

Dan Crowe. Sunday 3rd February 2008. Philippians 4:10-13

The secret of being content.

This preach will finish the series on Money that we have been doing for the last few weeks.

Last week Martin spoke on what the Bible has to say on the issue of how we are to respond to our financial circumstances. I want to continue on that theme this morning. This time I will be looking at a passage found the book of Philippians.

The heart of what Paul is talking about in the passage is finding contentment in life.

One phrase which I think helps describes the discontentment that we can have with our financial circumstances is the phrase '*if only*'.

'If only I could get this much regular income then I would be fine'

'If only I could be living a bit more comfortably than I am now, then I would be fine'

Martin spoke 2 weeks ago about how advertising feeds into these desires, and keeps telling us that we will only be content IF we buy what they are trying to sell us. These adverts tell us that we will save money and that their product will make us content, even though they are trying to sell us something that we weren't even thinking of buying in the first place.

A couple of years ago I bought a new digital camera, which at the time seemed to have the best amount of megapixels for the least amount of money. The adverts were telling me what a good deal that was - that THIS was the thing that was going to make me content. But *now* the adverts tell me that in fact that camera isn't quite as good as they were making out at the time, and that I have to buy a new camera for double the amount of megapixels if I am going to remain content.

I had a quick look at an advert for digital cameras this morning which told me that *'it has NEVER been easier to take and save photos'*. This not only tells me that the new camera is very good - it's also telling me that my old camera is now a thing of the past because clearly it is too complicated when it comes to taking photos.

I want to read out a story that demonstrates how one man clearly felt that it was money that would help him find contentment should he become discontent.

This is a news article from 2006:

A football fan will get damages of £1m if England are knocked out of the World Cup early and he suffers trauma.

Mr Hucker, 34, said he had taken out the policy following years of disappointment when England failed to progress to the final stages of a competition, and the agony of watching them lose through penalty shoot outs.

"The pressure of this World Cup is not just on the players and the managers. I think a lot of supporters are under a lot of pressure and suffer because of England's performance," he said.

"I find when it goes to penalty shoot-outs it gets very difficult and I wanted to insure myself against psychological trauma."

10 I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. 11 I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 12 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. 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. 13 I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

This passage comes from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, a church that he had started himself. Now Paul was in prison, and the church in Philippi had sent him a gift which was taken to Paul by a man named Ephroditus.

Ephroditus was about to return to the church in Philippi, and Paul gave him this letter to take to the church when he got back.

The passage itself starts with Paul referring to the gift they have sent him, and he tells them of the joy he has in receiving their gift.

Then after telling them this, he doesn't move onto a different subject, but takes the opportunity to teach the church something about how we are to handle our responses to our own financial situations. Paul talks about his own financial situation, that he is joyful in the gift they have sent him. This prompts him to talk about how he handles all the financial variations that he has experienced in his own life.

Paul is teaching here from his own example. He is showing them - 'Look, this is how I live my life and I want to encourage you to live your life in the same way.' Paul also talked about this in chapter 3 of Philippians, where he encourages the church to follow his example, and again in chapter 4, Paul says 'whatever you have seen in me, put it into practice'.

I want to encourage us to do the same this morning. We're going to look at Paul's life in terms of how he handled his financial circumstances, with a view to putting those things into practice in our own lives.

Having told them that he rejoices in their concern for him, he then goes on to say that although he is rejoicing, he doesn't really need their gift, which seems a bit of an odd thing to say.

However, the reason he says that is to make a point to the church. He is saying he doesn't really need their gift because he has learned to be content. He is grateful for their gift but would be content with or without it. In particular he says he has learned to be content whatever the circumstances.

I just want to spend some time thinking about the fact that he says that being content in all circumstances is something he has **learned**.

Let me tell you what I think this does not mean:

I do not think it means that one day Paul was wondering along a street and he saw this poster which said in big bold letters '**Do you want contentment in life? Do you feel discontent with your circumstances? Then come to hear**

this world renowned motivational speaker teach you how you can!, and that as a result, Paul went along and learned what the motivational teacher had to say. Then, from that point on in his life he could say 'I have learned how to be content in all circumstances because I heard this speaker teach me how I could and ever since that day I have been completely content!'

