

The Mystery of Contentment

In 1774, famous British navigator James Cook was in the middle of his second voyage, sailing nearly to Antarctica. Louis XVI was crowned king in France, the same Louis who was later executed by guillotine during the French Revolution. Probably more well known to us, the 1st Continental Congress met in Philadelphia and the colonies began organizing minutemen.

In the same year, William Cowper wrote the words of this well-known hymn:

God moves in a mysterious way
his wonders to perform;
he plants his footsteps in the sea,
and rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
of never-failing skill
he treasures up his bright designs,
and works his sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
the clouds ye so much dread
are big with mercy, and shall break
in blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
but trust him for his grace;
behind a frowning providence
he hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
unfolding ev'ry hour;
the bud may have a bitter taste,
but sweet will be the flow'r.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
and scan his work in vain;

God is his own interpreter,
and he will make it plain.

(William Cowper, 1774)

When it comes to God's mysteries, Cowper says, "Judge not by feeble sense," and "Blind unbelief is sure to err." By faith alone, we see what eyes can't see. By faith, God reveals to us his "bright designs," his "big mercy," his "blessings," and his "smiling face," in his sovereign will for us in any and every situation.

Jeremiah Burroughs says that Christian contentment is a mystery like this. He calls contentment a mystery for two reasons. **First**, contentment is a mystery because there are things about contentment that seem paradoxical to us at first glance. It's paradoxical to be given a "wasteland" and say, "the lines have fallen for me in pleasant places, indeed I have a beautiful inheritance" (Ps 16:6), – in other words, "Isn't this grass green?!" "No!" we say, if we judge by feeble sense alone. It's a mystery. A paradox.

And **second**, contentment is a mystery because it is something *the world has no skill in*. Over and over, when Burroughs presents the mysteries of contentment, he says, "this is something *the world has no skill in*." But we should! Christians should! Because Christians walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7). Paul says, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," (Phil 4:13).

This is something the world has no skill in.

But "to be well skilled in the mystery of Christian contentment is the duty, glory, and excellency of a Christian" (3).

Burroughs gives 15 mysteries of contentment, but we're just going to look at four of them. So if you want the other 11, you'll have to read *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*.

Let's pray as we turn today to the Mystery of Contentment.

The Christian is content, yet unsatisfied.

Mystery #1: The Christian is content, yet unsatisfied.

At first this sounds like a paradox. Isn't contentment the skill of being deeply satisfied with God's will *no matter what*? Isn't that what Paul said in Philippians 4?

Listen to this, I love this; Burroughs says:

"Mark, here lies the mystery of it. A little in the world will content a Christian for his passage, but all the world, and ten thousand times more, will not content a Christian for his portion....the soul that is capable of God can be filled with nothing else but God" (35).

When it comes to things of this world, on the one hand, we cry, "Enough! Whatever you have given me, God, it is enough! I am content!" But when it comes to God himself, we cry, "More! More! God, I need more of you in my life. I want more of you! Give me more!"

Like Moses, in Exodus 33:18, we ask, Please, show me your glory!

Burroughs says, "The men of the world seek after estates, and think if they had thus much, and thus much, they would be content: *they aim at no great matters*" (35).

But not so for the Christian.

When Jesus says to us, "In this world, you will have trouble," we respond, "Your will be done, Lord." And if that ancient serpent slithered up and whispered in our ear, "I'll give you everything this world has to offer and ten thousand times more, just bow down and worship me," we respond, "What a load of rubbish. Everything in this world is like garbage in comparison to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. 3:8).

In the morning when I rise, and when I am alone, and when I come to die – you can have all this world, give me Jesus!

That's the mystery of contentment.

Charles Spurgeon said, “The Christian is the most contented man in the world, but he is the least contented with the world. He is like a traveler in an inn, perfectly satisfied with the inn and its accommodation, considering it as an inn, but putting quite out of all consideration the idea of making it his home.”

We were made for another home. We are citizens of another country. Even while we are content, God calls us “further up and further in” to all that he is for us in Christ.

In C.S. Lewis’s book, the *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, King Caspian and his crew are sailing east, further than any Narnian had ever gone, east to the World’s End. But by the time they’ve reached the easternmost island, after lots of adventures, many of the crew start to think about going home. They were feeling pretty satisfied with how far east they’d come. They weren’t certain what would happen as they sailed further east and they weren’t certain just how they would get home to Narnia again.

