

November 25, 2018

Thanksgiving 2018
Cultivate Contentment
Philippians 4:10-13

Opening words: Kelly Doty lived in Paradise, California. For the last several years, she spent Thanksgiving Day delivering meals to low-income families. This year, she received one. The reason is simple; you know the story. Paradise, California, a community of 27,000 people, is now gone, wiped away by a wildfire. 85 people perished in that fire and over 200 are missing. Kelly Doty was forced to relocate to Battle Ground, Washington, where she and her two sons live with a relative. Kelly lost everything, except some personal photograph albums. In a world that expects to thrive, there wasn't much to be thankful for on this Thanksgiving. Yet, that isn't Kelly's story. When someone asked her what she was thankful for this Thanksgiving, she hugged her sons, smiled and said, "*I am thankful we survived.*" She learned that contentment comes from relationships, not possessions. I think there is a sermon in that story. Let me ask you a question: How contented are you?

On this Thanksgiving weekend, we are instructed from Paul's letter to the Philippians. Do you remember the background? The city of Philippi was named after King Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. The citizens of this prosperous Roman colony were proud of their Roman citizenship. They dressed as if they were in Rome itself. No one has ever questioned the authorship of this letter. The early church accepted the fact that the Apostle Paul was the author of this letter. He wrote it during his house arrest in Rome in the year 61. He wrote to the Philippians to thank them for a gift they had sent him. However, he took that opportunity to update them on his situation, encourage them in the faith, challenge them to be unified and humble, and warn them to keep their theology pure. Our reading for today is Philippians 4:10-13. Let me call this message *Cultivate Contentment*.

Philippians 4:10-13 ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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.

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) is one of the great names in American history. He once said, "*Content makes poor men rich; discontent makes rich men poor.*" This is my question for you today: How contented are you? If that question makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

Did you know, Thanksgiving did not become a national holiday until 1941? However, Americans have been observing a day of thanksgiving for generations. Historians tell us the first recorded Thanksgiving took place in Jamestown, Virginia. This is the story. The winter of 1610 was harsh at Jamestown. Many settlers died. The group that once totaled 409 had been reduced to 60. Tradition tells us the survivors prayed for help, without knowing when or how it might come. When help arrived in the form of a ship filled with food and supplies from England, a prayer meeting was held to give thanks to God. There is no mention of a feast. Maybe that is why it is not the famous Thanksgiving?

Ten years later, in 1620, the Pilgrims left Southampton, England. They headed to North America because they longed for religious freedom. They began their journey with two ships, the *Speedway* and the *Mayflower*. There was trouble from the start. As they sailed around the south tip of the British Isles, the *Speedway* was ruled unseaworthy. The two ships stopped, and some of the Pilgrims went home. However, some of the *Speedway's* passengers boarded the *Mayflower*. Because of the extra weight, the trip took longer than the estimated 66 days. They had navigation problems, too. They wanted to go to Virginia, but they arrived in New England. It was November, and the weather was harsh. There was no time to build permanent shelters, so they survived their first winter in the New World in crude temporary housing. In time, disease came, and the death toll began to rise. Only 51 of the original 102 saw the spring. When spring came, two things happened. First, the dead had to be buried in unmarked graves, so the local natives would not know how small their numbers had grown. Second, they were forced to make a painful choice. The *Mayflower* was a rented ship. It had to be returned. Would they stay in America, or return to England? They decided to stay, and their luck began to change. Friendly Native Americans helped them plant 30 acres of wheat and build permanent shelters. By the fall of 1621, their homes were built, and their crops were harvested. They decided to observe a day of thanksgiving to thank God for his blessings. The Pilgrims saw what they had, not what they wanted. That is how we are different from the Pilgrims. They were thankful that they had survived. We expect to survive; we long to thrive. In contemporary America, we take a whole day to thank God for what we have, and get up early the next day to buy some more.

How much money did you spend on Black Friday? Just think about these numbers for a moment.

Did you know, according to the National Retail Federation, Americans spent \$5 billion on Black Friday last year?

Did you know 174 million Americans shopped between Thanksgiving and Cyber Monday last year?

Did you know the average shopper between Thanksgiving and Cyber Monday spent an average of \$334 last year?

Did you know the biggest spenders, millennials aged between 24 and 35, spent an average of \$419.52 last year?

Did you know 50% of holiday shoppers will only shop on line? 36% of shoppers will never shop on line.

