

Contentment—The Problem

Quoting from William Barclay's Commentary on Philippians, Pg. 84 and 85

Commenting on what Paul says in Philippians 4:10-13

"It was not that he was dissatisfied with his own state, for he had learned the gift of content. Paul uses one of the great word of pagan ethics (autarkes) which means entirely self-sufficient. Autarkeia, self-sufficiency, was the highest aim of Stoic ethics; by which the Stoics meant a state of mind in which a man was absolutely independent of all things and all people. They proposed to reach that state by a certain pathway of the mind.

- (1) They proposed to eliminate all desire. The 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 his desires." Socrates was once asked who was the wealthiest man. He answered: "He who is content with least for autarkeia is nature's wealth." The Stoics believed that the only way to content was to abolish all desire until a man had come to a stage when nothing and no one were essential to him.
- (2) They proposed to eliminate all emotion until a man had come to a stage when he did not care what happened either to himself or to anyone else. Epictetus says, "Begin with a cup of a household utensil, if it breaks, say, 'I don't care.'

Go on to a horse or pet dog; if anything happens to it, say, 'I don't care.' Go on to yourself, and if you are hurt or injured in any way, say, 'I don't care.' If you go on long enough, and if you try hard enough, you will come to a stage when you watch your nearest and dearest suffer and die, and say, "I don't care." The Stoic aim was to abolish every feeling of the human heart.

Skipping Two Paragraphs and then:

We see at once the difference between the Stoics and Paul. The Stoics said, "I will learn content by a deliberate act of my own will. Paul said, "I can do all things through Christ who infuses his strength into me." For the Stoics contentment was a human achievement; for Paul it was a divine gift. The Stoic was self-sufficient; but Paul was God-sufficient. Stoicism failed because it was inhuman; Christianity succeeded because it was rooted in the divine. Paul could face anything, because in every situation he had Christ; the man who walks with Christ can cope with anything.