

The Secret to Contentment

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Preacher: Luke R

[0 : 00] This is a sermon from King's Church West! If you've got a Bible, you can have it open or your Bible app or whatever you like to use.

The verses will come up later as well for us. And we're just going to read three verses together today. And it's a really interesting topic. It's a topic that I really enjoyed thinking about as I was preparing.

And I've called this message The Secret of Contentment. The Secret of Contentment. Now, it's the sort of title that I think you might find in a WH Smith in a train station or an airport.

You know those books, the bestsellers, the New York Times bestsellers, The Secret of Contentment, Five Steps to Contentment, or something like that. Or it's the sort of thing you might see online, a bit of clickbait.

I googled what would that be, and they gave me this. They said, scientists have discovered the one habit that makes you instantly content. I wonder what it is. I'm so excited to find out.

[1 : 26] But the reason, you know, the reason we imagine these kind of things is because, to be honest, people, me and you, the people in the world around us, we're all looking for contentment, aren't we? If we're honest, we are looking for that.

We're looking for that deep and lasting joy, that deep and lasting satisfaction, despite what life throws at us.

And we'll look a bit more at that as we go on. And that explains, you know, why we see all these books and, you know, podcasts and stuff online about how to be content, how to have satisfaction in life.

And, you know, when we think about contentment, we obviously think about the opposite as well, don't we? So, thinking about discontent. Believe it or not, I am 36 years old, and I am heading towards what you'd call middle age.

I mean, some of you might be thinking, you're already there. Luke, you've been there for a while. Middle age is a funny time of life, isn't it? I mean, some of you have been through it, some of you are heading towards it, some of you are in it.

[2 : 30] I don't really know what middle age is. I imagine it's kind of quite a flexible sort of age bracket. But it's a funny time of life. People talk about a midlife crisis. I'm not going to ask you to put your hands up, don't worry.

You know, it's quite a common thing to talk about a midlife crisis. And I think it's all wrapped up with this idea of being content or not. You know, experiencing what it is to be discontented with life.

And what's the classic example of a midlife crisis? The sports car, isn't it? The sports car. And I'm not confessing I've just ordered a sports car or anything. But the sports car is like the funny go-to example of a midlife crisis.

And again, I was just interested in that. I thought, what's that all about? So again, I Googled it and Google gave me five reasons why a sports car is the classic midlife crisis thing.

And it's actually more interesting than you think. So bear with me. So number one, a sports car is a symbol of youth. You know, so if someone buys a sports car, they're basically trying to have that sense of being young again.

[3 : 32] And it's a tangible way. It's something you can get your hands on to feel young. My uncle actually has one in a shed in his garden. And all he does, he's like, he's my uncle, so he's in his 70s. So he's not midlife.

But all he does is let his grandkids crawl all over it. And then never drives it anywhere. It's quite funny. A sports car is a symbol of youth. It can be a bit of a sign of status as well.

So when someone reaches middle age, they can kind of wonder, have I made it in life? And the sports car is like an instant injection of that sense of status or significance. Now, if you don't agree with these things, that's fine, because it's not my ideas. It's Google's ideas. Number three, a sports car can fulfill an unmet dream. So maybe someone's dreamt for their whole life.

Maybe as a kid, they've dreamt of having that car. And middle age is the time when it can actually happen. They've got the money to do it. So they buy the sports car. Number four, a sports car can show a spirit of adventure.

[4 : 33] Do you know, middle age life can feel very routine. You know, going through the motions, going through like the same job, same house, same responsibilities. So sports car is pretty much the opposite, isn't it?

It's that sense of adventure. And number five, it is or it can be a sign of an identity crisis. When someone hits middle life, middle age life, they can begin to ask these questions like, is this it? Who am I really? Did I become the person I want to be? And the sports car is a quick, kind of easy answer to some of those questions. You can rewrite your identity as someone who is confident or someone who's free to make their own decisions.

Now, we're not going to be talking anymore about the sports car, but I think it's interesting because it's quite easy to laugh, isn't it? It's quite easy to poke fun at it. But I think as we go through that stereotype, some of those things probably start to touch a little bit on our own hearts and the only things that we think about.

So the issues of status or fulfillment or feeling significant, having dreams or ambitions, having a sense of excitement about life or a sense of identity.

[5 : 47] I think, to be honest, all of us can relate to those themes in some way or another. And I think every human, Christian or not, maybe apart from Jesus, will experience this sense of nagging discontent.

At some point in your life, you'll feel that sense of, is this it? Is this all there is? And the question today we're looking at is, what is contentment? What is true contentment?

What is the secret of contentment? And we use the word secret because it comes up in the verses. So, yeah, if you have your Bible, we're going to read these verses together.

And thanks, Regan, if you could pop them on the screen. So it's Philippians chapter 4, verse 11 to 13. And remember, it's Paul writing his letter there. So we're going to pick up in verse 11, where Paul says this.

