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Dear friends in Christ,

I'd like to start just by asking you a question, and I want you to be honest with yourself and with God. Are you content? Are you satisfied with your lot in life? Are you content with your level of earthly wealth? Or do you instead find yourself yearning for more? Do you find yourself stressed or even angry about your current circumstances?

In our reading from Scripture today, the apostle Paul makes a remarkable claim. He says: "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." And he says, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation." What's remarkable about these statements is that Paul isn't writing these words as he was planting a new church somewhere and experiencing rapid growth. It wasn't a time when the tent-making business was booming and the money rolling in. Paul wrote these words when he was sitting in a prison cell in Rome. He is in chains. In fact, he had a guard chained to him at all time. And prisons in Rome in the 1st century were not like the comfortable American prisons we see today. Think rats. Think filth. Think dark and dank. Think meals that were horrible tasting, yet not enough to satisfy hunger. Couple this with the fact that Paul doesn't know how things are going to turn out. Execution is a real possibility for him. Do you think you would be content living under such circumstances?

Yet, Paul is content. And he says, "I have learned the secret of being content whatever the circumstances." Compare to yourself... how often have you been discontent under far easier circumstances. You look at your cell phone, car, house, clothes... you name it... you compare it what others have... what you wished *you* had. You can't be content with what you have. We can be discontent in other areas as well. A man compares his wife to the models he sees in the media... he is not satisfied. A woman compares her paycheck with that of her male counterpart who's doing the exact same job. She is suddenly far from content with the pay she receives. The couple that is unable to have children looks at the family of four and yearns to have what they have. The family of four looks at the couple without children, and yearns to have the freedom they have! Oh, the irony! Neither is content, and each wants what the other has. The college student sees the big paycheck of someone in the workforce and is not content to sit in classes. The working man remembers the fun and friends of his college days and wishes he could go back to them.

A lack of contentment dwells deep inside each of us. And we don't like the situation. As odd as it sounds, we are discontent with our discontentment. We wish we could be content, but we are not! It seems like an elusive ideal that can never be attained. So our ears perk up when we hear Paul say, "**I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation.**" Well, what is it?! Tell us already!

Let's make sure we don't miss what God is teaching us here. To understand, we need to look at these verses in context. We won't go into too much detail, but it is important to know that Paul is the one who planted this Christian congregation in Philippi. In Philippi, Paul met with his share of adversity. He was arrested there, flogged, and thrown in prison briefly, but then abruptly released but told to leave town... which Paul did. But he left behind a congregation that was strong in faith, and also generous in their support of Paul and his mission work.

So Paul's letter to the Philippians is really a thank-you letter that Paul is writing to the believers in Philippi because they had sent a care-package of sorts to Paul while he was in prison in Rome. And this wasn't the first time they supported him in his time of need... they had done so repeatedly. So in response to their gift, Paul writes this: **"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. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want."** That's a strange way to write a thank you note! At first glance it may sound like he's saying, "I'm glad you renewed your concern since you had forgotten me... but that's okay since I don't really need your help anyway." But that's not what he's saying. They were concerned about Paul all along, but circumstances had prevented them from helping him. Now they were able to show their concern. And he's happy to receive their gift, not because he was discontent and in need, but because they were showing their love for him, their love for Christ, and their love for the gospel ministry of Paul. Paul rejoiced because he has partners in serving Jesus.

But we still don't know the secret, do we? We only know that somehow, Paul, who was living in horrible circumstances with an uncertain future, was content. What was the secret? Listen to the last verse:

"I can do everything through him who gives me strength." This verse is often taken out of context and misapplied. You see this verse on many plaques and in Christian artwork. People take this to mean that through God, nothing is impossible for me. I am capable of anything through God who strengthens me. But that's *not* what Paul is saying. Look at the context. Paul is instead teaching the secret to being content. The "everything" he is talking about refers back to the many situations he has found himself in. Well fed, or hungry... in times of plenty or in want." The phrase, **"I can do..."** means being strengthened for something. *I am strong enough for any and every circumstance in life through him who gives me strength.*

How can he be content in any circumstances? He can put up with anything... he can be content in everything... through God who gives him strength. In other words, Paul's secret sauce for contentment is trust fully and implicitly in God no matter what his circumstances. Or maybe this helps clarify: Paul says, "I can do hunger... through him who gives me strength. I can do... persecution... flogging... imprisonment... shipwreck... mockery... pain... poverty... and I can also do wealth through him who gives me strength. No matter what the circumstances, with trust in the God who is strong, Paul can be content in anything.

