

Some reasons why Burroughs calls Contentment a “Mystery” Lesson 3

To the Christians who had “joyfully accepted the plundering of their goods” (Hebrews 10:34) the Apostle commands: **“Let your behavior in this world be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, ‘I will never, no, never, leave or ever forsake you.’ Therefore we may boldly say: ‘The LORD is my Helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?’”** (Hebrews 13:6, 7)

In this lesson we will be considering the sermons Jeremiah Burroughs preached under the heading “The Mystery of Contentment.” They are found in The Rare Jewel chapters 2, 3, and 4 in which he gives 15 reasons why contentment is mysterious. He writes:

“There is a great mystery and art in what way a Christian comes to contentment... that a man should be content with his affliction, and yet thoroughly sensible of his affliction too; to be thoroughly sensible of an affliction and to endeavor to remove it by all lawful means, and yet to be content: there is a mystery in that... How to join these two together: to be sensible of an affliction as much as a man or woman who is not content; I am sensible of it as fully as they, and I seek ways to be delivered from it as well as they, and yet still my heart abides content... But grace teaches such a mixture, teaches us how to make a mixture of sorrow and a mixture of joy together... this mingling of joy and sorrow while in a contented state.” (Burroughs, page 41)

Perhaps we should substitute the contemporary word ‘counterintuitive’ in place of ‘mystery.’ Why do these principles of Christian contentment sound so foreign or even foolish to the carnal mind, the man of the world, and even to disciples who have been church members for a long time? For instance, why would God teach: “I will train My children to be contented by sending them afflictions?”

In Biblical language the term “mystery” does not describe a principle that is impossible to understand or that is hidden so as to be eternally undiscoverable. It highlights the proposition that such a truth cannot be known unless God’s Spirit reveals it to us. We could never understand it on our own. It requires divine illumination to become apparent.

As we proceed I would like you to remember the definition of contentment introduced last week. Run Bible teaching and narratives through the grid of this definition and judge whether or not it passes Scriptural muster.

“Contentment is an active, untroubled presence of mind that accepts God's varied providences with a satisfied heart and continues to perform its Christian duties with joy.”

Quote from Burroughs’ life - the chapter of his flight to Rotterdam. (Simpson, page 80)

“Upon arrival in Rotterdam, Burroughs might have been tempted to sulk about his apparent downward spiral. He had left Emmanuel College full of hope, fed by the desire to be useful in Christ’s service and for the advancement of His kingdom. Instead, he was forced out of his first job at Bury St. Edmunds for speaking out against sin and was silenced at his second job for refusing to conform to unbiblical ceremonies and superstitions. After that, his sphere of influence narrowed as he was allowed to preach only to a limited number of friends and their families. Then he was forced to flee his beloved country or face imprisonment. Burroughs may have been tempted to wonder: Does God fail to reward faithfulness? Or is it possible that following Christ means, in some cases, that matters actually get worse? Paul’s words from 2

Timothy 3:12 seemed to ring true: 'Yes, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.'"

"Though such reflection was probably inevitable, Burroughs exhibited only contentment during this time. He later wrote one of his best-known books on the subject, entitled *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. This book was no theoretical discourse. The topic was not speculated upon in a vacuum detached from his personal experience. Rather, Burroughs was a living sermon; he simply preached on what he himself had lived and learned."

(Keep in mind that while in Rotterdam Burroughs was preaching to a congregation of displaced English pilgrims. They had left their homeland because they above all wanted to worship God in sincerity of truth according to a thoroughly Biblical pattern. The year was 1638. King Charles had installed Archbishop Laud as his inquisitor and religious policeman to require elements of divine worship contrary to and in addition to what God had prescribed in His Word. Those who left England did so at a high cost to themselves and their families. They lived as sojourners in a foreign land, and they undoubtedly at times faced temptations of regret, second-guessing, and questioning of the divine goodness of the God they were attempting to obey.)

Some reasons why is Christian Contentment a Mystery or Counterintuitive to the wisdom of this world.