Now, Now, the sort of immediate context of these verses comes just before that.

[7 : 12] But I've left it for today because I think we'll look at it a bit more in a couple of weeks time. But basically, Paul has received a gift, a financial gift from the Philippian church. And he is, he's responding with a sense of gratitude and joy.

He's expressing that towards them because he's, you know, he's seen that they care about him. He's seen that they support him in his ministry. But today we're going to see that although Paul was evidently grateful for their generosity, he wanted them to know that over the years, whether he was being financially supported or not, he has learned to be content with whatever he has.

That's immediately what's going on in those verses. But it's even helpful to just step back a little bit more. And just to think about Paul. We've talked about this quite a bit as we've gone through the letter.

And as we think about where Paul is when he's writing this letter, I think the verses shine a bit more brightly. You see, we have to remember that Paul was writing about being content in every situation while being imprisoned in Rome.

So he was under house arrest. So although he wasn't in this harsh, like prison environment, he was confined and he was under constant watch. He had the unknown of what's happening next.

[8 : 33] His trial looming could possibly mean execution. He wouldn't have been able to go out to work. He wouldn't have been able to earn any money. So he's relying on his friends.

And at that time, and it's, I mean, it's sort of true today as well, isn't it? That being in prison is not a great look. It has a social stigma around it. It has a sense of shame around it in the world that Paul lived in.

So given all of that, Paul is able to say, I am content. It's interesting, isn't it? I am content. So let's look at his words a little bit more in depth.

He says, I have learned to be content, whatever the circumstances. Now that is what contentment is. Contentment is having this sense of lasting peace and lasting joy, no matter what the circumstances.

I actually think that that is nothing short of miraculous. You see, it's really easy to base our contentment in the things that we have.

[9 : 40] So, you know, if you have a nice house, you have your family and your friends around you, you have a good job. If you've got safety, if you've got security, if you've got comfort, those are easy things to kind of rely on in terms of sense of contentment, a sense of satisfaction.

But for Paul, each of those things was taken away. And he could still say, I have learned to be content, whatever the circumstances.

He goes on in verse 12. I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to have plenty. I know what it is to be in need and plenty.

It's like two ends of the spectrum, isn't it? And I wonder, you know, if you hear those verses for yourself, where do you think of yourself on that spectrum from need to plenty? It could be quite difficult to gauge, can't it?

And you might well have experienced both ends of the spectrum throughout your life. However, I think it's fair to say, with a worldwide perspective, Scotland, where we live, is a place of plenty.

[10 : 43] So I'm a primary school teacher and at the school I work at, we've been reading this book and it's called If the World Were 100 People. You might have seen things like this before.

And it takes the population of the world, 8 billion humans, and scales it down to this village of 100 people. And then it tells you what life would be like for those 100 people. And it gives you stats. So it says, you know, out of 100 people, 29 people in this village would not have clean water. 11 wouldn't have enough food. And I think that means pretty desperately wouldn't have enough food. 20 wouldn't have a safe home. 14 of them wouldn't be able to read or write. 23 people out of 100 would live on less than three pounds a day.

So, you know, reading those sorts of stats reminds you that, relatively speaking, Scotland is a land of plenty. It might not always feel like it, but I think that's the case. And I think that is the challenge from Paul's letter that is for us.

[11 : 46] What is it like to live in plenty and still be content? That's kind of interesting. What is it like to live in plenty but still be content? It sounds a bit funny.

Surely it's easy to be content when you have everything that you need, when you live in plenty. But Paul says that it's something that we have to learn.

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. Why do we need to learn to be content when living in plenty? Well, you know, I said already, I think Scotland is relatively a place of plenty, but would we say it's a place of contentment? I'm not so sure.

We talked about that classic midlife crisis situation being actually more relevant to us than we think. It's easy to laugh at it, but it's probably true for lots of us. And so there's that very real search in our lives for a sense of fulfillment or satisfaction or contentment.

[12 : 50] And there's an American Bible teacher called John Piper. And I was just listening to him and he gave this just really sort of simple personal example that he was given by some friends. He was given a brand new Apple Watch.

Now, I know nothing about these sorts of things. I don't wear a watch. I don't really have that sort of tech. How much would a brand new Apple Watch cost? Does anyone know? No, no experts here. I'm imagining hundreds of pounds. Hundreds, yeah? And he was just, he was looking at his watch and thinking, man, that is a generous gift, isn't it? And it would be really easy to find contentment in having something like that, to have that gift.

But what happens when that watch breaks? Or what happens when that watch gets lost? Or what happens when it gets stolen? Or to be honest, more likely. What happens when the watch just loses its novelty?

What happens when there's a new watch? A more exciting watch coming out? What happens to our sense of contentment then? And this is what he says. He's talking about Paul.

