

# The Art of Divine Contentment



# The Art of Divine Contentment

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Edited by Don Kistler



Soli Deo Gloria Publications  
*. . . for instruction in righteousness . . .*

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# Epistle to the Reader

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Christian Reader,

Having seriously considered the great dishonor done to almighty God (as well as the prejudice which accrues to ourselves) by the sin of discontent (a universal and epidemic sin), it put me upon the study of this subject at first. Nor is it incongruous to handle this next in order to “The Christian Charter” [reprinted by Soli Deo Gloria in *The Sermons of Thomas Watson*], I showed you there the great things which a believer has in reversion. Things to come are his, and here behold a Christian’s holy and gracious deportment in this life, which reveals itself in nothing more eminently than in being content.

Discontent is to the soul as a disease is to the body: it puts it out of temper and much hinders its regular and sublime motions heavenward. Discontent is hereditary, and, no doubt, is much augmented by the many sad eclipses and changes that have fallen out of late in the political body, yet the disease is not to be excused because it is natural, but resisted because it is sinful. That which should put us out of love with this sullen distemper is the contemplation of the beautiful queen of contentment.

For my part, I do not know of any ornament in religion that more bespangles a Christian, or glitters in the eye of God and man more, than this of contentment. Nor certainly is there anything wherein all the Christian virtues work more harmoniously or shine more transparently than in this orb. Every grace acts its part here. This is the

true philosopher's stone which turns all into gold. This is the curious enamel and embroidery of the heart which makes Christ's spouse all glorious within. How should every Christian be ambitious to wear such a sparkling diamond!

If there is a blessed life before we come to heaven, it is the contented life. And why not be contented? Why are you angry, and why is your countenance fallen? Man, of all creatures, has the least cause to be discontented. Can you deserve anything from God? Does He owe you anything? What if the scene were to turn and God put you under the blackrod? Whereas He now uses a rod, He might use a scorpion. He might as well damn you as whip you. Why, then, are you discontented? Why do you give way to this irrational and hurtful sin of discontent? May the good Lord humble His own people for nourishing such a viper in their breast as not only cuts out the bowels of their comfort, but spits venom in the face of God Himself!

Oh, Christian, if you are overspread with this fretting leprosy, you carry the man of sin about you, for you set yourself above God and act as if you were wiser than He, and would sassily prescribe to Him what condition is best for you! Oh, this devil of discontent which, whenever it possesses a person, makes his heart a little hell!

I know there will never be perfect contentment in this life. Perfect pleasure is only at God's right hand, yet we may begin here to tune our instrument before we play the sweet lesson of contentment exactly in heaven. I should be glad if this little piece might be like Moses' casting the tree into the waters, to make the bitter condition of life more sweet and pleasant to drink of.

I have once more ventured to address the public. I acknowledge this work to be homespun. Some better hand



might have made a more effective draft, but, having preached upon the subject, I was earnestly solicited by some of my hearers to publish it, and although it is not dressed in that rich attire of eloquence as it might have been, I am not about poetry or oratory, but divinity. Nor is this intended for fancy, but practice.

If I may herein do any service, or cast but a mite into the treasury of the church's grace, I have my desire. The end of our living is to live to God, and to lift up His name in the world. May the Lord add an effectual blessing to this work and fasten it as a nail in a sure place. May He, of His mercy, make it as spiritual medicine to purge the ill humor of discontent out of our hearts, so that a crown of honor may be set upon the head of religion, and the crystal streams of joy and peace ever run in our souls. This is the prayer of him who is desirous to be a faithful orator for you at the throne of grace,

*Thomas Watson*

From my study at Stephens, Walbrook  
May 5, 1653

# To The Christian Reader

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“A word spoken in due season, how good is it!” (Proverbs 15:23). As God “giveth to His creatures their meat in due season” (Psalm 104:27), so His “faithful stewards provide for His household their portion of meat in due season” (Luke 12:42). And as it is with corporal food—the season adds much, both to the value and usefulness thereof—in like manner it is with spiritual food. In this regard, the brokenness of these times (wherein the bosoms of most people are filled with alarm, and their mouths with murmurings) may well render this treatise all the more acceptable. The seas are not as stormy as men’s spirits are tempestuous, tossed to and fro with discontents.

