

Do you want to know a secret?

BY DAVID POSEY

Do you want to be a tad happier in 2017 than you are now? Do you want a stronger marriage, happier children, and financial security? Would you like to navigate the winding rivers of political and cultural change with a minimum of dismay and disappointment? If so, you have to learn the secret of contentment.

The apostle Paul learned it:

Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. *Philippians 4:11-12*

He learned the “secret” of facing changes without losing his bearings. This is the context of his next sentence, one of his most famous:

I can do all things through him who strengthens me. *Philippians 4:13*

Paul had to learn what we all need to learn — how to avoid the misery fueled by an insatiable desire to have more — more stuff; more comfort; more applause; more power. Paul had to learn the secret of contentment. Before we look at how to be more content, we need to think about what contentment is *not*. It's not *stoicism*, the “principle or practice of showing indifference to pleasure or pain.” If we define contentment as a “calm acceptance of things as they are” then it's tempting to think that we must reach some kind of “nirvana,” where we reach a point that nothing outside of us affects us — we are indifferent to pain, worry, and the external world. Or, even worse, we may think that being content means we are free of ambition and drive.

But that's not it. Paul was not indifferent about his suffering for Christ (see, for example, II Cor. 4:7-12 and 11:23-33). Even in this upbeat letter to a church he loves, he says, “I am being poured out as a drink offering...” (Philippians 2:17). And later, he says he is “straining forward...” and “pressing on...” There is no lack of drive or ambition in Paul. But he was content.

Contentment is not satisfaction. “Satisfaction” is “the state of having one's desires fully appeased.” That's not contentment. I am not satisfied with my level of knowledge — and I hope I never am. I'm not satisfied with our growth at Folsom — and I hope none of us are. But we can and should be content. Contentment is also not a *suppression of desire*. The Bible is replete with “wishes” — Paul went so far as to say that he would be accursed from Christ if he thought it would save his people (Romans 9:3). C.S. Lewis says it better than I can (I find myself referring to this quote a lot these days):

It would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are halfhearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

— C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*

So, what is contentment? I don't know anyone who doesn't want to be more content but some of us are not taking the steps required to get there. Contentment requires submitting to circumstances without worry. We are not disquieted or disturbed when every wish is not gratified. But how do we get there?

Anything that must be "learned" is going to take some effort. And aiming for contentment is a two-edged sword. We know we're supposed to calmly accept our circumstances in a world filled with worry, stress, anxiety and frustration; but there is pressure for grades, for success, for accomplishments, too. We are pulled in two directions and that can lead to emotional and mental distress.

Parents in our time have not taught their children to be content. We've seen this on display in the aftermath of the presidential election. Where's it coming from? As usual, people are acting out of selfish — and often extremely childish — motives. I posted this on Facebook last week, prior to Thanksgiving.

As Thanksgiving approaches and I look around at what is going on in this beautiful nation of ours — the whining and complaining and "sky is falling" attitude — it occurred to me that our problem isn't primarily political and ideological division. It is *ingratitude*. Most of the unrest we see is not a result of not having enough; it's the result of not getting our way. Studies have shown that thankful people are the happiest people; that explains much of what is going on right now: unthankful people who don't get their way are always the most unhappy people. It's not new. Paul said in Romans 1:21, "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened." It's amazing that so many Americans cannot find it in their hearts to summon some gratitude for what they have; stated another way, it's better to light a candle than curse the darkness.

Contentment must be taught and many children have not even gotten a whiff of it. The ridiculous demands some young people are making on adults bears this out. They require "safe spaces" and "trigger warnings" so their feelings aren't hurt. Poor things; they live their lives on the edge, in a "dangerous" world — but not the danger of the battlefield, mind you, like the battlefields their grandfathers and great grandfathers fought on. This generation battles anyone who might offend their fragile egos by taking issue with their worldview.

I don't place all the blame on the young people. I blame parents who themselves haven't the foggiest notion of what it means to be content. There is little or no contentment in their marriages and their jobs and their kids reflect this discontentment. These are the overly-protective, "helicopter" parents, who, at the slightest whimper, jumped up nervously to tend to their kids. They have raised a generation of discontented, whining wimps who wouldn't know parental discipline if it ran over them. And guess what? They aren't happy children. How could they be? They've been raised by unhappy, discontented fathers and mothers.

Contentment is not something we are born with or that we can buy with a MasterCard. It's learned. Children learn it by instruction, by example and by discipline. My father — who grew up as a young man during the Great Depression — had no patience with grumbling and complaining. We found that out early on. If, while eating a meal our mother fixed, we said, "I don't like..." dad had no problem sending us away from the table with nothing to eat for the rest of the day.

"You eat what is set before you" — those are words he and his 5 brothers heard in the 1930s and he passed them on to us faithfully in the 1950s. Through those difficult times,

they learned what Paul learned: “But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.” (I Tim. 6:8).

We *learn* to be content — to calmly accept our circumstances as they are, even as we work to change them for the better. The way we become content, however, is not just in accepting our situation. There’s a more excellent way.

The more excellent way is to start each day with a mental list of things that you are thankful for. As I mention in the Facebook post, ingratitude is at the heart of discontentment. And ingratitude is a sin, as Paul points out in Romans 1:21.

Ingratitude is so ugly, not only because it views the great blessings of God as of little value, but because it shows a complete lack of appreciation for what other people are going through. In Tanzania, for example, you’ll see children smiling and thankful — why? Because someone gave them a clean cup of water. Over 1 billion people in the world face a daily crisis in getting access to clean water.

Yet, we aren’t content if the waiter is a little too slow in bringing our meal while dining at the Cheesecake Factory. We are so spoiled. We are so coddled. We think we deserve more. We are discontented.

But why? Why do I think that I’m entitled to be born in a nice, clean hospital and sleep in a clean, warm bed in an air conditioned house and get three square meals a day while, a 10 year old in Tanzania has to walk 2 miles just to get a drink of water?

There are many important lessons we need to teach our kids. But it seems to me that teaching them to be thankful should be high on the list because cultivation of gratitude is the best way to teach them to be content; and contented people are the only truly happy people.