[13 : 55] He says, when Paul speaks of the mysterious secret contentment or gladness or rejoicing, he's not speaking of the perfectly natural, unmysterious human pleasure that's based on pleasant circumstances.

He's speaking of a contentment that is based on Christ. Gladness grounded in Christ. Joy resting on Christ.

And that is why contentment in plenty and abundance have to be learned. It's not natural. It's supernatural. I think that's really helpful.

Do you know, natural contentment based on good circumstances is all well and good. But what we need more than that is a supernatural contentment based on knowing Christ, whether in need or perhaps more pertinently in Scotland when we live in abundance or when we live in plenty.

How is this contentment supernatural? You know, Paul says, I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation. And in verse 13, it says, I can do all of this, whether living in need or living in plenty.

[15:06] I can do all of this through him who gives me strength. Through him who gives me strength. Now, at the time when Paul was writing, there will have been a lot of philosophers at the time who spoke about being content and contentment.

But usually what they did is they talked about self-sufficiency. They talked about finding strength from within to be able to smile at whatever life throws at you.

Life's ups and downs. Paul has a completely different view. For him, it's not about self-sufficiency. It says, I can face anything because of the one who gives me strength.

Not this one, that one. You know, that one who gives me strength. He says something similar in the letter to the Colossians. He says, I work and struggle so hard. So humanly, he is doing things.

But he's depending on Christ's mighty power that works within me. I work and struggle so hard depending on Christ's mighty power that works within me.

[16:11] You know, Paul is not afraid of facing life's ups and downs. But I think what he is afraid of is facing life's ups and downs without God.

He's not afraid of it, but he is afraid of doing it without God. Living life through the one who strengthens me.

It could be Paul's strapline, couldn't it? It could be his sort of mission statement. But I wonder if that's mine. And I wonder if that's yours. To live life through him who strengthens me.

I wonder, what does that look like for you? To live life through him who strengthens me. What does that mean for you as you go to work each day?

What's that mean for your relationships? What's it mean for your free time? What does it mean for how you seek to care for people?

[17:12] Or how you seek to serve others? Or to love people? What does through him who gives me strength mean for how we share the gospel with other people?

What does it mean for how we are generous with our money or possessions? What does it mean with life's hard parts? Like if we are coping with illness or with grief.

What does that experience of God at work look like for you? All of these things that we do in our everyday lives. All these things that we face.

I think Paul would say that they have to be bound up with Jesus Christ. He wants to be involved in every circumstance of life.

Every situation of life. He wants to be Lord over your life. And he also wants to be your unshakable contentment.

[18:08] He himself, Jesus, wants to be your contentment. He wants to be your true source of satisfaction. He wants to be your source of rejoicing in life.

The question is how do we respond to him? I think this issue of contentment cuts through a lot of what Paul said throughout Philipians. It's all about Jesus.

You know, it's not about what you're facing in this world. It's not about whether life's good or bad.

It's about Jesus. And I just, I've not written this down, but I just feel as, you know, as we're worshipping together, whenever we worship Jesus, there's something different happens.

And Fiona shared about having faith. We only can have faith when we start to talk about Jesus.

When we look at ourselves, why would we have faith? You know, why would I have faith in myself? I'm pretty useless. But when we start to sing about Jesus, when we start to pray to Jesus, when we start to talk about Jesus, faith grows, doesn't it? Faith grows.

[19:14] And I would hope that we come out of this room today and actually every day when we come to church, thinking, Jesus, you have become magnified in my gaze.

Magnified means so it looks bigger. You know, I walked into church thinking I look big. I go out of church thinking, Jesus, you're much bigger than I thought. And that's true for contentment. Do you know? I think for us, and I will say this again, I do think we live in a land of plenty for most people in Scotland, not for everybody. And, you know, we are all pretty much lucky to go home to a safe house to have some nice food to eat.

It's so easy for us to base our contentment in that stuff, isn't it? But I think Paul and the Bible would teach us it's all about Jesus. Because those things, they might not last.

Well, they won't, will they? They'll fade, but Jesus will never fade. I wonder if we could just spend a couple of minutes just praying. So do you want to just close your eyes or whatever you find helps you to focus on Jesus?

[20 : 18] And let's just come to him. Jesus, we are just so grateful. We're so grateful for who you are. We're so grateful for the wondrous gift of your love, of your salvation, your mercy and grace towards us.

We're just so grateful about who you are, Lord, that you are the God who cares, the God of compassion, the mighty God, the saviour. Thank you, Jesus.

Thank you, Jesus. And Jesus, we want to just bring our lives before you. And we bring to you the areas of our life where we feel not content, where we feel there's a nagging discontent somewhere. Lord, we just give it to you. We give it to you. God, we ask, would you be our source of true joy as we look to you, Lord Jesus?

Would you be our source of everlasting joy and peace? Thank you, Jesus. Thank you that you are always with us.

[21 : 32] Praise you, Lord. Amen. Amen. Amen.