Walking from the parking garage to the office, a person heard one of the street vendors mutter to themselves “I would be content if I could just have $100 today.” This office worker thought about that as they continued walking. Then this sudden urge overwhelmed them to have the privilege to make someone in this world satisfied. So the office worker turned around, walked back to the street vendor and gave that vendor five $20 bills. The vendor was confused at first, but then thanked the office worker again and again for such a generous and undeserved gift. The office worker walked away really excited – isn’t it great to be able to give something so someone could be content. But as office worker paused out-of-sight to take the wonder of that moment in, they heard the vendor cry out, “why didn’t I say $200?”

I don’t know if you’ve ever thought about it, but money, things, activities, or possessions cannot and will not make us content. Although we always think, “I’d like to try.” We can get excited about money, activities and things, but more stuff doesn’t lead to a lasting contentment. Contentment is something that must be learned and it is not dependent on how much or how little we have. This seems so countercultural because we Americans really have convinced ourselves that if we could just get one more thing, or one more raise, or one more complement or one more relationship then we would be satisfied.

There’s something about contentment that I have been experiencing lately with my health. As the regulars here know, I have a form of muscular dystrophy that was passed on to me genetically by my father, his mother and her mother. It is one that progresses slowly but had definitely caught up to me. I have gone from being a very active outdoorsman to needing a powered wheelchair here at church. In February I couldn’t put my coat on by myself and I needed 2 hands to comb my hair – and there is not much up there! Through the help of many people here at the church in the spring, we were able to make everything in my home easier to use which allowed me to use my limited strength for more important things. Then in the early summer a new extensive genetic test pinpointed my genetic problem.

So for the first time in 49 years, since I was diagnosed with this family disease, there was something that could potentially help. I started taking some medicine at the end of August and within the first 3 weeks you started to notice a difference. And I continue to get stronger every week. After a number of you realized that a positive change was happening to me, you said something like, “you must really be excited to be able to walk again.” And I gave you back a funny answer, “Well actually I am not feeling that much different because I was content back when I couldn’t walk very much.” I was trying to describe a profound change inside me that I didn’t have words for. I still don’t think I have the words for it but I am going to try because when we learn to be content now, it makes any future blessing so much richer.

As my muscles have started to come back and I can now do some simple things that I haven’t been able to do – like take out the garbage, there is a deep appreciation and joy I experience in
that comes when a deep NEED is met. It wasn’t like getting cool fresh water when you are
really, really thirsty on a hot day or having someone help you when you have been stranded on
the side of the road a long time or when you finally figure out how to do something that has
frustrated you a long time. While I had many needs - Leisa, you, the Lord, my wheelchair and
other helps were allowing me to get those things done. I was fine with that. I had come to a
contentment with my disability – and simply sought to do the best I could for Jesus with
whatever little strength I did have. I sought to find a way to overcome the obstacles I faced.
There was a level of contentment I had come to that didn’t depend on me getting better or more.
And I definitely looked forward to my new resurrection body, the millennium and eternity of
most American Christians. HOWEVER this summer, each time I rode my wheelchair around
the neighborhood or explored the fields around my neighborhood in my chair, I DID feel that
excitement of a need finally met. I would breath deep and think, “I can finally explore on my
own again – this is so great!”

Then as my muscles started to come back and I started to walk more freely – there was a much
different feeling. It was not relief from a NEED being met – like I felt getting around freely in
the neighborhood for the first time in 4 years in the wheelchair. Instead it was a kind of settled,
pure joy, deep down. I wasn’t worried I might lose these new abilities or they wouldn’t last or
they wouldn’t get stronger because I had already come to experience contentment in those
situations. Instead this deep appreciation was totally something EXTRA – like when you you
are already at peace and then quietly watch a sunset or sit on a beach watching the calm waves
or watch the snow fall from a warm room! That positive is deeper, more profound & more
settled than some of the exciting joy we feel when a need or want is met. It is also not so needy
or expectant of the future. As I said, I still don’t have the words for it, but I am beginning to see
a really, really profound reason God would have us go through problems in life encouraging us
to learn contentment in those times, because every blessing we receive later is so much more
profound, positive and lasting. In fact, I am beginning to believe that learning contentment in
the situations we face today is going to help us appreciate everything of heaven so much more
than we could ever conceive. And I don’t think someone can learn these lessons of contentment
outside of problems. In other words, I don’t think God’s call for us to learn contentment is just
for the moment or so we aren’t such a pain to be around! I think learning contentment in many
different kinds of situations actually will multiply exceedingly the future blessings God has for
us.

