Learning to Be Content

by Mark S. Wheeler

Each one of us wants to find content, yet we search for it in the wrong places. We long for better health, more money, a bigger house, a newer car, a thinner waistline.

The Greek Stoics rightly believed that contentment did not consist in possessing much but in wanting little. "If you want to make a man happy," they said, "add not to his possessions, but take away from his desires." An important step toward finding contentment, then, is learning to do without.

While we are capable of learning to do without, we are not able to do this apart from God's help. True contentment is a supernatural quality that is developed in us only as we depend on Jesus Christ for strength. While the Stoics said, "I will learn contentment with a deliberate act of my own will," Paul said, "I can do everything through Him who gives me strength."

The Stoics believed that contentment was a human achievement, for Paul it was a divine gift. The Stoic was self-sufficient, Paul was God-sufficient. The late Greek scholar Kenneth S. Wuest translated Philippians 4:13: "I can do all the things that I need to be content, in all circumstances, at all times."

My father demonstrated contentment during two periods of crisis in his life. The first period occurred when I was in high school. My father was employed in the aerospace industry in Southern California in the early 1970s. Due to a defense cutback, his job was eliminated and he was laid off from work. It took 10 months before he was able to find another job.

The second period of crisis took place during the last four years of his life. During that time my father lost his eyesight and he regained it; he was in an accident in which his car was struck by a train but he recovered from that accident; he developed cancer and he finally died.

During these crises, my father was a contenant man. When he lost his job, he did what he could to find another one. When he developed cancer, he was given no hope and he underwent every treatment that the doctors ordered. But he did not complain. He calmly accepted what God had brought into his life. My father demonstrated to me and to others what it means to be content.

Contentment does not require a formula; it requires an attitude of dependence on God. When we start the life with Jesus, we feel pressure to keep up with the world, we need to ask God to help us to be content with whatever He has given us, the strength to endure. Then we will be able to say with Paul, "I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances...I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

Mark S. Wheeler is pastor of Christian Church, a member of the Christian Church in Illinois. He and his wife, Carol, have two children. They make their home in Wheaton. © 1989 Mark S. Wheeler.