At this point, Lucy turned to Reepicheep and said, “Aren’t you going to say anything, Reep?” She wants to know, what do you think about all this talk of turning back? How far is far enough?

And Reepicheep responds loudly enough for everyone to hear,

“My own plans are made. While I can, I sail east in the Dawn Treader. When she fails me, I paddle east in my coracle. When she sinks, I shall swim east with my four paws. And when I can swim no longer, if I have not reached Aslan’s country, or shot over the edge of the world in some vast cataract, I shall sink with my nose to the sunrise” (213).

When it comes to the *un-satisfaction* of contentment, this is what we’re aiming for. Even contented Paul urges the Philippians to this kind of “un-satisfaction” in chapter 1:9-11,

“And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”

We can be content with our circumstances and we can be content with our possessions. But when it comes to knowing God, we're not content. And when it comes to our Christ-likeness, we're not content. When it comes to loving God and loving neighbor, our cry will always be "More! More! More! Lord, keep working on me and in me until the day of Christ Jesus!"

This is divine discontentment. And *this is something the world has no skill in.*

A Christian Comes to Contentment by Subtraction

This is the second mystery of contentment.

Burroughs says, "It is not so much by adding...to what he has, not by adding more to his condition, but rather by subtracting his desires, and so to make his desires and condition to be even and equal" that a Christian comes to contentment.

If we had a scale, our conditions – our circumstances and possessions – would be on one side of the scale, and our desires on the other. When we are discontent, our desires are heavier than our condition – we want more than what we have. So, naturally, one way to make the scale balanced is to add to our condition whatever we desire, until we finally got what we wanted, and the scale is balanced. This is the way of the carnal heart, according to Burroughs. Basically, he's saying, if we didn't have Jesus, this is how we would try to find contentment every time.

But actually, there is another way to balance the scales. We can take things off of the desire side of the scale, until what we want actually matches what we already have. And the scale would be balanced. Balanced means "contentment."

And again, Burroughs says, *the world has no skill in this.* Apart from the grace of God, **humans do not choose the way of self-denial.** In fact, now we're even told that it is unhealthy to suppress your desires.

Our culture follows the logic of Oscar Wilde, when he says, "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself." (*The Picture of Dorian Grey*, chapter 2).

But we know from God's word and from our own experience that this is a lie. What happens when we get what we want? We always want more.

When we *subtract* our desires to match our condition, we're really back to acceptance of God's will. We're back to "This grass that you have given me is green. This garden is good."

When we first moved to Vietnam, I had put a ton of effort into getting a storage cabinet for our kitchen. I had to design it and then find a builder who could build it and try to communicate what I wanted, including all the dimensions – all with my minimal Vietnamese. For some reason, I had imagined that this cabinet would magically make my kitchen turn into a Pottery Barn image. Somehow I thought adding a cabinet to my not-so-attractive kitchen would make the whole thing beautiful.

As you have probably guessed, that's not the way it worked out. When they delivered the cabinet, I thought it was so ugly. There was nothing wrong with it, it was just a plain, white cabinet, but I thought it looked like something from a communist hospital! I literally hugged my knees and just cried.

It took me a long time to be content with that cabinet. But you know what? God was patient with me, and he did subtract my desires to my condition, so I did learn to be content with the cabinet. We used it for our entire time in Vietnam and passed it on to another family that said it was exactly what they were looking for. It was a good cabinet. And it was a good lesson in contentment for me.

When it comes to subtracting our desires, I think there is actually another mystery within this mystery, and it is this:

We can be content and have unfulfilled desires *at the same time*, when those desires are godly desires and when they are rightly ordered.

Sometimes we think that if we desire something that we don't have, it must mean we're not content. But this is not always the case, because if it was, it would mean contentment only comes by our desires being fulfilled. And we know that's not true.

Here are a few examples:

If a single woman desires to be married, she doesn't need to stop desiring to be married in order to be content in her singleness.

If a married couple desires to have children and find themselves in a season of infertility, they do not need to stop desiring children in order to be content.

If someone we love is diagnosed with cancer, or if we face serious health issues of our own, we don't need to stop desiring health in order to be content.

If someone's husband isn't saved, she doesn't need to stop desiring his salvation in order to be content.

There is a way to be content even though we have unmet desires. In order to do this, we need God's help to order our desires properly, and Jesus has taught us how to do this when he prayed in Gethsemane, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."