And now the Lord, who “maketh everything beautiful in His time” (Ecclesiastes 3:11), has most opportunely put into your hand a profitable discourse to calm unquiet hearts. Adam, in paradise, dashed upon the rock of discontent, which some divines conceive was his first sin. This, with many other instances in Scripture, together with our own sad experience, both identifies our danger and calls for caution. Now godliness is the only sovereign antidote against this spreading disease, and God’s grace alone, being settled and exercised in the heart, can cause steadiness in stormy times. Whereas “contentment arises either from the fruition of all comforts, or from not desiring some which we have not,” said Dr. [Joseph] Hall. True piety puts a Christian into such a position. Hereby we both possess God and are taught how to apply Him who is the only satisfying, everlasting portion of His people. Herein

Christ, though poor in this world, greatly rejoiced. “The Lord is the portion of my inheritance; the lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places, yea, I have a goodly heritage” (Psalm 16:5–2). Upon this account also Jacob said, “I have enough” (Genesis 33:11), or, as the original renders it, “I have all.”

God the Father and Christ His Son had sweet satisfaction in each other when there was no other human being; therefore those who possess and improve God through Christ cannot possibly be dissatisfied. The Almighty is the God of all grace (1 Peter 5:10), all comfort (2 Corinthians 1:4), and of salvation (Psalm 68:20), in which respects neither deficiencies nor disappointments, losses nor crosses can cause disquieting discontents in that bosom where faith is commander-in-chief. The prophet Habakkuk rejoiced in the God of His salvation when the pestilence went before him and burning coals came forth of his feet (Habakkuk 3:5, 17–18), and when he supposed all creature succors both for delight and necessity to be quite removed. This is the life toward which Christians should endeavor, and which they may attain by the vigorous, regular actings of precious faith. This is the gain of contentment which comes in by godliness when providences are black and likely to be bloody.

“Now the just shall live by faith” (Habakkuk 2:4). That speech of learned Mr. [Thomas] Gataker is weighty and well worth marking: “A contented mind argues a religious heart, and a discontented mind argues an irreligious heart.” And that worthy divine Mr. [Richard] Greenham was bold to say, “They never felt God’s love, or tasted forgiveness of sin, who are discontented.” This likewise was a holy breathing of Reverend Dr. [Joseph] Hall in his *Meditations*: “I have somewhat of the best things. I with

thankfulness enjoy them, and will lack the rest with contentment." By attaining and maintaining this frame of heart, we might have much of heaven on this side of heaven. Holy contentment makes them truly rich whom the oppressing world makes very poor. Hereby our sweetest morsels shall be well seasoned, and our most bitter portions well sweetened.

Had we learned to enjoy contentment in Jehovah, who is immutable and all-sufficient, this heavenly frame of spirit would never perish or change in the midst of the most amazing alterations in church and state with which his Majesty is pleased to exercise us. Because we depend on outward things, therefore we are apt to die upon the nest through dejectedness, upon the approach of imagined dangers. When God sees cause to cut us short of many creature accommodations, faith will moderate our desires after them, assuring the soul that nothing is withdrawn or withheld which might really be advantageous; and doubtless it is a great piece of happiness upon earth not to long after that which the Lord is pleased to deny. Indeed, men act rather like heathens than Christians when they fret upon some particular inferior disappointments, notwithstanding God's liberality laid upon them in many other respects. Alexander, the Monarch of the world, was discontent because ivy would not grow in his gardens at Babylon. Diogenes the Cynic was herein more wise who, finding a mouse in his satchel, said that he saw that he was not so poor but that some were glad to have what he left behind.

Oh, how might we, if we had hearts to recognize higher providences, rock our peevish spirits quiet by much stronger arguments! Let us, then, lay before our eyes the practices of pious men recorded in Scripture for our imi-

tation, such as Jacob (Genesis 28:20), Agur (Proverbs 30:8), and Paul (1 Timothy 6:8). And let us charge home upon our consciences divine exhortations backed with strong reasons and encouraged with sweet promises. It was the grave counsel of holy [Richard] Greenham, "Having food and raiment, take the rest as an overage."

Are we not less than the least of God's mercies? Is not God our bountiful Benefactor? Why, then, do we not rest contented with His liberal allowance? Oh, let us chide our wrangling spirits and encourage confidence with contentment in God as blessed David did!