PROPOSITION: Contentment is not the absence of desire but focusing our desire on that which
has higher or eternal value - the long term benefits are more than we can envision!

I. True contentment deepens joys and thanks

A. Contentment is not the absence of desire

Paul is in prison when he writes the letter of Philippians under the inspiration of the
Holy Spirit. So he is facing a lot of problems, especially losing his freedom and not
being able to do the missionary work God has called him to. Now Epaphroditus, who
almost died when Paul sent to help out the Philippian church, has returned bringing welcomed news from the people and also a financial gift. At this time, prisoners in the Roman system were dependent upon outside support for everything. So this isn’t an extra like a birthday or Christmas present. Yet Paul’s thank you here is more than just having a need met – his previously learned contentment has magnified and deepened his joy & thanks for their unexpected gift. READ Phil 4:10-11. So what is contentment? How do we get this sense of peaceful easiness inside?

Some have pictured contentment as the absence of desire. Eliminate all emotions and you’d be more “level” or “at peace” in life. If you aren’t hungry or wanting companionship, then you won’t be anxious inside. Eliminate your desires then worry & concern will disappear. That is not the Biblical definition of contentment because Jesus, who knew how to be content, definitely exhibited strong emotions. Jesus wept when Lazarus died even though He knew He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead in a few minutes. Jesus was super upset at the temple was being used for profit. Jesus boiled inside because of the Pharisees heartlessness. True contentment doesn’t come by trying to eliminate our desires or emotions to bring more settledness into our lives.

Others, like the Stoics, pictured contentment as a kind of self-sufficiency. If we could come to the place where we didn’t need anyone, or anything, then we could be content & at-peace inside. The Stoic ideal was a kind of self-contained superman who could rise above anything. The word used for “content” here is the same one the Stoics specifically used. Yet it is clear from the context, especially v 13, that Biblical contentment is not based on self-sufficiency but reliance on Jesus.

Still others see contentment as just accepting everything. It is almost the opposite of the Stoics - there is nothing you can do about it, so it is best just to accept every and any thing. That is “fatalism” and definitely not what the New Testament is giving us since we’re on mission with Jesus to change the world, one transformed life at a time.

B. Contentment enhances any gifts/grace received
So ‘contentment’ doesn’t come from getting rid of desires – Paul wanted to be out of prison badly. He wanted to be back sharing Jesus openly. But contentment definitely enhances any positives that come into our lives beyond just the immediate effect. READ v 11. Paul wanted the Philippians to know that his joy was NOT because they finally got around to helping him when he was all alone and helpless in jail. Learning contentment doesn’t have to do with gaining more stuff or getting better but it does enhance any future gift or grace we receive including heaven. This winter I had a choice when I could no longer when I could no longer go up steps & had difficulty putting on a coat by myself. Was I going to choose the path of contentment in dependence on Jesus or was I going to feel sorry for myself, worry and be upset that God wasn’t helping me enough. After 49 years of decline, I had come to the place where I didn’t expect my body to get any better until the rapture.
C. Contentment allows us to see so much more
That contentment made daily life a little easier for all of you (and for me) because I wasn’t complaining about my situation but encouraging you & myself to keep overcoming. I was genuinely excited about my raised chairs, handicap ramp, powered wheelchair and accessibility helps – but I was also content knowing full well my physical abilities would continue to get worse and limit me from doing even more things. That contentment allowed me to see so much more of the blessings that I did have! READ v 10. Paul saw more in their gift than just physical help – he experienced the joy of their concern – of wanting to do something to help, but not having anyway to show that. In fact in the second part of v 10 he made it crystal clear he was not complaining about any lack of caring or action on their part. His coming to that place of contentment in the midst of being imprisoned, unsure of the future, & unable to evangelize and church plant was actually leading Paul to appreciate more than their gift – but their love, concern and caring!