That is a great amount of money and a great deal of shopping. Did you know, according to CNBC, the average American carries a credit card balance of \$6,375? Thanksgiving and Black Friday make an odd couple. This is the problem. All of our shopping is not making us content, or happy. Did you know, according to the Harris Poll, only 33% of Americans consider themselves happy? So, let me ask you the question of the day. How contented are you? If that question makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** Let us look at this morning's scripture lesson.

We find ourselves in the fourth chapter of Philippians. These are some of the greatest words in the Bible. Do you remember my opening words? It is important that you know Paul wrote these words while under house arrest, facing an uncertain future. There is no reason to believe he didn't fear execution. He wasn't interested in thriving. He was more like the Pilgrims; he was more interested in surviving. That is what makes verse 11 so incredible. That verse says, *"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances."* Did you hear what he said? He said, you can learn to be content in any circumstance. Facing death itself, he learned to be content. How contented are you? Is there anyone here today, who needs to learn how to be content?

There is a woman by the name of Cindy Keating. She writes a Christian blog. She says there are certain things content people do. That means, if you don't do these things, then you will become discontented. I have distilled her list of eight things down to four. So, what do content people do?

Contented people don't compare their journey to others. How much time do you spend comparing yourself to others? It is easy to compare yourself and your possessions to others. It is easy to fall into the trap of, "I wish," "If only," "They're so lucky." But what's the point? Focusing on your faults and someone else's strengths will not change one single thing about yourself or your situation. Keating says, you should focus on what you do have. How much time do you spend comparing yourself to others? If you have an answer, say, **"Amen!"**

Contented people don't run from their imperfections. How much energy do you spend hiding your imperfections? This is the truth: Every single human being on this earth has faults. No one is flawless. To assume people are perfect only proves how toxic our thinking can be. The first step in loving yourself is to admit you aren't perfect and move forward. Imperfections can be our greatest teachers if we see them as the catalyst for personal growth and change. How much energy do you spend hiding your imperfections? If you have an answer, say, **"Amen!"**

Contented people value relationships, not possessions. Who do you seek out when life is hard? You can't do life on your own. We like to think we can – like we're

tough and impenetrable and that life won't drag us down. But we're human. To find people who you can be safe and real with is what creates a strong foundation you can stand on when the going gets tough. But in order to have quality friends in your time of need, you need to *be* a quality friend in *their* time of need. Important investments take time. Reciprocal relationships take work. Who do you seek out when life is hard? If you have an answer, say, **"Amen!"**

Contented people don't take life for granted. Are you blind to your own accomplishments? You would never be where you are today without that math teacher, that music instructor, that football coach, your Grandma, your Mom, your Aunt. Your life at present is marked with achievements and success because of the people who helped you get to where you are today. It takes but a few minutes to compile a list stating all the amazing things you already have. Try it. You'd be amazed how much you have going for you at this moment. Are you blind to your own accomplishments? If you have an answer, say, **"Amen!"**

The Pilgrims never heard of Cindy Keating, but they applied her lessons to their lives. We remember the Pilgrims on that first Thanksgiving as being content because the foundation of their lives was their relationships, not their possessions. Consider this fact with me. With everything there is to buy in America, you can't buy contentment.

When I was young, my parents seemed to spend every Thanksgiving with my father's Aunt Nelma and her friend, Ruth. Those were simpler times. No one questioned their relationship then; we might now. They lived in Shaker Heights in a small apartment. They cooked the traditional turkey dinner and my mother brought the desserts. There were seven of us. In addition to myself, there were my parents, my sisters and our hosts. We would sit around their tiny kitchen table. I remember sitting on a bench at the corner. My father would pray, and we would eat. However, what was more important was, we talked. After dinner, people came by to visit. After they were gone, we would pile into our tiny family car and drive around Cleveland to look at the Christmas lights. I cherish those Thanksgiving memories, because I valued each one of those relationships. I have lost everyone around those early Thanksgiving tables, except my sister, Susan. Consider this with me. I received a Christmas present every year of my childhood, and I have forgotten each one. However, I haven't forgotten those relationships. They were not just important to me then, they are still important to me. I know they are waiting for me in heaven.

Life has taught me that contentment comes from my relationships, not my possessions. What has life taught you? How contented are you? Benjamin Franklin once said, *"Content makes poor men rich; discontent makes rich men poor."* And, all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**