My pen has outrun my purpose for this preface, so I will no longer detain you, good reader, wherein I have designed to quicken and to prepare you for the more fruitful use of this seasonable treatise, wherein the author has exercised to good purpose the Christian graces and the ministerial gifts with which God has enriched him.

Herein the doctrine of Christian contentment is clearly illustrated and profitably applied. The special cases wherein, through change of providences, discontents are most commonly occasioned are particularized, and are preservatives applied to the soul. Although some other worthy divines have been helpful to the Church of God by their discourses upon this subject, yet there is much of peculiar use in this treatise. The apostle tells us that some "manifestation of the Spirit is given unto everyone to profit withal" (1 Corinthians 12:7). Your soul's profit is propounded as the author's end in publishing this piece. That this end may be accomplished is the unfeigned desire and hearty prayer of him who is your servant in and for Christ,

*Simeon Ashe*



# Chapter 1

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## *Introduction to the Text*

“I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.” Philippians 4:11

These words are brought in by way of prolepsis to anticipate and prevent an objection. The apostle had, in the former verses, laid down many grave and heavenly exhortations, among them to “be careful for nothing” (verse 6). This is not to exclude a prudential care, for “he that provideth not for his own house has denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel” (1 Timothy 5:8); nor a religious care, for we must give all “diligence to make our calling and election sure” (2 Peter 1:10); but to exclude all anxious care about the issues and events of life: “Take no thought for your life, what you shall eat” (Matthew 6:25). And in this sense it should be a Christian’s care not to be careful. The word “careful” in the Greek comes from a root that signifies to cut the heart in pieces, a soul-dividing care. Take heed of this. We are bid to “commit our way unto the Lord” (Psalm 37:5). The Hebrew word means to “roll thy way upon the Lord.” It is our work to cast care, and it is God’s work to take care. By our immoderacy we take His work out of His hands.

Care, when it is either distrustful or distracting, is very dishonorable to God. It takes away His providence, as if He sat in heaven and did not mind what became of things here below, like a man who makes a clock and then leaves

it to go by itself. Immoderate care takes the heart off from better things, and usually, while we are thinking how we shall live, we forget how to die. Care is a spiritual canker that wastes and discourages, and what good do we get from it? We may sooner add a furlong to our grief than a cubit of comfort by our care. God threatens it as a curse: "They shall eat their bread with carefulness" (Ezekiel 12:19). It is better to fast than to eat of that bread. "Be careful for nothing."

Now, lest anyone should say, "Yes, Paul, you preach that to us which you have scarcely learned yourself! Have you learned not to be careful?" the apostle seems tacitly to answer that objection in the words of the text: "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content."

This is a speech worthy to be engraved upon our hearts, and to be written in letters of gold upon the crowns and diadems of princes. The text branches itself into these two general parts:

- I. The scholar, Paul: "I have learned";
- II. The lesson: "in every state to be content."



# Chapter 2

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## *The First Branch of the Text*

I begin with the first, the scholar and his declaration, “I have learned,” out of which I shall observe two things by way of paraphrase.

First, the apostle does not say, “I have heard that in every state I should be content,” but, “I have learned.”

**DOCTRINE 1: It is not enough for Christians to hear their duty, but they must learn their duty.** It is one thing to hear and another thing to learn, just as it is one thing to eat and another thing to cook. St. Paul was a practitioner. Christians hear much but, it is to be feared, learn little. There were four sorts of ground in the parable of Luke 8:5–8, and only one good ground—an emblem of this truth that there are many hearers, but few learners. There are two things that keep us from learning:

1. Slighting what we hear. Christ is the pearl of great price. When we disesteem this pearl, we shall never learn its value or its virtue. The gospel is a rare mystery: in one place it is called “the gospel of grace,” in another “the gospel of glory,” because in it, as in a transparent glass, the glory of God is resplendent. But he who has learned to condemn this mystery will hardly ever learn to obey it. He who looks upon the things of heaven as things by the by, and perhaps conducting a trade or carrying on some political design to be of greater importance—this man is on the high road to damnation and will hardly ever learn the things of his peace. Who will learn that which he thinks is

scarcely worth learning?

2. Forgetting what we hear. If a scholar has his rules laid before him and forgets them as fast as he reads them, he will never learn. Aristotle calls the memory “the scribe of the soul” and Bernard calls it “the stomach of the soul” because it has a retentive faculty and turns heavenly food into blood and spirit. We have great memories in other things. We remember that which is vain. Cyrus could remember the name of every soldier in his huge army. We remember injuries. This is to fill a precious cabinet with dung!

