

Why Are You So Unhappy?

Philippians 4:11–13

Introduction

In 2008, 35% of Americans said they were *happy*. Three years later the number dropped to 33%. Throughout history the number has steadily dropped and will continue to drop. People are increasingly *unhappy* with their lives.

One recent Gallup study revealed 70% of people do not feel engaged in their jobs. They are failing to reach their full potential because their work fails to inspire them. In other words, 70% of people would quit their jobs at “the drop of a hat” because they are not *content* with it.

Sadly, not only are people dropping jobs at “the drop of a hat” but they are also dropping their mates. Since the 1860s, divorce rates have generally been increasing. In 2000, there were over 21 million divorces. Why? The overwhelming answer is, “I am not *happy*.”

To be honest, not only is the world filled with unhappy people, but the church is too. My most difficult task of the night is at this moment. I have to show you your unhappiness even when you do not think you are. Let me assure you that seeing your unhappiness could be the best thing that has ever happened to you.

Some of you possess a superficial contentment. That is why you do not see your lack of contentment. If at any point this morning you say, “I am deeply discontent,” that is a good thing. You are more likely to actually search for true contentment. We all express our unhappiness in various areas and in various ways in our life.

- Some of you hate going to work. Your happiest time of the week is Friday at 5:00 because you have finished your work week. To make matters better, you do not have to work the next day. Your most miserable time is Sunday night because you know Monday is approaching. Your heart cries, “My job pays the bills, but I am miserable.”
- Some of you mothers put your children in bed at night and grab your husband’s hands while laying your head on his shoulder. You tell him, “I love my home, my children, and you. But sometimes I wish I had one friend I can share things with.”
- Some of you hate where you are in life. You really thought you would be so much further along—living in a bigger house, having more respect at work. Things didn’t turn out terrible, but not like you planned.

If you are starting to see some of your unhappiness, that is good. That means your contentment is non-circumstantial. Admit it! You are more apt to seek for true happiness when you realize you do not have it.

A 1st century Christian¹ named Paul found the *secret of happiness*. Some of you familiar with Paul may say, “Well that's Paul. Of course he can be *happy* in any circumstance. Apostles possessed this ability—Americans do not. After all, Paul knew everything would turn out alright.” Really? Paul was under house arrest, mistreated, falsely accused, and deserted by many friends. Even worse, Paul could not lean on his good looks. Historians describe Paul as a man of little stature, partly bald, with crooked legs, eyes set close together and a hooked nose. And the happiest man in Rome laid his head down at night not in a palace, but in a prison.

In Philippians 4, Paul reveals to us his personal struggle in finding happiness. It is never easy to admit you are wrong. That is why you rarely say “I’m sorry” to your wife or knock on your boss’s door and admit you made a mistake. Confessing your failures is hard, even for Paul. In verse 11, he publically confesses one of his failures to the world.

11 Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.

Transition: Paul’s paves his path to *contentment* and *happiness* with instructions for your *happiness*. This passage answers the question posed today, “Why are you so unhappy?”

1. First, because you think contentment is a personality trait.

Have you ever met someone and wished you were “wired” like them? They are always so happy. When God gave out gifts to individuals he gave them the gift of contentment. They are naturally content. According to verse 11, this person does not exist. Paul was not wired that way either. He had to *learn* contentment. The word translated *learned* is also translated “discipled” in other places in your Bible. In other words, Paul is saying, “Through my many years of discipleship, I had to learn to be happy with what God had given me, where he had placed me, and who He had surrounded me with.”

Would you underline the word content? The word *content* (autarkes) means an internal attitude of having enough. Contentment is not a personality trait; it is a disciplined mind. Sadly, some Christians live and die without ever learning contentment. Just because you underline the word in your Bible does mean you are living it. Some Christians will only experience contentment after they die and enter into the presence of Jesus. They do not believe it is possible in this life.

Charles Spurgeon, the Prince of Preachers and a well-known Baptist in the 1800s, said,

¹ I am giving a more descriptive detail of Paul for the non-believers in the audience.

