

Contentment Turns a Wasteland into a Garden

To be well skilled in the mystery of Christian contentment is the duty, glory, and excellency of a Christian, says Jeremiah Burroughs. He says contentment is as valuable as a rare jewel.

I wouldn't call myself a "jewel person." But one of my closest friends is into jewels. She loves diamonds. And for her tenth wedding anniversary I remember she really wanted a ring with diamonds all the way around. Just to prove how *not* into jewels I am, I had to google, "what do you call a ring with diamonds all around," to learn that it's called **an eternity ring**. And her husband did buy her an eternity ring, and he gave it to her while he was dying of cancer. In God's providence, the circumstances made her ring more valuable to her than the mere value of the diamonds.

It was the giver of the ring that made it so valuable to my friend. And similarly for us, it is the One who is the source of our contentment that makes it a precious jewel. God commands us, in Hebrews 13:5, to be content with what we have, and the reason we can do that, he says, is because we have him.

"Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"

God is my contentment!

God is our Contentment

Again, Psalm 73:25 hits the bullseye for us:
Whom have I in heaven but you? And besides you I desire nothing on earth.

That's real contentment. That's a contentment that nothing can ever take away from us.

Contentment comes from nothing less than being well-pleased with God, satisfied in God – treasuring him more than anything else – and therefore (as we'll see later), deeply satisfied with his will for us. If God is all we need, if God is enough, then we will always be content, because we always have God.

But if we subscribe to God+, if we need God plus anything else, that is the way of discontentment. If we need God plus “just a little bit more,” like Rockefeller, we are on the wrong road. If we need God plus a new phone, or an easier life, or a different (fill-in-the-blank), we will never be content. **God promises us nothing less or more than himself. Anything less than God will not do, and there is nothing greater than God.**

The Bible is the story of Jesus who “suffered once for sin, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18). Jesus didn't suffer to bring us to health and wealth; or to bring us a comfortable and easy life; or to bring us the American dream. He came to bring us to God.

J.I. Packer says, people who really know God “never brood on might-have-beens; they never think of the things they have missed, only of what they have gained.”

I remember a day last fall, in my daily Bible reading I came to Psalm 116. So I started reading verse 1, “I love the Lord, because he has heard –” and I just stopped. I was already amazed – our God hears! I love the Lord because he heard! The rest of the verse says, “my voice and my pleas for mercy.”

Take a minute, and fill out Psalm 116:1 for yourself. In your notes, write I love the Lord, because _____ . And fill in the blank. [1 minute].

Just think if we took the time to read everything that was just written down in this room. This is our God! We have ten thousand reasons to love him. When he gives us himself, he gives us the pearl beyond price!

This is Paul's heart in Philippians 3:8, “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ.”

If we look at the whole book of Philippians, Paul's declaration of contentment in chapter 4 is sort of like the cherry on top of a hundred-layer cake, with layer upon layer saturated with the worth of Jesus.

Look at some of these passages with me:

- 1:1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus
- 1:8 For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.
- 1:13 ...it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ
- 1:21 For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.
- 1:26 ...so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again
- 2:5 Have this mind in yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus
- 2:10-11 At the name of Jesus, every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father!
- 2:21 ...for they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ
- 3:3 For we are the true circumcision, who worship by the spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus...
- 3:8 ...I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord
- 3:14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus
- 3:20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ
- 4:7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
- 4:13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me
- 4:19 And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus
- 4:23 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit

I counted, and in the book of Philippians, Paul refers to Jesus 48 times, and that doesn't include pronouns. There are 104 verses in Philippians. That's just about every other verse, on average.

It could not be more clear what Paul's treasure is, and where his treasure is, there is his heart, also. In 1:23 he says, "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better."

Sisters, Jesus is not the means to some other end for us. He's not the thing we use in order to get contentment, like contentment is the ultimate thing we're aiming for, like as long as we're content, as long as we're feeling satisfied, then it doesn't really matter if we have Jesus.

He is the end, not the means! He's the aim! He's our goal. He is our treasure. When we get Jesus we get contentment, because he is the one thing that can fill our heart. Nothing else will do. We were made for him.

Turn with me to Isaiah 55. We'll start in verse 1.