II. True contentment must be learned 
Philippians 4:11 b-12
READ v 11-12. True contentment is something we must learn – and that learning is not just intellectual. We have to learn it deep within us through the problems of life. Just because a person commits his or her life to Jesus as their Savior and Lord – repenting of their sin, believing Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty of our sin and rising again bodily from the dead to prove He really is God incarnate and the one we need to surrender our lives to – just because a person commits their life to Jesus as Savior and Lord doesn’t mean we are content. Just as we must learn to pray so we also need to learn how to be content in the midst of different circumstances – both good or bad!

A. We are naturally discontent over time (wanting more)
I actually believe our normal bent is discontent. While we want to be content as that is much easier to live with, as time goes on we tend to move back to discontentment. Biblically, we can’t blame our circumstances – satan & the demonic were discontent in the perfection of heaven & God’s person – Eve and Adam were discontent with the paradise of Eden – and Americans Christians today are discontent a bunch in life even though we have more than the vast majority of people on planet earth today. Like the word “no” to a toddler, it just seems so much easier to learn discontent, than contentment. Contentment lessons must be constantly relearned. We must take our eyes off what we don’t have or we will miss what we do have!

B. Contentment doesn’t come from getting more, having more or having a need filled
Notice there are three sets of contrasts here in v 12. READ v 12. The first and last set speak about physical needs in general, while the middle set refers to food (and I love food!). Despite these very opposite situations, there is a spiritual equilibrium contentment brings into our life. Simply put, we need to learn that contentment doesn’t come from getting more, having more or having a need met. That is not natural for Americans! In fact, Paul seems to state here that it is just as hard to be content if you have lots of money, power, food or possessions as it is to be content
when you can’t meet your basic needs, don’t have any food, or are in serious financial trouble!

C. Contentment is not dependent on the circumstances
(1 Corinthians 4:11-13; 2 Corinthians 4:8-12; 11:24-27)

Contentment is also not dependent on the circumstances. It is dependent on our focus. It wasn’t God’s will for Paul to be rich or to be hungry – but it was God’s will for him to share Jesus Christ with those who would never hear whether he was hungry or well fed. It isn’t God’s will for us to be in need or to have plenty, but it is God’s will that we glorify Jesus in all we do whether we are in need or have plenty. I have always sought to prepare you spiritually for the future whether my body worked or it didn’t work – whether I was in a good mood or a bad mood – whether you were appreciative or in a complaining mood. In learning contentment, we are taking on the values of God and then want to live those regardless of our circumstances.

Consider Paul’s circumstances ...

- I Corinthians 4 - “To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless... We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world” (1 Corinthians 4:11-13, NIV)
- II Corinthians 4 - “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed... For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body.” (2 Corinthians 4:8-12, NIV)
- II Corinthians 11 - “Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.” (2 Corinthians 11:24-27, NIV)

If Paul can learn contentment given all these bad circumstances in his life, we can too.

D. Contentment is a decision

Ultimately contentment comes down to a decision. You’ll see that clearly in the 4 page article on Joni Erickson Tada in your bulletin. It took her 2 years to finally surrender the bitterness and self-pity to start to move toward godly contentment. God has been working on me for 49 years to let go of any idea that my physical disability was the cause of discontent – I needed to make the decision to do the best for the Lord with what I had now, rather than wish I had a different situation to be serve God. That decision is seen even more clearly in a Pastor friend of mine named Paul.
June 2014, he had an itch. It started on his left forearm then went to his right forearm then down to both ankles. He didn’t think much of it at the time. But then it turned to feelings of electrical shock and numbness. Within a couple months, it turned to pain. For the next 2 ½ years Pastor Paul went in and out of countless doctors’ offices and undergoing countless tests to try to find the source of this unrelenting strong pain throughout his body. They could find nothing. Unlike my muscle weakness which simply prevents me from doing simple things, he had intense pain as his physical abilities were fading away.

A Biological Researcher in that church shared Paul’s situation with a fellow researcher who had previously worked in the Undiagnosed Disease Program of the National Institutes Of Health (NIH). They encouraged Paul to apply. He was accepted and in Feb 2016 he went for a week of testing. They also sequenced his whole genome – 7 months later they contacted him to say he has Fahr’s disease, an extremely rare genetic neurological degenerative disease that takes calcium from the bones & places it in the brain which messes up one’s whole nervous system. There is no therapy, no medicine nor anything that helps. Currently he struggles with walking, has little balance and often can’t sleep. The super strong opioid pain medicine only dulls the pain for a time – he seems to be suffering without remedy.