The impression he seems to give is that learning to be content in all circumstances is something that he has learned over a prolonged period of time. He tells us that he has learned contentment through how he has responded to the variety of circumstances that he had experienced in life, increasingly learning to not depend on his circumstances for contentment.

His circumstances have varied again and again through his life, as they do for all of us. He has learned to not get caught up in discontentment and complaining and coveting, not dreaming all the time about what he would like to have, but has learned by working at deciding to be content with his circumstances.

We live in a society where we can get things more and more instantly, and in particular this seems to relate to possessions and money. We can get instant cash, instant loans and instant credit, but the way in which Paul describes contentment with financial and all circumstances is not something that is instant but something that is learned over time.

For some of us, when we first became Christians we may have expected that we should get instant contentment in every aspect of our lives. Now clearly Paul himself writes that when we become Christians we receive enormous blessings from the very beginning of our Christian lives. We are forgiven by God, we are set free from sin and from the punishment we deserve for our sin. We are made completely righteous in God's sight and are adopted by God. However, Paul is making the point here is that we all also have a process of learning to go through as Christians. We are all to grow in maturity and understanding as Christians, and specifically here Paul is teaching is that to be content in all circumstances is something we are to learn through our lives as Christians.

Paul then goes on to give some more detail on what he means by all circumstances, and again he describes circumstances that he has experienced

himself. These aren't theoretical experiences for him but his own real experiences.

He says in verse 12:

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

The first point I want to make on this is that Paul is not trying to say that one particular financial circumstance is correct for all Christians. In fact he is pointing out that within his own life his financial circumstances have been quite variable. The same is true for all of us, so my circumstances are different now than to when I was a student, and they may change again when I move abroad in the future.

The recurring theme in the Bible in terms of God's view on money is that He is not so much concerned about how much money we may receive (although we do need to be aware of extremes), but he is concerned about our attitude to the money we receive, and what we do with that money, and how big a place in our hearts our money takes. Here again God is speaking to us through Paul's example and asking us to learn to be content with however much money we might be receiving.

He recognises that both being in need and being in plenty are valid circumstances for Christians. What he wants to discourage us from in both those situations is discontentment with our financial circumstances.

Discontentment in our financial circumstances can often lead to coveting, which is something God speaks very strongly against in the Ten Commandments. Coveting could be described as being the opposite of financial contentment, as, if we are content with our situation we will not be constantly looking for more wealth. When we covet things it is about a driving desire for other people's possessions, or to gain things dishonestly, or having a selfish desire for possessions. I'm not talking about a healthy desire to handle our finances well so we can get the things we do need in life, which is about good stewardship, but an obsession about how much we have rather than being more concerned about how we use our money.

Paul wants us to learn to be content whether we are in plenty or in need, in whatever circumstances we are in. So amongst us here this morning we will have a variety of financial circumstances, and, whatever your circumstance is here this morning, God wants us all to be people learning to be content. The message is actually the same to all of us this morning in terms of contentment. If you are in need this morning, the message is 'learn to avoid coveting, learn to be content'. If you are in plenty this morning, the message is 'learn to avoid coveting, learn to be content'.

Now clearly within that there are different messages in terms of good stewardship, so if you are in need and struggling it may be important for you to make other people aware of your needs so you don't find yourself getting into deeper and deeper debt. If you are in plenty it may be important for you to be asking who can I help who is in need? But for both those sets of people we are encouraged to learn to be content.

Being discontent with our situation and coveting are things that can affect anyone whatever their situation. Whatever our situation, we can always be vulnerable to thinking 'if only had this much income', or 'if only I owned this, then I would be ok'. We can look at rich celebrities and think - surely they must feel like they have everything they need, surely they must be content.

However the truth is that it's just not true.

Here are some quotes from some very wealthy men from recent history.

