

A close-up photograph of a stone architectural detail, likely a frieze or cornice. The stone is a warm, reddish-brown color. A horizontal band of intricate, dark-colored relief carvings runs across the middle of the frame. The carvings depict a dense, swirling pattern of leaves and vines, possibly representing a classical or medieval decorative motif. The stone shows signs of weathering and age, with some darker, possibly carved or eroded areas. The background is a blurred, light-colored wall.

Huddle, Dec 6 2019

Philippians 4:11-12:
The secret of contentment

The fascination of the “secret”

“¹¹Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹²I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.”
(Philippians 4:11-12)

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μυέω (myeō): to initiate, instruct in the sacred mysteries; in NT, to be disciplined in a practical lesson, to learn a lesson

αὐτάρκης (autarkēs): sufficient or adequate in one’s self; contented with one’s lot

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What is the secret?!

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Question: *Who is the most contented person you’ve every known?*

Outline

- ❖ The literary, historical and cultural context
- ❖ Four Interpretations:
 - ❖ The Early Church and Calvin: Surviving riches
 - ❖ Wesley and A. Motyer: The healthy church organism
 - ❖ An ancient-modern interpretation
 - ❖ What does Jesus say?

The *historical* context: *friendship*

- ❖ The Philippians had just sent a gift of support to Paul, who is in jail in Rome
- ❖ Paul was eager to acknowledge their gift without obliging them to send more

“¹We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ² for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³ For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints...” (2 Cor 8)

- ❖ Even with this context, Paul’s statement is striking

The *cultural* context: self-sufficiency and mystery

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Mystery religions

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The Stoics and Cynics

αὐτάρκης (autarkēs): sufficient or adequate in one’s self; contented with one’s lot

Seneca: “The happy man is content with his present lot, no matter what it is, and is reconciled to his circumstances.” “The wise man is sufficient unto himself for a happy existence.”

The *literary* context: “garrisoning” yourself with the “mind of Christ”

- ❖ Both Paul and the Philippians were suffering persecution
- ❖ The Philippian response to external pressure was causing fissures in their fellowship
- ❖ Paul’s instructions for surviving a caustic environment (1st cent. or 21st):
 - ❖ Have the “mind of Christ”
 - ❖ “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others”
 - ❖ Rejoice (a choice), give thanks, and present your requests to God
 - ❖ Don’t be like Israel in the desert: no grouching; choose to focus on the positive (“whatever is true...”)
 - ❖ Knowing Christ:
 - ❖ “I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of *knowing Christ* Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish... ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the *power of his resurrection* and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.”

The *literary* context: “garrisoning” yourself

Is *this* Paul’s secret?

- ❖ Both Paul and the Philippians are “garrisoning” themselves in their fellowship
- ❖ The Philippian request (1:3-6) is a “garrisoning” of the heart (1:10-12):
- ❖ Paul’s instructions (1:12-26):
 - ❖ Have the “mind of Christ”
 - ❖ “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others”
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Early Church commentators and the snare of riches

- ❖ The early church writers and Calvin focus on something altogether unexpected: *riches*
- ❖ This interpretation has going for it that it draws directly from Paul's talk of "plenty and need"

Early Church commentators and the snare of riches

ORIGEN: “Suffering poverty is often thought to be a tribulation, but abundance also may be an occasion for tribulation. The wise person restrains himself from being enervated by abundance”

AUGUSTINE: “All sorts of people indeed can suffer poverty, but to *know how to suffer poverty* is a mark of greatness. Likewise, who is there who may not abound? But to *know how to abound* belongs to none but those who are not corrupted by abundance.”

CHRYSOSTOM: “Abundance does not yield either knowledge or virtue. How so? Because just as penury occasions much wrongdoing, so does plenty. Many who have become affluent have become derelict. They do not know how to bear their good fortune. But not so with Paul, for what he received he spent on others. He emptied himself for others.”

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ORIGEN: "Suffering noverty is often thought to be a tribulation, but abundance also restrains him. The wise person is not proud of his poverty, but to *know how to be content* is there who may not be proud but those who are not content with their poverty." The average American has material riches beyond those of the ancients. The wise person is not proud of his poverty, but to *know how to be content* is there who may not be proud but those who are not content with their poverty.

