

## *“The Secret to Being Happy”*

*Philippians 4:4-13*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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What makes you happy? Think about that for a moment. Is it when things go your way? When you get to do the things you enjoy? Is it when you eat a Happy Meal?

When the founders of our country wrote the Declaration of Independence, they wrote that God had endowed each of us with certain inalienable rights, including the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I think it's safe to say that as Americans, we may not be living up to everything the founding fathers had hoped but we have pretty much made the pursuit of happiness our national goal.

I'm sure you've have heard the saying, “money can't buy you happiness.” I once saw a poster that said, “All I want is the chance to *prove* that money can't buy me happiness.” I think most people, if asked, would agree that money can't buy happiness. But if you look at their lives you find a different story. These days we find so many people who devote themselves to things that they think will make them happy, even though deep down they know that those things will probably not satisfy them either.

One author put it this way: “At a time when families are smaller than ever, [people] are buying larger houses, which means they also have to buy more furniture to fill them, and that means they have to earn more and more money to pay their debt. Before long, they are having to get a better paying job. When they *find* that better paycheck, the first thing they do is buy an even bigger house, and the cycle starts again.”

Literally from the time we're born we are bombarded with the message that we *need* more stuff. Our identities become tied into the things we own. The message we hear over and over again is that if we will just get more and better stuff we will be a better person, that we'll be complete. The things we do each day are simply to provide us with more stuff. If our belongings are what define us, then the best we can do is to become better shoppers.

The problem, of course, is that we keep acquiring more and more stuff, thinking that it will satisfy us, which it can't. That's what the saying, “money can't buy happiness” means. It means that things can never fill our need for God. The need for more and more becomes an addiction. Think about how many celebrities, who earn millions of dollars, end up in bankruptcy or at least nearly broke. And it's not just celebrities. Seventy percent of lottery winners end up broke within seven years. We fall for the lie that happiness is something “out there” that we simply need to go find, and it's available at the mall.

Now don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that money or possessions are a bad thing. Desire is what motivates us to get up in the morning and go to work. What I'm talking about is excess desire – a desire for more and more that gets in the way of your relationship with Christ and with other people. Bad desire is the desire that's never satisfied.

So what's the answer? What's the secret to being happy? The Apostle Paul writes to the church in Philippi, “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.” Did you catch that? Usually when we read that verse we focus on the phrase, “I am to be content.” But there's something else that I think is more important. Have you ever tried to “will” yourself to be content or happy? Usually you end up thinking about why you were unhappy to begin with and it makes you more unhappy. Paul says, “I have *learned* to be content.” In other words, being content didn't come any more naturally for Paul than it does for you or me. We have to *learn* to be content. Happiness is not something that happens to us, it's something we learn. So how do we learn to be happy?

I think the answer is in this passage. There are three things Paul tells us to do to learn contentment and they all point in the same direction. First of all, in verse 8 he says, “whatever is true, whatever is honorable,

whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” The first step is to *think* about good things. This is sort of like mental housekeeping. Get rid of the things you think about that keep you from focusing on what’s important. Reading the Bible is the best way to train your mind on good thoughts.

The second step in learning to be content is in the very next verse, verse 9. “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—*practice* these things, and the God of peace will be with you.” A change in thinking will result in a change in behavior. It’s not enough for us to learn the Scriptures. We can never be content unless we put what we learn into practice. Following Jesus means that our lives should reflect him. Every moment of every day you’re either moving closer to Jesus or farther away. You’re either becoming more like Christ or less like him. Your actions are how you will truly know which direction you’re moving.

The third thing Paul tells us in this passage that we need to do to learn contentment is in verses 5 and 6: “Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Prayer is one of those things that is so simple that anyone can do it, and yet it’s something about which we can always learn more. Verse 5 says, “let your reasonableness be known to

everyone.” I really like the word “reasonableness” here because I think it informs how we are to pray. Let me explain.

There are a number of preachers, and you’ve probably seen them on TV, who use verse six to say that if you will only pray the right way you can have whatever you want. God has guaranteed it. If you want a new car or a big screen television, you only have to pray in the right way and the new “stuff” will be on its way. But that’s not what Paul is saying at all. He’s saying that as you learn contentment you will discover how ridiculous it is to pray for a new television. Prayer is not so much about trying to get God to do *your* will, but submitting yourself to do His will.

And that’s what we learn through this process. Paul tells us the secret to happiness, the secret to being content in verse 13: “I can do all things through him (that is, Christ) who strengthens me.” As you draw closer and closer to the risen Christ, as Jesus fills more and more of your life, the material things become less important. Not unimportant, but they are kept in their proper perspective. And when our perspective is correct then we can truly say, “In every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.” As long as we keep Jesus as the most important thing in our lives, we will be learning how to be truly happy.

*Amen.*