If what we desire most is for God's will to be done, then all of our unmet desires will always be properly secondary to God's revealed will for us. Like Jesus, we say, "God, this is what I want, but the thing I want more than what I want is what you want for me."

Sometimes I think it is helpful to think of this as handing our desires over to God for his safekeeping. It's our way of saying, "God, if I hold onto this desire on my own, I might hold onto it too tightly, and turn my desire into a demand. And a demanding desire is an idol. Help me to give this desire to you. I give it to you completely – both the *if* and the *when*. **If** it is fulfilled and **when** it is fulfilled are for you to decide, not me. Not my will, but yours be done."

That is a surrendered, contented heart.

A Christian Comes to Contentment by Adding to the Burden

A third mystery of contentment is to add to the burden of our circumstances the greater burden of our sin.

Burroughs says, “Labor to load and burden your heart with your sin, and the heavier the burden of your sin is to your heart, the lighter will the burden of your affliction be to your soul, and so shall you come to be content” (41).

It is only by realizing what we *do* deserve that we begin to see the generous grace and mercy of God in all we have that we *don't* deserve. Even the weight of our trials is lighter than the weight of our sin.

Feeling the weight of our sin is often harder for us than it should be, and this is one reason why I love the puritans. Puritans are no loafers when it comes to following Jesus. I mean, if they were members in our churches, they would be our role models. We would want them as our elders and Sunday school teachers; we would ask their advice about everything!

But when you read their prayers, they say things like:

- I'm hemmed in by mountains of sin.
- Subdue my stubborn heart
- I am often straying...opposing your authority...abusing your goodness
- I am vile, miserable, strengthless
- My heart is slow to feel...my ways reluctant to amend
- I have a secret motive to eye my name in all I do
- O that a creeping worm should be advanced to the high state of salvation

These men and women knew the burden of their sin, and so their delight in salvation, their joy in God's grace is equally unsurpassed. Aware of their sin, they respond with words like:

- My heart melts at the love of Jesus
- For all my mercies come through Christ, who has designed, purchased, promised, and effected them.
- O Divine Redeemer...when thou are present all blessings are mine
- In Jesus are everlasting strength for the weak...and fullness for the empty

- Thy blessings are as secure as they are glorious

She who is forgiven much loves much. That's what Jesus teaches Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7. Like the puritans and like the prostitute, do we know how much we've been forgiven?

I can't remember if it was while we were dating, or early in our marriage, but I remember Jon would often say, "All we need is Jesus, everything else is bonus." And I never forgot it. If in Jesus all our sins are forgiven, and everything else we have is bonus, how could we not be content?

Our culture says that to feel bad about yourself is wrong. We need positive self-talk to be content. No matter how you screamed at your kids and manipulated them and put yourself first, make sure to tell yourself that you are an amazing mom. Are you feeling a little stressed out? You deserve a grande cappuccino! Are you feeling a little insecure? Remind yourself that you are enough! (Literally, on the day I typed this paragraph, I passed a car with a license plate that read: URENUFF!)

That's not what the gospel says! Romans 3:23-24 says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." The good news is that we've never been enough and we'll never be enough, but Jesus is! And everything else is bonus!

Our sin is like the black cloth that makes the jewel of God's grace and mercy stand out. It is a divine paradox, a mystery, that the reality of our sin should increase the comfort and contentment in our heart, but it does! Because of the gospel!

And this is something the world has no skill in.

A Christian Sees God's Love in Affliction

The fourth mystery of contentment is that a Christian sees God's love in affliction.

Burroughs says, "...Not only the good things that he has...and they are very sweet to him, but all the afflictions, all the evils that do befall him, he can see love in them all, and can enjoy the sweetness of love in his afflictions as well as in his mercies....All God's strokes are strokes of love and mercy" (61).

We feel the paradox of this. How can affliction be loving? How can bad things be a mercy? And I think all of us are theologically rooted enough to solve the seeming paradox. We raise our hand, "Romans 8:28! God works all things together for good! That was an easy one."

We know it, but do we live it? I think sometimes in practice, we can slip into a way of interpreting our circumstances that doesn't actually see them as coming from God's love. We believe that God works all things together for good, but we don't always believe that he loves us.