John D Rockefeller: 'I have made many millions, but they have brought me no happiness' (oil)

Henry Ford: 'I was happier doing a mechanics job' (cars)

John Astor: 'I am the most miserable man on earth' (fur trade, businessman)

Terry Virgo tells a story to illustrate this fact well - that however much you may get there will always be potential for a sense of discontentment.

He tells the story of how he was due to speak at a conference in the United States, and the man who had invited him to speak, (CJ Mahaney), had become aware that Terry had had an extremely busy time booked just before

he was going to speak at this conference. CJ contacted Terry and invited him to come a few days early so that he could have a bit of a break before he went to the conference. So Terry went over, and on one of the days off CJ took him to Disneyland. You may or may not have heard of Disneyland but it is a park that you can go to where there are lots of spectacular things to see and do.

It is the kind of place I used to dream about going to when I was a child, and this is really how it advertises itself, that it is the kind of place where dreams will come true. The problem is that actually Disneyland is not Heaven. Terry makes this point with his story, because he goes along, and in the evening he goes to an event where they sing a song at the opening at this place where your dreams are supposed to come true. The song goes 'there's a bright new tomorrow, and it's only a dream away'.

It can be like that with money - we can think if only we have this, or we had that, but then if we do get to that place, we find it doesn't satisfy us and we start to look for the next thing.

He also was quite happy to recognise that he didn't need to feel guilty to be at Disney, he enjoyed himself there, he was content there, but also it was quite clear that it wasn't fulfilling all his dreams.

So let's go back and look at verse 12 again.

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

So in this verse, as well as telling us what he means by every circumstance, Paul tells us that there is a secret to contentment.

Paul is bringing us closer and closer to the great statement he makes in verse 13. He starts off by telling us that he has learned to be content, and then tells us that there is a reason that he has learned to be content. There is a secret to his contentment. He didn't just learn how to be content through luck but he learned how to be content because he has learned the secret of being content.

So we get to verse 13 and Paul tells us what this secret is:

The secret is this...

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

Now this verse is a verse that will be very familiar to many of us here this morning.

What I want to do this morning is to hopefully help us to get a good understanding of this verse as it is really the application for what I have been talking about this morning. I have been saying from Paul's example that God is asking us to learn to be content in all circumstances, and in this verse Paul tells us HOW we can learn that in life.

However, to learn to apply this verse in a good way we need to spend some time thinking about what it actually means.

It is a verse that is often quoted on its own, so this is why many of us will be familiar with it. We may well have seen it written up in a poster.

It is a great verse, but we need to remember that it is not just a verse on its own but it actually is written to teach us how we are to learn to be content in all circumstances. The aim of it ultimately is not to be able to run through life saying 'I can do all things', but ultimately it is about learning to be content.

When you read it on its own, it could lead to us thinking that it is about us being invincible. We could get this sense of - 'Is it a bird? Is it a plane?' - No it's Super-Christian who can do all things through Christ who strengthens him/her.

In fact, when you link it into the other verses it is clear that this is not what Paul is writing about. He is not talking about being invincible, about just blasting our way through life, that we will never find anything difficult in life because we can just charge our way through like a super hero. He is talking about how to handle the challenges we face in life, how to face up to them and work through them and find contentment in them all, rather than just blasting our way through.

I want to encourage you this morning as we look at this verse to not just see it in isolation. Clearly it is a highly encouraging verse, but let's not just think of it on its own, let's think about the other verses around it as we think about it so we can be reminded of the reason why Paul said it. He said it because he

wants us to learn how to be content in all circumstances, so let's continue to keep this in mind as we look at this verse this morning.

So let's start to think about what it does mean in terms of how we respond to our varying financial circumstances.

What Paul says is to tell us that we can

'Do everything through him who gives me strength.'

So he tells us that to learn to be content, we need to recognise that we can work through all the varying circumstances that we can face through Christ.

He tells us to learn contentment in our financial circumstances we need to work through our circumstances through Christ who gives us strength.