Let me see if I can illustrate this with a personal story. The year before we came back to America to serve here at Good Shepherd, we were making our annual trip from Russia to America for vacation. Our trip involved a 4 hour plane ride from Novosibirsk to Moscow. In Moscow we were to have a 3 hour layover followed by a long flight to London. A quick overnight in London, then the transatlantic flight to Chicago. That's what was planned. That's not how things turned out. The three hour layover in Moscow, turned into an 8 DAY layover. If I told you the whole story it would take two hours, so I will summarize. A mistake in the visas for two of our children prevented us from flying out of the country. We thought we might be able to fix the situation quickly at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow the next morning. We ended up spending the night in the apartment of a complete stranger who asked us at the airport if we needed a place to stay that night. She had an apartment she rented out to travelers. We were desperate, so we went. The apartment was a nightmare. It was run down, holes in the floor, cockroaches, ashtrays in the

bathroom, no toilet seat, not enough beds for our family, and the screenless windows had been open all day, letting in countless mosquitos. I hardly slept a wink that night. The next morning we found our way via public transportation to the U.S. Embassy (through this foreign city of 11 million people.) We got there only to be told it was doubtful the Embassy would be able to help us, but they would try. That day, late afternoon, the embassy told us the bad news: they couldn't help us... we would need deal with the Russian visa department directly. We had no place to stay. We would not go back to that apartment. We went out to the region of town where the 1980 Moscow summer Olympics were held, because the area had been overdeveloped and there was a chronic oversupply of hotel rooms. It was evening, we were exhausted. We made it to the checkin counter, eager to get to our room and crash... and figure out our next steps. When I tried to check us in, we were told that we were missing a necessary migration card. The document had been removed and held by the visa officials at the airport. Without that card, they said they could not check us in... and neither would any hotel in Moscow. Through all of this, I was the picture of contentment. Okay, no I wasn't. I was a wreck. Responsible for my family, stressed past the breaking point, I was at a loss. I envisioned our family of 7 sleeping in a train station. Just then she noticed our 5 year residency visa stamped right in our American passports. She hadn't seen it before because it's so rare to have one. But she realized she could register us in the hotel using that stamp in our passport. We had a place to stay!

There's much more to this story... sometime during the next very stressful day, the whole visa issue was resolved. But then British Air informed us that the next available flight was 6 DAYS later. We were stranded in Moscow for 6 days. We were staying in a tiny hotel room. Julia was 3 months old. Our four other kids slept on the floor lined up like cord wood lying on extra sheets we had to "rent" from the hotel. My wife and I slept on a twin bed with Julia in between us... sleeping on opposite edges. We had brought with us one extra set of clothes for an overnight in London. We had forgotten our main clothing suitcase back at our apartment in Russia. We handwashed our clothes each night in the hotel and hung them up to dry everywhere we could find a place.

Now what do I want to teach you about contentment from this story? Two things:
1) Through all of this, our kids were amazing. They helped with luggage. They walked for miles. And get this: They never grumbled or complained. Doesn't that sound like contentment? How could they be content in this miserable circumstance? Because they trusted Mom and Dad. They didn't know how this was all going to go down, but Mom and Dad would figure it out somehow.

So first secret to contentment: Trust your heavenly father implicitly. He's got it all figured out. He will not let you down. Whatever you're going through, just trust him and his ability to handle your situation. When you know he's in control, and you know he loves you, how can you not be satisfied?

2) Thing you can learn from this story: I can say that after the 2nd or 3rd day, even Jenny and I were pretty much content. We knew the visas were figured out. We knew we were going to get to America. So we made the most of the situation, and had the most memorable family vacation anyone could ever have. Because we knew where we would end up, we could relax and enjoy what would seem from the outside was a very bad situation.

Why can you be content in any and every situation? Because you know where you will end up. Yes, our lack of contentment and our host of other sins are a tremendous offense to our God. But he did something about it. He sent Jesus to live for us and die for us. He rose again, so we are forgiven. He promises that he will set us free from this body of sin and death. He

promises us a perfect existence with himself in heaven. This is a done deal. You know where you are going to end up. Knowing this, you can be content in whatever you have to put up with for a short time here on earth. It's only temporary!

So what's the secret to contentment? To be content, you need godly discontent. By that I mean we are dissatisfied with this dying world, and have our desires set on eternity. We are dissatisfied with our weakness and we trust in him who has all strength and all forgiveness. With a complete dependence on our God who has all strength, with our hearts set on the eternal instead of the temporal, we will be content.

In Christ Jesus, you can do poverty... broken relationships... health issues... you can do these things through him who gives you strength. You can be content.

May God strengthen our faith and reliance upon him and grant us true, joyful contentment, no matter what our circumstances... no matter what our level of earthly wealth. Amen.