We need not teach men to complain; they complain fast enough without any education. But the precious things of the earth must be cultivated. . . . Do not indulge the notion that you can be contented with learning, or learn without discipline. It is not a power that may be exercised naturally, but a science to be acquired gradually. We know this from experience. Brother, hush that murmur, natural though it be, and continue a diligent pupil in the College of Content.²

Transition: Why are you so unhappy? First, because you think contentment is a personality trait.

2. Secondly, because you think contentment depends upon perfect circumstances.

Some of you are waiting for all the pieces of the puzzle of life to fall perfectly into place before you find contentment. You truly believe it will come after. . .

- You pay the debt off the vehicle
- You buy the lake house
- You get married
- You get the new job
- You reconcile the conflict

The problem arises when you complete the step, you find out happiness is in the next step. The events taking place in verse 12 could be compared to tennis players hitting a ball from one side of the court to the other. Paul in a similar manner hits contentment from one extreme in life to another.

12 I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.

Happiness is found *in* the extremes of life. Not in *one* extreme but in *every* extreme. Do not be mistaken by the word *both*. Paul is not indicating it takes both extremes for contentment. You may be saying, “Well, if it takes poverty and wealth to be happy, I have had poverty for years. Now all I need for happiness is wealth.” No! Contentment is found *in* every extreme. Paul said. . .

12 I know both how to be abased [live in humble means]. . .

To live abased means to financially tighten the belt. Paul knew what it was like to live with an empty cup. I told a man one time that wealth would not bring happiness. He told me, “Neither will poverty.” He is right. Contentment does not come *because* of the circumstances but *in* them. Stephen Davey says it best: “Contentment does not come because you have conquered your circumstances, but because you have learned to live with them.”

² Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Morning by Morning* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 47.

Again and again Paul had been “brought low”. The verb abased is also used with in reference to Christ in Philippians 2:8 (Christ humbled himself). Paul knew what it meant to be brought low. He knew what it was to hunger, thirst, be cold, lack the proper clothing, suffer, endure mental torture, and receive persecution. Some of you are abased today. Life has knocked you down into humble means. You are brought low. . .

- Your husband left you and he is not coming back
- You lost your job a month ago, but still get up and dress like you are going to work because you are so ashamed to tell your wife you lost your job.
- Your kids are causing you heartache like you have never experienced
- You are forced to work at a job that deep down you feel is beneath you
- Your life is filled with pain because of a disease
- Your childhood torments you

You are wondering if it is still possible to be happy. Yes. Yes. It’s possible. Paul continues...

12 ... and I know how to abound [I also know how to live in prosperity]...

Paul says I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. Paul learned to live with an overflowing cup. There are more unhappy people living in mansions than there are living in modest homes. Why do you think this is the case? Why are wealthy people on more anti-depressants than poor people? You say, “That is easy—because they can afford it.” [Pause] Well, maybe—but possibly the answer runs deeper than affording pills.

Many of you sitting in this auditorium are a prime example of someone abounding. Compared to the rest of the world, especially third world countries, you are wealthy. People all around the world look at what you possess and think it will bring happiness: a car, a home with more than one bedroom, a home made out of brick instead of straw or mud, or even living in America. Does it? Are you happy? Or are you looking at something someone else has and thinking that will do the trick?

Our prayer life even reveals our lack of happiness in our abundance. It usually shows by putting the word “but” at the end of a thank you.

- Thank you, Lord, for friends, but I wish I had more.
- Thank you, Lord, for my health but could You eliminate my arthritis?
- Thank you, Lord, for my house, but I really need one with more bedrooms.
- Thank you, Lord, for my food, but I really wish I had money to eat out more often.
- Thank you, Lord, for my clothes, but I really wish I could afford to dress classier.

The truth is we have so much –we do not know how to handle it with happiness. When your cup runs over, instead of thanking God, you complain about the size of his cup.³

³ Adapted from a sermon by Stephen Davey.

Paul states,

12 ...every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.