In the middle of a challenge or a trial, have you ever been tempted to think that God is punishing you? Have you ever started to review all the ways that you "failed," to figure out why this is happening? [I skipped those 3 days of prayer]

Maybe it's not that we think God is punishing us, but we just don't believe that God loves us, or maybe at least not as much as he seems to love other people. We have a dear sister in our church who is struggling with infertility, and she has struggled deeply with a sense that God hates her, that he will not bless her with children because he just doesn't love her.

When you find yourself in an affliction, a trial, when you are suffering, how do you tend to picture God? Do you picture him frowning at you? Do you picture him like a stern examiner, watching your every move, to see how well you perform? Do you picture him as absent? Do you feel forsaken? Is it hard, in those times, to believe that he loves you?

I think we can all resonate with these reactions. In our pain, we wonder why? Why is this happening? If God loves me, why is he doing this to me?

I think we need Burroughs' reminder that all God's strokes are strokes of love and mercy.

Turn with me to Hebrews 12.

12:5

And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

[The writer of Hebrews wants us to listen up, because God has something to say to his sons and daughters – whom he loves. And what does he say?]

My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.

Here's what God wants us to hold onto: *He disciplines the ones he loves; he disciplines his children.*

The word discipline is not what we might think of when we think of discipline. It's not talking about a punishment or a consequence, like a spanking, that follows disobedience. The word is 'paideia,' which is probably familiar to anyone involved in classical education, and it's talking about training and formation and learning.

So what the author of Hebrews is saying is, "Don't be weary of God's training!" Why? Because his training is proof that he *loves* you. In fact, verse 8 tells us that if we aren't trained, it means we're not true children!

What is his purpose in training us? He answers in verse 10, the second half of the verse says, "He [that's God] disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness."

Heidelberg Catechism question #1 says, "...in fact, all things must work together for my salvation."

He's doing something good in us; in fact, he's making his children more like himself, more like their Heavenly Father. Verse 11 says discipline yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. God prunes us to make us fruitful. He doesn't leave us the way we are. He grows us. And that is true love.

That's why Burroughs can say that all of God's strokes are strokes of love and mercy.

Here are three meditations on God's love to us in affliction, one from J.I. Packer, one from John Piper, and one from the Apostle Paul:

Every single thing that happens to us expresses God's love to us, and comes to us for the furthering of God's purpose for us. Thus, so far as we are concerned, God is love to us — holy, omnipotent love — at every moment and in every event of every day's life. Even when we cannot see the why and the wherefore of God's dealings, we know that there is love in and behind them, and so we can rejoice always, even when, humanly speaking, things are going wrong. We know that the true story of our life, when known, will prove to be, as the hymn says, "mercy from first to last" — and we are content.

(J.I.Packer, *Knowing God*)

And this is what John Piper says, "This is God's universal purpose for all Christian suffering: more contentment in God and less satisfaction in the world" (*Desiring God*).

And here's what Paul says in 2 Cor 12:10, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

We all know the weight of suffering. And when we come to comfort someone in the midst of their suffering, we probably shouldn't start with, "You know, Jeremiah Burroughs says, 'All God's strokes are strokes of love and mercy,' so chin up!" No. Romans 12:15, we weep with those who weep.

But what if in our suffering, we comforted our comforters by saying, "All God's strokes are strokes of love and mercy. God loves me." We can cultivate our hearts *today* to rightly interpret the affliction that comes *tomorrow*. We need to be confident in God's love for us *before* the moment of crisis comes, so that we do not shake our fist and see our afflictions as a *denial* of God's love, but as a *manifestation* of his love, paradoxical as it seems. Like Paul, we want to be able to say, "I am content with calamities, because it means God loves me."

And God says we need training, we need practice to get better at this. Our godly response to even the smallest inconveniences prepares us to stand in God's love when the bigger trials come.

"Now, says Burroughs, this is a mystery to carnal hearts, they can see no such thing perhaps: they think God loves them when he prospers them, and makes them rich, but they think God loves not when he does afflict them, that is a mystery" (61).

This may be what worldly hearts think, but Burroughs expects better of Christians.

Here's one thing that this "mystery" has challenged me to do. When hard things happen, I'm learning to thank God for what is hard. Right now, I'm thanking him for a hard relationship. I'm thanking him for one of my children's struggles with insecurity and pride. I'm thanking him for the commute to school.