Isaiah 55:1-3a

55

"Come, everyone who thirsts,
 come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
 come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
 without money and without price.

2

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
 and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,
 and delight yourselves in rich food.

3

Incline your ear, and **come to me**;
 hear, that your soul may live;
and I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
 my steadfast, sure love for David.

Notice in Isaiah 55:2, discontentment is the result of looking for satisfaction in the wrong things. We labor for things that don't satisfy, and so we aren't satisfied. We're still hungry. We want more.

The problem is not that our cravings are too high; they're too low. When we work for what isn't "bread," that's like a starving man working for rocks as his wages. Rocks won't satisfy his hungry belly. That's why God says in verse 3, "Come to me!" and in verse 6, "Seek me!"

St. Augustine, writing in the 4th century, wrote, "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Jesus, then, is not our ticket to contentment. He *is* our contentment. And when we are content, this actually fits with the reality of our redemption in Jesus. This is what Paul is talking about in Phil 1:27 when he says, "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ."

He doesn't mean that we follow rules in order to earn Jesus' love, to be "worthy" of Jesus, as though we deserve him. We know that's not true because we're never worthy of the gospel, in that sense. We never deserve God's grace. He means that our lives should fit with who Jesus is. Our lives should be congruent with his all-satisfying worth.

If Jesus is all that we need, and we have him, then we Christians should be the most content people in the whole world.

When Jesus is our treasure, it changes our whole life from the inside out. That's why Burroughs calls contentment a heart-business.

Contentment Is a Heart-Business

Burroughs calls contentment: a "sweet, inward, heart-thing; a work of the Spirit within doors," a "heart-business."

He compares it to a box of precious ointment that needs to be opened up and applied to our hearts.

We'll read his definition and then take our time looking at the different parts, in good puritan style.

Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and takes complacency [deep satisfaction] in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.

Burroughs defines contentment as both an inward attitude and an outward response. So, attitude and response.

Inward Attitude:

Part 1: "Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit..."

Inward

When we talk about attitude, we're talking about something inward. Contentment begins in the heart. That's what he means when he calls it "inward" and "a frame of spirit." He's talking about our character, which concerns our heart.

We know this from Jesus's teaching. Jesus says good hearts are like good trees that produce good fruit, but bad hearts bear bad fruit. Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks (Mt 12:34; Matt 7:16-18; Matt 15:16-20). In Matt 7:21, Jesus says the one who bears good fruit – the one with a good heart – is "the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." Keep that in mind for later – because he's going to connect contentment and God's will.

Contentment is a heart business. And what we're aiming for is not just an occasional spurt of contentment, like we might occasionally floss our teeth (and hope the dentist doesn't question us too carefully). We're aiming for a relatively constant attitude.

Burroughs calls it the habit of the heart. We don't call someone generous who one time dropped their pocket change into the Salvation Army bucket at Christmas time. Someone generous is "given to generosity," it's the way they always are. Someone who flosses their teeth every day can honestly answer the

dentist, “Yes, I am a flosser.” So a content heart is given to contentment. Contentment is its normal posture. Its habit is to be content.

Burroughs describes it as a habit of judging, thinking and submitting. Contentment **judges** that everything comes to us from the hand of God, which leads us to **think rightly** of those things as God’s best for us, which leads us to **submit** our will to the hand of God in all things. This is what the contented heart does over and over and over, about everything.

This came from God. So this is best for me. So I will submit to God’s hand. Judge. Think. Submit. Repeat.

And this isn’t a bitter or begrudging habit. It is sweet, quiet, and gracious.

Sweet

Amy Carmichael said that a cup brimful of sweet water cannot spill even one drop of bitter water, however suddenly jolted (*If*, 46).

What a beautiful and convicting description! This is the sweetness of contentment. All the way down, there is nothing sour or bitter.

Bitterness looks back at our past with resentment. Sourness judges our present and our future with resentment. But contentment is sweet, because it looks at past, present, and future with satisfaction – not because it has been easy, or all sunshine and daisies, but because all has come to us from God, and as C.S. Lewis puts it in *Perelandra*, “All his biddings are joys.”

Quiet

A content heart is quiet. First, let’s talk about what that doesn’t mean.