Notice the two words *every where*. Some of you are convinced contentment rests in moving. You have seen the grass, and it's greener over there. You see all the good in a different location and only the bad in your current location. Notice the next four words, *and in all things*, these *things* refer to the extremes of life. Contentment is not found *from* these things but *through* them.

Let me give a caution concerning contentment. Contentment does not mean. . .

- That you're never going to change jobs. some of you are verbally abused and need to leave that environment. Others are offered better money and better hours and God may have you to take that opportunity.
- That you should never desire to excel. Work hard! Even better, work smart. Climb the corporate ladder; just do not think the ladder leads to happiness.
- That you should not seek for ways of improvement. Learn, read, and never stop growing.

Contentment is not about lowering expectations. You see, this Gospel contentment removes none of your drive, but all of your restlessness.

Transition: Why are you unhappy? Because you think contentment is a personality trait. Because you think contentment depends upon perfect circumstances.

3. Thirdly, Because you think contentment is possible in your own strength

Sadly, verse 13 remains one of the most incorrectly used verses in the Bible. It says, 13 I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.

Sports stars cling to it in order to win a game. Business owners place it their office in an attempt to make the fortune 500. One preacher, while driving through a multi-million dollar subdivision, said to his wife, "We will never be able to live in places like this." She said to him, "You just have to have faith. After all, we can do all things through Christ." If I said this man's name, it is likely everyone here would know him. Before we point the finger at the pastor of the largest church in America, let us first repent for mistreating the verse ourselves.

We have ripped this verse out of its context while it kicked and screamed. He is not saying you can win a marathon when you're overweight. Some of you know how difficult it is to hit a straight drive on the golf course. It's just as difficult to interpret this verse. We tend to slice into the prosperity gospel or hook into the entrepreneurship gospel. The first, the prosperity gospel, emphasizes the first two words *I can*, and the second, entrepreneurship gospel, emphasizes the words *all things*. Just as Jesus was crucified between two thieves, this verse is often crucified between two errors. Do not

reduce this verse to an entrepreneurship gospel. It was not written to help you win a game. It was written for men like the Christian India who was sentenced to be skinned alive for his faith. While they took out knives, he told them, "Take off these robes of sin; I shall soon put on robes of righteousness." And he did just that. Read this verse in view of persecution, not success.

A proper interpretation of this verse looks like this; *I can* means *I will*. *All things* means in all *these things*—"I will endure all these things through Christ..." Paul could endure all the things mentioned previously because of Christ. Or I could say it this way: Paul could be happy in anything because of Christ who infused strength into him. No matter what things come your way; they cannot take away your happiness.

- Can you suffer the loss of your job and remain happy through Christ?
- Can you live with a loss of food or comfort and still be happy?
- Can you endure prison and still be happy? Paul did.
- Paul also could handle the heights of success and remain happy. Can you?
- Can you handle having plenty?
- Can you handle never missing a meal and still be happy?
- In the language of this verse, Can you handle the extremes of life?

Christ infuses you with strength. Contentment comes from Christ. The world cannot touch what Christ gives you.

- You can be happy even though you have a disrespectful child
- You can get through this unemployment
- You can get through the divorce of your parents
- You can endure this disease that will one day take your life.

The world cannot touch your contentment. The reason Paul could live in such extremes is not because of his ability. He was not super Christian. He could endure because Christ enabled him to live in various and ever changing circumstances. Christ infused strength within him. You can be content in whatever situation or place God gives you. I am still trying to learn this truth. It will take years for you to work this into your heart so it is your default setting.

Do not allow yourself to accept any superficial substitutes for contentment. Do not settle for anything but Gospel contentment. Will you connect the words contentment (in verse 11) and Christ (in verse 13)? That is the secret. Real contentment is found in Christ. There is a void inside of every man that only Jesus can fill. God designed the Christian life in such a way that no person including a wife or child can fill that void. Only Jesus can. You need to repent of the failed attempts to find happiness in other things. The one who can forgive your sin is the same one who can make you happy.