay up treasure in heaven--we shall not depend for happiness, on the way things go with us here, nor on the measure of temporal goods we have. The earthly desires are crowded out by the higher and spiritual desires. We can do without childhood's toys--when we have manhood's better possessions. We need the toys of this world less--as we get more of God and heaven into our hearts.

There is a modern story of a merchant who was devoted to noble purposes in life, who was determined to be a man free from bondage to the baser things. One day a ship of his, which was coming homeward was delayed. He became anxious, and the next day was yet more troubled, and the third day still more. Then he came to himself, awaking to his true condition of bondage to earthly things, and said, "Is it possible that I have come to love money for itself, and not for its nobler uses?" Taking the value of the ship and its cargo, he gave it to charities, not because he wished to be rid of the money--but because only thus could he get the conquest over himself, holding his love of money under his feet. He was learning well one secret of contentment.

Paul knew this secret. He cheerfully gave up all that this world had for him. Money had no power over him. He knew how to live in plenty; but he did not fret when poverty came instead. He was content in any trial, because earth meant so little--and Christ meant so much to him. He did not need the things he did not have. He was not made poor by the things he lost. He was not vexed by the sufferings he had to endure, because the sources of his life were in heaven, and could not be touched by earthly experiences of pain or loss.

These are hints of the way we may learn in whatever state we are, therein to be content. Surely the lesson is worth learning! One year of sweet contentment, amid earth's troublous scenes is better than a whole lifetime of vexed, restless discontent. The lesson can be learned, too, by anyone who is truly Christ's disciple; for did not the Master say, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you"?

The artist painted life as a dark, storm-swept sea, covered with wrecks. Then out of the midst of the wild waves, he made to rise a great rock, in a cleft of which, high up, amid herbage and flowers, he painted a dove sitting quietly on her nest. It is a picture of Christian peace in the midst of this world's strifes and storms. In the cleft of the Rock, is the home of contentment.

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