But how easily do we forget good! As Jerome said, “How soon we forget the sacred truths of God!” We are apt to forget three things: our faults, our friends, and our instructions. Many Christians are like sieves. Put a sieve into the water and it is full, but take it forth from the water and all runs out. So while they are hearing a sermon they remember something, but take the sieve out of the water—as soon as they have gone out of the church—and all is forgotten. “Let these sayings sink down into your ears,” said Christ in Luke 9:44, or, as it is in the original, “Put these sayings into your ears.” A man who would hide a jewel from being stolen locks it up safely in his chest. Let them sink down. The Word must not only fall as dew that wets the leaf, but as rain which soaks to the root of the tree and makes it fruitful. Oh, how often Satan, that fowl of the air, picks up the good seed that is set down!

Let this put you upon a serious trial. Some of you have heard much. You have lived forty, fifty, sixty years under the blessed trumpet of the gospel. What have you learned? You may have heard a thousand sermons and yet not learned one. Search your consciences. You have heard much against sin. Are you hearers or are you scholars?

How many sermons have you heard against covetousness, that it is the root on which pride, idolatry, and treason grow? One calls it a complex sin, which brings a great many sins with it. There is hardly any sin but covetousness is a main ingredient of it, and yet men are like the two daughters of the horseleech that cry, "Give, give." How much have you heard against rash anger, that it is a short frenzy, a dry drunkenness, that it rests in the bosom of fools (Ecclesiastes 7:9), and yet upon the least occasion your spirits begin to take fire?

How much have you heard against swearing? It is Christ's expressed mandate, "Swear not at all" (Matthew 5:34). This sin, of all others, may be termed "the unfruitful work of darkness" (Ephesians 5:11). It is neither sweetened with pleasure nor enriched with profit, the usual vermilion wherewith Satan paints sin. Swearing is forbidden with a curse. While the swearer shoots his oaths like flying arrows at God to pierce His glory, God shoots a flying roll of curses against him; and do you make your tongue a racket by which you toss oaths like tennis balls? Do you sport yourselves with oaths as did the Philistines with Samson, which will at last pull your house down around your ears? Alas! How have they learned what sin is who have not yet learned to leave sin? Does he know what a viper is who plays with it?

You have heard much of Christ; have you learned Christ? The Jews, as Jerome has said, carried Christ in their Bibles, but not in their hearts. Their sound went into all the earth (Romans 10:18). The prophets and apostles were as trumpets whose sound went abroad into the world, yet many thousands who heard the noise of these trumpets had not learned Christ: "They have not all obeyed" (verse 16).

A man may know much of Christ and yet not learn Christ. The devils knew Christ (Mark 1:34).

A man may preach Christ and yet not learn Christ, as did Judas and the pseudo-apostles (Philippians 1:15).

A man may profess Christ and yet not learn Christ. There are many professors in the world whom Christ will profess against (Matthew 7:22–23).

QUESTION. What is it, then, to learn Christ?

ANSWER 1. To learn Christ is to be made like Christ, when the divine characters of His holiness are engraved upon our hearts. “We all with open face, beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image” (2 Corinthians 3:18). There is a metamorphosis: a sinner viewing Christ’s image in the glass of the gospel is transformed into that image. Never did any man look upon Christ with a spiritual eye but went away quite changed. A true saint is a divine landscape or picture where all the rare beauties of Christ are portrayed in a lively manner and drawn forth. He has the same Spirit, the same judgment, and the same will with Jesus Christ.

ANSWER 2. To learn Christ is to believe in Him as “my Lord and my God” (John 20:28). It is when we not only believe God, but believe *in* God, which is the actual application of Christ to ourselves, and is, as it were, the spreading of the sacred medicine of His blood upon our souls. You who have heard much of Christ, and yet cannot with a humble adherence say, “my Jesus,” be not offended if I tell you that the devil can say his creed as well as you.

ANSWER 3. To learn Christ is to live Christ. When we have Bible conduct, our lives, like rich diamonds, cast a sparkling luster in the church of God (Philippians 1:27), and are, in some sense, parallel with the life of Christ, as the transcript is to the original.