AUGUSTINE: "All men are not content with poverty, but some are content with abundance? But they are corrupted by riches. *The Early Church: If you want to be content, know how to handle your riches.* They do not know how to be content with their poverty, but some are content with abundance? But they are corrupted by riches. They do not know how to be content with their poverty, but some are content with abundance? But they are corrupted by riches." The average American has material riches beyond those of the ancients. The wise person is not proud of his poverty, but to *know how to be content* is there who may not be proud but those who are not content with their poverty.

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Early Church commentators and the snare of riches

ORIGEN: "Suffering riches is a tribulation, but abundance also is a tribulation. The wise person restrains himself from riches."

AUGUSTINE: "All things are made to suffer poverty and to abound? But the rich are corrupted by their abundance."

CHRYSOSTOM: "Abundance is a snare. Because just as a man who has become rich and who has become content with his wealth bears his good fortune on others. He emp



a tribulation, but abundance also is a tribulation. The wise person restrains himself from riches. The wise person is not content with riches, but to know how to use them. There is no one who may not be rich, but those who are not rich are not content. How so? Because they do not know how to use their riches, so does plenty. Many are rich, but they do not know how to use their riches for what he received he spent

Calvin concurs!

CALVIN: “If a [person] knows to make use of present abundance in a *sober and temperate manner, with thanksgiving, prepared to part with everything whenever it maybe the good please of the Lord, giving also a share to his [fellow believer], according to the measure of his ability, and is also not puffed up, that person has learned to excel, to abound.*

This is a peculiarly **excellent and rare virtue**, and much superior to the endurance of poverty. Let all who wish to be Christ’s disciples exercise themselves in acquiring this knowledge which was possessed by Paul, but in the meantime

let them accustom themselves to the endurance of poverty in such a manner that it will not be grievous and burdensome to them when they come to be deprived of their riches.”

Early Church commentators and the snare of riches

Questions:

- ❖ Each generation sees its own struggles reflected in Scripture. What struggles do we see reflected when we read this passage?
- ❖ How does your wealth (or deficit) impact your contentment?

Wesley and Alec Motyer: The Church organism

WESLEY: “[When Paul says] to abound [he means] having wherewith to relieve others also.”

ALEC MOTYER (20th cent. Irish pastor, scholar and IVP author):

“[Paul] thus enunciates a principle: *one Christian has enough because another Christian is generous.*

Or, since ‘every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above’*, *the Lord uses generous Christians to help needy Christians**.*”

This interpretation has going for it that is a perfect description of Paul’s relationship with the Philippians.

* 2 Cor 8:1-15 esp. vv. 13-15

** Rom 12:13; 2 Cor 9:1, 6-7; 1 Pet 4:8-9

Wesley and Alec Motyer: The Church organism

- 2 Corinthians 8:13-15: “¹³I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a *fair balance between* ¹⁴*your present abundance and their need*, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. ¹⁵As it is written, ‘The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.’”
- 2 Corinthians 9:6-10: “The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything [αὐτάρκεια], you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹As it is written, “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.”

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2 Corinthians 9:6-7: “Who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each of you must do as you have decided in your heart to do, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything [αὐτάρκεια], you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹As it is written, ‘He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.’”

God's breathtaking plan for his Church: a worldwide, Spirit-driven network supplying needs as they arise

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Excerpt from Dr. Clive Calver,
pastor, author and past
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Wesley and Alec Motyer: The Church organism

Questions:

- ❖ When have you seen this “breathtaking plan”, the “healthy church organism”, at work? When have you been on the receiving end?
- ❖ Humble suggestion: *Ask God to use you to meet needs of others, even (especially?) those you don't know about*

An ancient/modern view: Learning to trust

MOTYER: “The second factor in producing contentment is a Christian’s own *attitude toward circumstances*.

“Paul was contented because God was trustworthy and to be glorified in even when (by worldly standards) he seemed not to be! The apostle had learned to be content because *he had learned to trust*”

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“First of all, we must decide not to covet.

“Because [Paul] had freed himself from the covetous spirit, he was able to ‘ride’ every sort of circumstance (vv. 11-12). David of old, great man that he was, fell before the temptations of hardship and of prosperity alike (1 Sam 27:1; 2 Sam 11:1+). Joseph, earlier on, had triumphed in each arena (Gen 39:9; 40:8). Paul was in the line of Joseph. *Circumstances no longer had the power to touch him, for he was content.*”

An ancient/modern view: Learning to trust

F. F. BRUCE (Scholar, commentator and IVP author): “‘To be content with what you have’ (Heb 13:5) seems to have been a general precept in the early church. This attitude is the opposite of covetousness, against which both Jesus (cf. Lk 12:15) and his disciples uttered solemn warnings, describing a ‘greedy person’ as ‘an idolater’ (Eph 5:5).”