1. The Christian is the most satisfied man in the world, and yet the most unsatisfied man in the world. He is satisfied when he has only a little, and yet could not be satisfied if he were the richest man in the world. A soul that is capable of being filled with God and of enjoying God will be satisfied with nothing but God. (Hebrews 13:6, 7)
2. A Christian comes to contentment not so much by way of addition as by way of subtraction. It is as appropriate for me to bring by desire down to my circumstances as to raise my circumstances up to my desires. He can recognize that his circumstances are for the present moment the best circumstances. Or said another way, "Contentment does not come by getting what we want but by wanting what we get" (Simpson, page 81). "This is why many godly men who are in a low position live more sweet and comfortable lives than those who are richer." (page 46)
3. There might be a burden of circumstances or affliction, but the burden of sin should be recognized as the greater burden. Charge yourself with the burden of your sin and the burden causing your discontent will be lessened. "How are you doing?" "I have gotten much less than I deserve." It is better to accept the greatest of afflictions than to excuse and tolerate the least of sins, (Burroughs, The Evil of Evils, (Job 36:21) "proving that there is more evil in the least sin than there is in the greatest affliction.") The first message is entitled, "It is a very evil choice to choose sin rather than affliction." So consider that this view of sin is promulgated by the man most known for his gentle, sweet contentment of soul. I wrote in this book in January of 09, "I begin this work again, reasoning by the impression God has made upon my soul, that since there is a hell in which sinners receive infinite punishment, the sin that put them there, justly, must be infinitely evil."
4. Perhaps the removal of the affliction is not as necessary as the changing of the affliction into something else. Think of Joseph in the dungeon or of Paul with his thorn in the flesh. God meant to change the affliction into something of a blessing.

5. A Christian comes to contentment not by making up for the wants of his circumstances, but by the performance of the work in his circumstances. Let me spend my strength doing the duties demanded in my circumstances. "I know nothing more effective for quieting a Christian soul and getting contentment than this, setting your heart to work in the duties of the immediate circumstances that you are now in, and taking heed of your thoughts about other conditions as a mere temptation." (Acts 13:36 referenced) "Do the next thing."

6. He learns to melt his will and desires into God's will and desires.

In Acceptance Lieth Peace ~Amy Carmichael (quoted by Bridges)

He said, 'I will forget the dying faces;
The empty places,
They shall be filled again.
O voices moaning deep within me, cease.'
But vain the word; vain, vain:
Not in forgetting lieth peace.

He said, 'I will crowd action upon action,
The strife of faction
Shall stir me and sustain;
O tears that drown the fire of manhood cease.'
But vain the word; vain, vain:
Not in endeavour lieth peace.

He said, 'I will withdraw me and be quiet,
Why meddle in life's riot?
Shut be my door to pain.
Desire, thou dost befool me, thou shalt cease.'
But vain the word; vain, vain:
Not in aloofness lieth peace.

He said, 'I will submit; I am defeated.
God hath depleted
My life of its rich gain.
O futile murmurings, why will ye not cease?'
But vain the word; vain, vain:
Not in submission lieth peace.

He said, 'I will accept the breaking sorrow
Which God tomorrow
Will to His son explain.'
Then did the turmoil deep within me cease.
Not vain the word, not vain;
For in Acceptance lieth peace.

(May we substitute, "in Acceptance lieth contentment"?)

7. The mystery of contentment consists not in bringing anything from outside to make my condition more comfortable, but in purging out something that is within. (James 4:1)

8. From page 56: "A gracious heart gets contentment in a mysterious way, a way that the world is not acquainted with." He lives off the dew of heaven. (A mysterious thing, Where does it come from? How does it get there? Where does it go? How does it nourish to growth?)

Reference here Jesus' statement to His disciples in John 4, "**I have food to eat of which you do not know.**" (John 4:32) How true this is! And it is applicable to every day of our lives. The world has no way of knowing by experience what we are talking about. It is inscrutable to them. I have been with Jesus. I have heard Him speak. He has given me instructions about how to serve Him. It is my meat and drink.

In one respect the saint on earth can glorify God on earth more than he will be able to do in heaven. Here we are beset with afflictions, persecutions, pain, disappointments, and tears. In heaven there will be none of those evils. Here in this life the Christian may bear them with contentment of soul, valuing Christ's fellowship as sweeter than all the afflictions. Such forbearance and even joy in the midst of trials and temptations honor and glorify God. There will be no opportunity to cry tears of suffering in the life to come. So rejoice that you can glorify God in this life, in the midst of this veil of tears, in a manner that will be impossible in the estate of glory. "That you may be strengthened with all might according unto His glorious power, unto all patience and long-suffering with joyfulness," Paul's prayer for the Colossians 1:11.

Summary, from page 59: "I have what I have from (1) the love of God, and I have it (2) sanctified to me by God, (3) and I have it free of cost from God by (4) the purchase of the blood of Jesus Christ, and I have it (5) as a forerunner of those eternal mercies that are reserved for me; and in this my soul rejoices."

Listen to Richard Sibbes: "A Christian is not at the mercy of the world; his contentment is not a dependent contentment" (a statement, I think, which gives clarity to the "self-sufficient" term). "You may cast him into prison, you may impoverish him, you may labor to debase and disgrace him; but can you take away his comfort? Can you take away his grace? Can you take away the love of God? No; God will rather increase all upon him. For the best things of a Christian are not at the mercy of the world, nor at the mercy of his several conditions. Prosperity and adversity, these are out of him. He has a state depending upon the good will and pleasure of his Father, who loves him better than he loves himself, and out of love will work good out of the worst condition that can befall him." (Vol. 5, page 181)