It is not just about us trying to face our financial circumstances on our own, bravely battling through, trying to pretend to Jesus that everything is fine, pretending that there are no financial uncertainties or pressures, when in reality we are really struggling and not coping with our situation. Paul tells us that we are to do all things through Him, through Christ. We are to face all circumstances through Christ, allow Him to strengthen us as we face financial challenges. We're to be open with Jesus about our finances, to talk to Him about them, to pray about difficulties, to tell Him our anxieties so that He can strengthen us, to allow God to speak to us through the many different things He has to say on money in the Bible. Jesus is very, very interested in our financial circumstances so we are to include Him in our approach to our finances.

On the other hand it is not about us relinquishing all responsibility for handling financial uncertainty. It's not saying that we are to ignore our financial situation and just let go and let Jesus deal with it all. It is not telling us that we can just be passive in it all and just live in hope that it will all turn out ok in the end. In this verse we are being encouraged to take an active role, being strengthened by Christ as we face our varying financial situations. We are to be aware of our responsibilities and to be actively pursuing our responsibilities through Christ who strengthens us. We are to be aware we need to make good decisions about our finances, and monitor our finances and look to be a good steward of our finances, budgeting for electricity bill and gas bills and for our giving, and for our food and for whatever else we might need to budget for.

It's very clear both from this passage and from our experience of life that finances are variable in life, that we can't depend on them for permanent security in life or after we die. It is only God who is always faithful. Despite that, we can still get drawn into trying to find contentment through accumulating more and more wealth, or actually for some people they might look at things the other way and feel that they can only be content by becoming poorer and poorer and poorer.

However, what Paul says here is that contentment in circumstances is something to be learned through how we handle life. He tells us that he has learned the secret of being content, that he has learnt it through knowing that he is able to do all things through Christ who strengthens him. In reading it, we don't get a sense that this is about some quick fix but something that he has learnt through applying truth in his life throughout his life. I suspect again and again he will have learned to apply the truth that he can do all things through Christ in his life. I don't believe this is about a quick fix, like thinking if you say Philippians 4:13 over and over again you will find contentment, but it has been about applying Philippians 4:13 through his life's experiences.

If you are not a Christian here this morning I want to encourage you to think about your own financial situation, and to remind you that finances are not something that we can absolutely place our security in, both in this life and even more after we die. I believe that looking for security in Christ is a very wise thing to do because Jesus Christ is more secure than anyone or anything else that you think of. If you are here this morning and you are not a Christian I want to encourage you that Jesus does offer this security. The Bible tells us that Jesus is God, that He is eternally trustworthy. I want to speak to you also this morning to encourage you to consider what I am saying about this - that Jesus calls all of us to trust in Him because He alone is perfectly trustworthy.

To finish this morning I want to end with a story about a man I met about 10-15 years ago. I could see that in his life he was learning how to be content with both plenty and little, and he left an impression on my life which is what I'm aiming to do this morning - to make an impression on us as we learn about an aspect of Paul's life.

I was spending about 3 months living in Peru. While I was there I went on a medical trip to one of the poorest villages I think I have ever visited. This

man was one of the leaders in the village, and he was clearly quite content there, getting very involved in the running of the village and did not seem like someone who was discontent with his life there. As I said, this was a really poor village. The food eaten was rice and not much more, and if you got sick there wasn't much help. While I was there a man was shot by an animal trap, and had to drink salty water to try to counteract the blood loss, and then travel 3 hours being carried on a stretcher and then by boat to get to the hospital.

This leader came from a background that was really poor. However he would also pay trips to the main town where I was living because he was being trained in health by the organisation I was working with. What really struck me is that he had learnt to live in both situations. He had learnt to be content in both circumstances, so when he came to stay in the town, with all its material benefits, he would happily enjoy the things he could receive there. One of my memories of him is seeing him eating in a restaurant in the town, and he was clearly happy to be eating there, he gave me a big wave and a big smile as I was walking past.

He was a great example to me of seeing the reality of someone who was learning to be content in his variable circumstances and again I want to encourage us to look at Paul's life and his example as we consider learning to be content in our own lives.