This interpretation has going for it that comes out of the beating heart of Philippians in chapter 3: “For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, ...in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and ...a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but *one that comes through trust** in Christ, the righteousness from God based on *trust**.”

* πίστις (pistis): faith, trust; Tim’s modification to NRSV

An ancient/modern view: Learning to trust

MCCALLUM (pastor) : Contentment is (not here, but generally) best contrasted with *pleonexia*, loosely translated “lust,” but broader than that.

We are not content because we experience the effects of one form of lust or another, whether it’s sexual lust or materialism or the need to be in control of our time or pride or dissatisfaction with relationships—the list goes on and on.

Each of these represents the subtle belief that God won’t provide.

We develop contentment not as the result of some valley or mountaintop experience but by daily, in small ways, learning to turn from *pleonexia* to trust.

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We are not content with one another, whether in our time or place and on.

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Motyer, Bruce and McCallum:
To be content learn to trust.
To learn to trust, identify where you are *not* trusting God.

one form of lust or the need to be in control tips—the list goes on ‘t provide.

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Excerpt from McCallum's teaching

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Each of these represents the subtle belief that God won't provide.

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An ancient/modern view: Learning to trust

Question:

- ❖ Where are you most *discontent*? How has your answer to this changed over the last ten years?

Jesus: God is trustworthy

Matthew 6:25, 31-34: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ... So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

This interpretation has going for it that it isn't an interpretation of Philippians. It's Jesus' teaching on the same topic.

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If we aren't content, what are we seeking after?

Jesus: What did you expect?

John 15: 18: “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. 19 If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.”

Luke 9: 58: Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”

Paul agrees:

1 Tim 6:6-8: “Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment [αὐτάρκεια]; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these [ἀρκέω]”

Jesus: What did you expect?

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Luke 9: 58: Jesus replied, “The Son of Man has no place to rest, but the Son of Man will be Son of Man.”

Paul agrees:

1 Tim 6:6-8: “Of course contentment [ἀρετή] is a great virtue, but we can take nothing with us to the next world, so that content with these [ἀρκέω]”

Excerpt from *Quick To Listen* interview with Durmomo Gary, from South Sudan and now of World Relief.

Durmomo was convinced by family and friends to flee Sudan when he became a target of the authorities for his faith.

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Jesus: What did you expect?

Questions:

- ❖ True or false: your heart is where your *time* is. If you want to detach from worldly cares and pursue the kingdom, examine your schedule
- ❖ ...if you answered true, why aren't pastors and missionaries more content than the rest of us? Or are they?

Summary: If you want to be content...

- ❖ Paul: Have the *mind of Christ*
- ❖ Early Church and Calvin: Watch how you handle your *abundance*
- ❖ Wesley, Motyer and Paul: *God has a plan* to use others to support you when you are in need, and *vice versa*
- ❖ Bruce, Motyer, McCallum: Spot those *places where you are discontent*
- ❖ Jesus: Set your *expectations* right and *trust* God, pursuing the *kingdom*

Summary: If you want to be content...

- ❖ Paul: Have the *mind of Christ*
- ❖ Early Church and Calvin: Watch how you handle your *abundance*
- ❖ Wesley, Motyer and Paul: *God has a plan* to use others to support you when you are in need, and *vice versa*
- ❖ Bruce, Motyer, McCallum: Spot those *places where you are discontent*
- ❖ Jesus: Set your *expectations* right and *trust* God, pursuing the *kingdom*

Question:

Do you wish you were more content? What are you willing to do about it?

How well do you know Jesus?

A proposal for Huddle 2020

*“I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ
Jesus my Lord”*

Jesus:

- ❖ *First-century rabbi*
- ❖ *Member of a persecuted minority*
- ❖ *Oldest child of a single parent*
- ❖ *From the sticks?*
- ❖ *Outsider*
- ❖ *Harsh? Compassionate?*

Possible topics:

- ❖ *Jesus in the OT*
- ❖ *Jesus as rabbi: Jesus’ teachings v. early rabbinic teaching*
- ❖ *Jesus and the authorities*
- ❖ *Jesus and outsiders/seekers*