Quietness doesn’t mean denial of the reality of our situation or circumstances. This is important for us to understand, because one of the hardest places for us to be content is in our suffering, when our circumstances are hard. Contentment is not denial.

A quiet heart doesn't say, "It's not bad," about something that is bad. Jesus doesn't say, "If anyone would come after me, do not call your cross a cross." What does he say? He says, "*Take up* your cross and follow me."

Quietness doesn't mean we don't groan and bring our complaint to God, or even to friends. A quiet heart groans but *it doesn't grumble*. Groaning complains *to* God, but grumbling complains *about* God. Groaning says, "God, this is hard. Help me bear fruit in this hard soil." Grumbling expresses bitterness that there *is* a trial. It says, "Join me in telling God that this isn't fair."

Quietness also doesn't mean we don't use God-given means to get out of hard situations. It doesn't mean we stay put and do nothing. No! If we're on a sinking ship, we're meant to get in the life boat! But we never use sinful means to get out of a situation. Desperate times do not call for desperate measures, when those measures are against God's will.

So, quietness doesn't mean we deny the reality of our situation, or that we don't groan to God, or that we never seek a way out of our circumstances.

Quietness describes the peace and rest that comes when trust God and submit to his will. Quietness doesn't grumble or rebel, like Israel in the wilderness. Contentment is quiet, like Psalm 131, like a weaned child with its mother. We know we're in our loving Father's hands all the time, so we're quiet.

Gracious

When Burroughs says contentment is "gracious" he means it comes from God's grace to us. It is the ongoing work in our hearts of salvation by grace through faith. We won't find it on our own. It is a gift of God, and one that he loves to give.

That's why to grow in contentment, we need to get as close to God as we can. We don't need more stuff. We don't need different circumstances. We need God. That means we don't pursue contentment standing on our feet, but on our knees in prayer. We don't buy a copy of "Contentment for Dummies" or look it up on Wiki-how. We immerse ourselves in God's word and God's people.

The inward attitude of contentment is sweet, quiet, and gracious. What is the outward response?

Outward Response

It **“freely submits to, and takes complacency in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.”**

Here’s how I translate that into modern English:

“Freely submitting to and taking deep satisfaction in God’s wise and fatherly will in every condition.”

Ladies, this right here is the X on our treasure map. This is where knowing God shows up in our daily lives. This is where contentment lives: right in the center of God’s will.

“God’s wise and fatherly will” is the theological center of contentment. God’s will is his sovereign decree, working all things according to his eternal purposes. As his children, we experience this as his providential care for us, as his eternal purposes worked out in the smallest details of our daily lives. God’s providence in our lives means that nothing happens by chance. Nothing is meaningless or purposeless. And therefore, nothing is wasted. Everything will bear fruit, according to God’s plan.

The Heidelberg Catechism question 27 asks “What do you understand by the providence of God?”

A: Providence is the almighty and ever-present power of God by which God upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty – all things, in fact, come to us not by chance, by his fatherly hand.

Therefore, says Paul, I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I trust God’s wise and fatherly hand.

If we do not learn to embrace God’s will for us *no matter what*, we will never learn contentment.

Charles Spurgeon said “When God’s will and our will are contrary to one another, we may be sure that there is something amiss with us. We are never right till

God's will becomes our will and we can honestly say, "The will of the Lord be done."

Yesterday we talked about the two gardeners, Discontent and Content. What those two gardeners see when they look at the "plot of ground" they have been given is determined by just how much they embrace or reject God's will for them.

When we struggle with contentment, we can tell ourselves whatever we want, but the truth is, we are struggling to accept God's will *for* our daily lives and to do his will *in* our daily lives.

The skill and mystery and beauty of contentment is to **want what we have been given, because we can do God's will in the circumstances we have and with the things that we have. And that kind of contentment turns a wasteland into a garden.**

The way we accept God's will is important, our manner matters. Burroughs says we do it "freely" and with "deep satisfaction."

"Deep satisfaction" means we don't just shrug our shoulders and say "Well, God's strongest, so I guess he calls the shots." Contentment goes deeper. Our hearts embrace God's will because we know it is better than ours. We want the surgeon performing open heart surgery, not the clerk at the desk.

