

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. (Philippians 4:11-13)

Have You Learned the Secret?

Have you learned the secret? Yesterday, I googled that question just to see what would come up. On the very first page, there were hits about the secret to winning the lottery, the secret to getting rich, the secret to making your skin look younger, and the secret to making mango cupcakes. People today are convinced that there's a secret to doing all those things and if I could just learn it, I could do them, too. But I'm not so sure that's always the case. My mom is a great cook but she's not a good baker because baking requires exact measurements and careful timing, and my mom prefers to wing it. Even if someone were to share some mango cupcake secret with her, she still couldn't turn out a decent batch of cupcakes. But this evening, St. Paul does talk about learning a secret – the secret to contentment and strength. On this evening before we observe our national day of thanks to God, it's worthwhile for us to consider that secret. After all, in this world, God never promises us a life without problems and hurts. My friends, **have you learned the secret?**

I.

I spend a great deal of time going to hospitals and sitting down with members whose health keeps them from getting to church. Again and again, I'm struck by the contentment that some people show, even though they face pain every day. Knowing what a big baby I am when I get sick, I often wonder if I would show the same measure of contentment they do if I faced their pain every day. Would you? **Have you learned the secret? Are you content?**

What is contentment? Most people would probably say "happiness." But that's not really the case. Now, in this letter to the Philippians, St. Paul was thanking them for a generous gift they had sent him. Their gift made him happy. He'd be able to support himself for a time in difficult circumstances. But he didn't want to sound like he was fishing for more support. So he wrote, **"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."**

Can you feel happy if you're hungry? Can you feel happy if you're living in want? When good things are happening, happiness and contentment go hand in hand. But true contentment is there even when we're hungry, even when we are in want or in need, even when we can't feel happy for good reason. What is true contentment? It's being at peace because we know that God loves us and he's doing what is best for us. So what is the secret to being content? It's trust. Even when I don't understand why I have to be hungry or sick or in need, I trust that God loves me and he is doing what is best for me.

Have you learned that secret? Would you be content if you hadn't had a meal in a couple of days – if you didn't get to eat one tomorrow on Thanksgiving? There's an old Polish saying, "When a Pole is hungry, he's angry." It's true about me. Just having a meal be a few hours late makes me really cranky as my wife can attest. So what would my attitude be like if God made me go hungry for a couple of days? What would your attitude be like?

If your stomach growling doesn't have that affect on you, what about other things? What if you lost your house? What if you couldn't clothe your children? Most of us have not experienced that kind of hardship, but sometimes Christians do. If we examine our feelings, we may not like what we see. How do you feel about people who make more money than you do? Are you jealous of their houses? Of their cars? Of their vacations? My friends, we live in the richest country on earth. Most of us have been provided for every day of our lives. Still, we struggle with jealousy over those people who have more. What would we be like if we actually had to live in poverty?

Sometimes God does call his children to suffer those things. And he still expects us to be content in his love, to trust that he's doing what is best for us. That's true in all the difficulties of this life – whether we're in the hospital, or we're lonely or we're frustrated over the way people treat us. Are we content? Don't we all have to admit that often we aren't? I do. I struggle with contentment. Judging from what I see, many of you

do, too. In fact, our entire economic system is built on making us discontent with what God has given us and driving us to spend ourselves into a bottomless pit of debt in the hopes that we will finally have enough to be happy.

There's the problem. Being happy and being content are not the same thing. Being content is an attitude of trust in the God who loves us. It applies his promises to our hurts and sorrows and believes that God is doing something good for us even when we struggle. It does not deny the real pain in those hurts and sorrows. But it knows that God loves us. It knows that he has a plan that will bring blessings here and in the life to come. It rests in his love.

Are we content? If we aren't, we are sinning and we deserve death and hell. But the cure to that sin is the secret to being content. What is the cure? You've all heard me say so many times that it's probably easy to tune me out this moment and say, "OK, he's up to the Jesus part now." But that's exactly what we need to hear. Jesus was the only human being who was perfectly content. He trusted in his Father and knew that he did all things for his good. Much of Jesus' life hurt. It didn't feel good to grow up poor. It wasn't pleasant to have the religious leaders of his day constantly attack him and try to trap him. And certainly, once he was arrested, he suffered pain that we can't begin to understand.