Last month he said to a group of us in Mass, “everyone will go through suffering – some go through physical suffering as I am, others go through emotional suffering, still others go through relational suffering. While all of our sufferings are different they all end up at the same point – we face 2 different gates. One gate is the gate of bitterness, the other gate is the gate of joy.” Then from a heart which had gone through more than 3 years of agonizing pain & steadily declining abilities, He stated, “I committed to go through the gate of joy.” There is no such thing as wasted or needless suffering with the Lord Jesus Christ. Now there is not a day he wakes up without pain. But he made the decision NOT to go the way of bitterness, but asked Lord to help him go the way of joy. He determined to continue to walk in faith with Jesus! Temporal losses become eternal gains when they force us to transfer our affections to Christ. Then Paul told us that he has learned more in the last 3 years than the previous decade, has grown spiritually more through this than anything else, he has experienced the presence of the Lord in more powerful ways and has been transformed himself a lot in a little time. If given the chance to go back in time and skip these 3.5 years of Fars, he wouldn’t. That is what Joni says in the article. And that is what I said to you about my MD before I started to get better.

III. We get empowerment for true contentment from Jesus 

A. This verse is an often quoted verse & the conclusion of the paragraph “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” is one of the most frequently quoted verses of the Bible but it is also the conclusion of this paragraph about learning how to be content.
B. Jesus gives us strength (in all situations)

We get the empowerment for contentment from Jesus—not our will-power, not our temperament, not our resources and not our situation. We can’t manufacture this contentment, make it happen by self-reliance, or gain it by having more money, bank accounts or security. In making God’s ways our ways and seeking to do God’s will whatever our circumstances, we actually rise above the circumstance, because our trust and our empowerment are from Jesus. Through small steps of faith in our lives and God’s exceeding grace to us, we become more content and more confident that Jesus will use our pathetically insignificant, but sacrificial sacrifices to do more than we could think or imagine. There is a great paradox here as we are strong when we are weak and we are weak when we are strong.

C. This verse most specifically deals with power for contentment

READ v 13. This verse was never meant to be put on the ceiling at the gym to get a new personal best or on your desk at work to reach a new sales goal. It was meant to help you truly be content in a broken world—not by eliminating desires, not by becoming totally self-reliant and not by just accepting what comes. That contentment is one we need to keep re-learning—every day in the case of Pastor Paul or Joni Erickson Tada. These heroes of the faith in our day must face that question of what gate they are going through, every day. So if you want to fly—go to flight school—but please don’t take the controls of an airplane reciting Philippians 4:13. But if you want to experience a greater depth to this life and the next, apply this verse to being content in all situations.

D. If circumstances cause us to curse God, we are holding on too tightly

If you start getting spiritually soft or lazy when things are going good or if you want to curse God when things are going bad or if you are constantly consumed with worry, then you know you are holding on too tightly to things in this life. Our possessions mean responsibility not ownership. We didn’t bring anything into this world and we’re not taking anything out. Let’s make our focus glorifying Jesus in all we do and in any kind of situation. There is no action you can take to become content—it is a direction—a path that goes through difficulties and goes through times of plenty in a different way. It is NOT about what we don’t have and having more can’t produce it. It comes in genuine reliance on Jesus—not to get the goods to make our lives easier now—but reliance on Jesus to be content in any and every situation—the situation is not the key, but serving and glorifying Jesus in that situation is.

Now I am not anywhere near the level of Biblical contentment I think I should be at, but the place I probably came closest was my physical disability with muscular dystrophy—having the practice of my body declining the last 49 years gave me plenty of practice. But now that I have experienced a tiny part of what we will all experience in heaven—where I have regained abilities I never dreamed I could—I realize learning contentment magnifies all the future blessings we will receive. Heaven, and any future blessings in this life, will be so much richer when we step trying to avoid all problems in this world but instead overcome in Jesus’ power and for Jesus’ purposes.