Freely means we're not forced. We're not gritting our teeth. We're not making God pry open our fingers. When I think of "freely," I think of Hwin, in *The Horse and His Boy*. Hwin is a horse, and when she meets Aslan for the first time, she walks up to him trembling and says, "Please...you're so beautiful. You can eat me if you like. I'd sooner be eaten by you than fed by anyone else" (201).

Hwin responds to Aslan the way we should respond to God, with absolute love and surrender.

What can make it hard for us to surrender is that we feel there is so much at stake. After all, this could be painful. We could lose everything we love, everything that means so much to us. We could die – Hwin knew that.

I'm going to do a little exegesis of *The Horse and His Boy* here. I think that Hwin was able to surrender to Aslan because she saw that he was beautiful – she saw his glory – and when she *knew* him she knew that she belonged to him.

We surrender to God because we belong to him – we're his, we are not our own. And it is only in surrendering ourselves to him that we get our life back the way it was meant to be.

That's why Jesus says in Matt. 16:24, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

C.S. Lewis, at the end of *Mere Christianity*, says:

There must be a real giving up of the self...Submit to death, death of your ambition and favourite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end: submit with every fibre of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in (227).

We will never be able to surrender to God like this unless we know that he loves us. His will comes with his smile. He is wise and he is our Father. He does not take from us to hurt us. He cares about our character more than our comfort. He loves us better than we love ourselves. He prunes us, so that we can bear fruit.

Contentment Bears Fruit, Even in a Wasteland

If we're not careful, we can mistake contentment for simply a "feeling." We try to "feel" content with whatever is happening. And that's true! When we delight in God's will for us, God gives us his peace that passes understanding (Phil. 4:7). But contentment doesn't stop there.

This is why I find the garden metaphor so helpful. Remember discontent looks at the “garden plot” it has been given and basically says, “God, I can’t do anything with this mess,” and so that’s just what discontentment does – nothing. We simply cannot tend our garden well when deep down in our heart we have rejected it.

But contentment isn’t neutral. It doesn’t just affirm, “Okay, this garden plot is enough for me.” It does the work of a gardener...it bears fruit!

Consider how Jesus teaches us to pray in Matthew 6.

Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.

Let’s take it one phrase at a time:

- Our Father in heaven: When we call God Father, we confess his love and care for us
- Hallowed by your name: we embrace God’s supremacy
- Your kingdom come: we surrender to God’s sovereignty
- Your will be done: We bear fruit by doing God’s will!
- On earth as it is in heaven: right here, on earth, in the middle of our brokenness, in the middle of the mess, in the middle of whatever circumstances we have, Jesus says – let God’s will be done.

Until we embrace God’s providential hand in every detail of our lives, we will always be tempted to see our circumstances and our possessions as obstacles or limitations that keep us from doing God’s will and bearing fruit for him. But in God’s providence, **our circumstances are not obstacles, but opportunities to do his will, right here, on the earth as it is in heaven.**

Contentment is not neutral, like a clean kitchen. Contentment has flour everywhere and things baking in the oven! It isn’t a patch of bare soil, with no weeds, but also no fruit. True contentment allows us to roll up our sleeves, put on our gloves, and get to work growing things.

We are like gardeners, and the circumstances we have been given and the things we have been given, the good and the bad – that is our garden plot. Discontentment looks at that ground and sees only a wasteland. But contentment will gladly turn a wasteland into a fruitful garden – for God’s glory and for the life of the world.

Burroughs says “What was it that you did aim at in your labor? Was it not that you might walk with God in the place that God had set you?”

G.K. Chesterton says, “**True contentment is a thing as active as agriculture. It is the power of getting out of any situation all that there is in it. It is arduous and it is rare.**” (G.K.Chesterton, “The Contented Man”)

Here’s what Chesterton is getting at: Contentment sees the potential to show with our lives that Jesus is our saving Lord in any circumstances, and that means today, whatever it brings.