I didn't do that before. Not much, anyway. But Burroughs has really helped me to do what Hebrews 12 already told me to do...to not grow weary of God's discipline, but to be thankful for it. He's training me. He loves me. He's training you. He loves you.

Conclusion: The One Thing and the Last Thing

The mysterious, fruit-bearing work of contentment is the work of every day. Everyday we wake up to another day given to us by God, and if we are going to be content with what we have and work out his will where he has placed us, it has to be today. We cannot re-live yesterday, and we cannot reach into tomorrow. **But God has given us this one, good day, to live in light of the One Thing and the Last Thing.**

The One Thing

I have a confession to make. When I was younger than I am now, less trained by God's loving discipline, I really didn't like the story of Mary and Martha. When someone brought up Mary and Martha, I would inwardly roll my eyes. I'm not kidding. I don't know if this is a reason or an excuse, but the main reason was

because I felt like it was one of the only passages women ever talked about, like we could only learn from the sections of the Bible that involved women, and that annoyed me. But I'm older now. And hopefully, by God's grace, a little wiser than I was. And here is what I would say to my younger self, if I could, "What kind of fool are you? Jesus himself is about to tell you *the one thing necessary*, and you're going to roll your eyes? Drop everything and sit down next to Mary."

We know what it means to be anxious and troubled about many things, like Martha. We know what it means to be distracted with much serving. We know what it means to be distracted by the world. We know what it means to be distracted by our selfishness.

But only one thing is necessary—that our souls will be saved in the day of Christ Jesus. Every Sunday when we take the Lord's supper, we remember that we have the one thing necessary. The one thing we need is the one thing we have, the portion that will not be taken away from us. The one thing we need is Jesus and every day anew, he calls us to himself, to sit at his feet, like Mary and listen to his teaching.

"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest," says Jesus. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

Jesus is the one thing and Jesus is the last thing.

The Last Thing

And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new...It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end (Rev. 21:5-6)

Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

The last, best thing that waits for us, as God's children, is the eternal weight of glory, the day when everything sad comes untrue, because Jesus has conquered every enemy and will reign forever.

There is no discontentment so deep that it will not be swallowed up in the joy of the Lamb. Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal. And that is our steadfast hope.

Author Fredrich Beuchner wrote,

"...The worst isn't the last thing about the world. It's the next to the last thing. The last thing is the best. It's the power from on high that comes down into the world, that wells up from the rock-bottom worst of the world like a hidden spring. Can you believe it? The last, best thing is the laughing deep in the hearts of the saints... Yes. You are terribly loved and forgiven. Yes. You are healed. All is well" (*The Final Beast*, 175).

We are daughters of Eve, cast out of the garden, but now we have an inheritance in the New Creation. In all the changes and chances of this fleeting world, may the habit of our heart *today* be to be fruitful in our contentment, as we respond to God's providence like Mary,

"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word."

Mine are days that God has numbered
I was made to walk with Him
Yet I look for worldly treasure
And forsake the King of kings

But mine is hope in my Redeemer
Though I fall, His love is sure
For Christ has paid for every failing
I am His forevermore

Mine are tears in times of sorrow
Darkness not yet understood
Through the valley I must travel
Where I see no earthly good

But mine is peace that flows from Heaven
And the strength in times of need
I know my pain will not be wasted
Christ completes his work in me

Mine are days here as a stranger
Pilgrim on a narrow way
One with Christ I will encounter
Harm and hatred for His name

But mine is armor for this battle
Strong enough to last the war
And He has said He will deliver
Safely to the golden shore

And mine are keys to Zion city
Where beside the King I walk
For there my heart has found its treasure
Christ is mine forevermore

Come rejoice now, O my soul
For His love is my reward
Fear is gone and hope is sure
Christ is mine forevermore

Amen! Come quickly, Lord Jesus!

Discussion Questions:

- In what area(s) of your sanctification do you want to abound more and more?

- What may be a desire that needs to be “subtracted” from your heart in pursuit of contentment? How has God been grown you to be content even in a season of unmet desires? What desires do you tend to turn into demands?
- When the weight of your sin doesn’t feel very heavy, how does that impact your understanding of God’s grace? How does the gospel both affirm the seriousness of sin, while rescuing us from shame and guilt?
- Can you share a time where you have felt God’s love more deeply in the midst of a heavy trial?
- How would you encourage someone who is struggling to see God’s love in the midst of “affliction”?