But through it all, he trusted in his Father. He was content. Today, in God's court of law, that perfect contentment of Jesus replaces all our failure to trust and discontent. And Jesus let his enemies nail him to that cross to pay for our failure to trust in God. Jesus let his Father abandon him on that cross so that he endured hell itself because our treacherous hearts deserve hell. Jesus died because death is the wages of sin. It's our wages. We earned it but he suffered it. Then he rose. He rose and declared that all of our sin is gone forever. He rose and he promised us a new and better life to come.

The God who loves you sent his Son to die for you. The God who loves you promises that nothing will enter your life that does not serve that cause of bringing you home to him. Whenever you hurt, you can remember that all this is good for you. If you doubt that truth, just go back to that cross. You see God's love for you there. The easy thing would've been for him to leave that cross and condemn us to hell. The thing that took real strength was staying there and suffering hell for us. The love that it took to do that for you is the same love that's guiding and directing your life right now. It's the same love that weighs everything that could happen to you, good and bad, and decides what joys and what sorrows you will have to face. Always, that love is drawing you to heaven. Knowing that love is the secret to being content.

II.

It's also the secret to having the strength we need to get through the difficulties of this life. We all need that strength. **Have you learned the secret? Can you do everything?** Paul says, "**I can do everything through him who gives me strength.**" I first discovered this passage twenty-eight years ago when I was basic training. It was the most stressful situation I had been in during the first nineteen years of my life. And I had a little pocket New Testament that I would read from when we had breaks. When I read this chapter of Philippians, I made this verse my motto for the rest of that experience. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

Now, what does this mean? Paul is not talking about skills. He does not mean that I can sit down at a piano and play Beethoven, because God will do a miracle. He does not mean that I will ever be able to throw touchdown passes or run four minute miles. He does not mean that I can get rich if I put my mind to it. None of those things will ever happen and I cannot make them happen, even if I approach them in faith.

The Greek word that our Bible translates as "can" really means "be strong." I have the strength for everything through him who gives me strength. Do you see the difference? I will be able to face anything through him who gives me strength. That is his absolute promise. Where does that strength come from? Not from inside me. I don't dig down deep and see what I'm really made of. I don't build up my self-esteem until I'm confident that I can face anything. All that is a lie of the devil. We're sinners and we are weak by nature.

God gives us strength. God reaches down into our hearts when he tells us that he loves us and he forgives us. God gives us strength every time we hear about Jesus, every time we confess our sins and hear that we are forgiven, every time we come to communion or remember our baptism. God works through the gospel and gives us that strength. His strength will always be enough for us. His strength will always get us through.

Sometimes, we live as if we didn't believe that. How many times have we said, "I just can't do this anymore!" Really? You can't do this anymore? So if you had to do it one more time – if you had to listen to

your kids scream or your boss yell at you or if you had to drive through that traffic or balance that check book one more time you would die? Or go blind? Or wind up in the hospital? Of course not! But you don't want to face whatever it is one more time. It's painful and stressful and unpleasant. You doubt your strength. Well, when you tell yourself that you just can't do it anymore, you're giving yourself an excuse to not trust what God tells us. You're denying that you can endure everything through him who gives you strength. That's just sin.

But again, Jesus died and paid for that sin, paid even for denying his power and promise and for making excuses for our weakness. He paid for that sin and then he washed it away from you when he baptized you. And hearing that you are forgiven is God's secret to giving you the strength to face your life without making excuses, to go forward and do the hard things that God calls us to do while we live here. God will get you through. You may collapse exhausted into bed tonight thinking that you've gone as far as you can. But tomorrow he will get you through another day. He will come to you in the gospel and comfort and renew you to go forward, come what may.

That is truly something to be thankful for! You don't have to face the world alone. Jesus stands right next to you in all things. That's the secret that God wants you to know. It's the secret to being content, in good and bad times. It's the secret to being able to face everything that God calls you to face. It's not in you. It's in him. He comes to you in the word, in communion, in your baptism. He gives these gifts to you. You have heard his gospel again tonight. Go forward with all his blessings. Be content in Christ. Be strong in the Lord. Amen.