Did you wake up with a headache? Did your car not start? Was the baby up all night? Did the washing machine break? Did the fashion trends change and outdate your wardrobe overnight? Is your small home in a mediocre neighborhood all you can afford? Are your kids facing challenges? Are you longing to be married? Is your phone on the fritz? Is your marriage a wreck? Did the pregnancy test come back negative, again? Are you hounded by regret? Did a routine check up result in a hard diagnosis? Is your family headed to the campground, while your friends are on a cruise ship? Are you frustrated by your government? Are you living paycheck to paycheck? Are you battling addiction?

All of us have different circumstances. **And where else are we going to obey Jesus?** In someone else’s circumstances? In our imagination? Or are we going to wait around for it to be easier?

We don’t have any other circumstances than the ones we’ve been given, and they have been *given* to us, not arbitrarily or by blind chance, but from God! From his wise and fatherly hand. When we bear fruit *no matter what*, we show how much we know and trust our heavenly Father.

Maybe you're thinking, Andrea, you keep talking about bearing fruit, but what does that even mean? What does it mean to bear fruit?

John 15 teaches us that bearing fruit is what happens when we abide in Jesus (that's first!), and when we abide in Jesus, we keep his commandments, we obey him (that's the fruit!).

And here's where contentment comes in. Contentment says, by God's grace, I can obey Jesus, today, *no matter what*. I call this "no matter what obedience."

The opposite of 'no matter what' is "except if." "Except if" obedience waits for things to change or be different in order to bear fruit. Here's what I mean, "I will be patient and kind with my husband and kids, except if I'm overtired, underfed, and super stressed out." Or "I'll steward my time well, except if I'm lonely and discouraged." Or "I'll be thankful in all circumstances, except if I don't like my circumstances." Or "I'll do all things without grumbling and complaining, except if there is a reason to complain." Or "I'll ask for forgiveness, except if the other person doesn't deserve it." Or "I'll trust you, God, except if I don't understand what you're doing."

You know what I'm talking about. We could probably journal an example of this every day from our own lives.

But what if we did God's will *no matter what*? How beautiful would that be? How fruitful would we be?

When we're living in Christian contentment, the question isn't "How much can I get?" but "How much can I give and how freely can I give it?" because I already have all that I need in Jesus!

Here are some NT examples of fruit we can bear, *no matter what*:

- Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly
- Be steadfast in prayer
- Let your speech always be gracious
- Don't gossip or slander
- Give thanks in all circumstances
- Do all things without grumbling or complaining

- Forgive one another
- Put away bitterness and anger
- Consider others more important than yourself
- Don't be anxious about anything
- Be patient in tribulation
- Rejoice in hope

God isn't looking for efficiency. He doesn't give a prize to the person who produced the most fruit for the least cost. He wants us to give freely and generously and gladly, the way he has given to us.

We bear fruit by washing the dishes gladly, feeding our people cheerfully, doing the laundry gratefully. Showing hospitality joyfully. Working diligently. Driving patiently. Listening graciously. Studying faithfully. Forgiving willingly. Asking forgiveness humbly. Reconciling relationships eagerly. **Let's be fruitful!**

Contentment says, Father, let your kingdom come, let your will be done, right here, today, in my circumstances. Let me bear fruit. And this kind of contentment will turn even the hardest circumstances into a fruitful garden.

Can you think of any examples? Someone who has been thriving and full of the fruit of the Spirit even in heavy trials? Maybe a time in your own life? This is the fruitfulness of contentment!

I want to finish with Paul's prayer in Colossians 1:9-14, will you read it with me?

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will, in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Let's pray:

Our Father in heaven, you are wise and good; hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, right here, in our lives on the earth, as it is in heaven. Let us be fruitful women, for your glory and for the life of the world. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

- How did you complete Psalm 116:1, “I love the Lord, because _____”?
- How would you describe the “habit of your heart” in this season of life? How does social media impact the “habit of your heart”? What are some ways you’ve cultivated a joyful, content “habit of heart”?
- Does God’s will feel more comforting to you or more threatening to you? Why?
- In what ways have you been tempted to see your circumstances and/or possessions as obstacles to doing God’s will?
- In what ways has contentment made you more fruitful as a Christian?
- What are some situations in which you tend to practice “except if” obedience? What are some ways you have grown in practicing “no matter what” obedience?