

14 Million Reasons to Be Content

22 November 2021



Be careful what you wish for, the old saying goes. You might just get it.

News outlets in South Africa have been gleefully reporting the story of a student at Walter Sisulu University in East London who checked her bank account for her monthly food allowance of R1400, only to find she'd been given R14 million. Due to a massive administrative error by the company responsible for allocating the allowances, she was given ten thousand times more than she usually got. Ten thousand times more. Just think about that.

In another time, another place, it might've ended there. She would've breathlessly contacted the authorities before posting some photos of her bank statement, they would've sheepishly apologised and taken their money back and we'd all have had a laugh about it. But we live in a generation that seeks gain without graft and pleasure without consequence, and so there was more to the story. What started as an error involving commas and zeros has turned into a nightmare involving death threats and criminal prosecution. After discovering the undetected deposit, she went on a shopping spree to the tune of R818 000, and in all likelihood would have carried on were the authorities not tipped off by suspicious retailers.

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The instinctive gut reaction to this story is probably disgust at the brazen greed of somebody blowing money they knew wasn't theirs, with no apparent concern for the inevitable backlash from society and the government. Many people are furious that she would spend amounts she could not pay back, as if to say, *"You gave it to me. I spent it. It's not my fault."* She is not a child with zero impulse control; she is an adult, and anger towards her attitude is perfectly understandable. But people seem to have risen up in righteous fury, as if they, in a similar situation, would immediately have followed the most lawful protocol.

I'm not so convinced.

We can all theorise about checking our bank accounts only to see a balance that looks like an international phone number, but try to imagine it actually being you. Your account. More money than you've ever imagined. In that sense, I feel for this young lady, that she was put in this situation. Her actions were sinful – criminal, even – and should not be defended, but they reveal how quickly and easily we can be enticed by money and how tempting it is to spend your life coveting what you don't have.

I Can Do All Things

One of the most misunderstood, misused verses of Scripture probably has to be Philippians 4:13. *"I can do all things through Him who gives me strength,"* wrote Paul from a jail cell. Today that verse is found stitched onto soccer boots or scribbled in exam notebooks. It's proclaimed with good intent, but generally accompanies achievement in a certain arena. Of course, no success in any field is possible without God. We only exist because He's given us life, so in that sense, it's true that we can do all things through Him who strengthens us. And yet Paul made that statement in a very specific context that we seem to apply the least. He was talking about money. The Philippian church had sent him gifts of aid to support him. So here, in Philippians 4:10-13, is the actual context of his famous line:

"I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength."

There's a lot we can take from this glimpse into Paul's thought process towards finances, but one word stands out to me: He calls it a secret.

The Secret

Secrets, by nature, aren't obvious. They don't jump out at you. They're hidden from conventional wisdom. They fly under the radar of common culture. Think about it: Paul could be content in any and every situation, but he described it as a secret he had to learn. From where? From whom? He certainly didn't learn it from the world around him.

Think about the culture around us today – do we see contentment in any and every situation? I see the exact opposite, and I see it across all economic sectors. I see desperate escapism among both the wealthy and the poor. I see people desperate for money as a validation of significance, and those who've reached the summit and now realise that it's not enough. I see crimes committed by those exploiting the poor in order to get wealthier, and crimes committed by the poor – not to have enough to live on, but out of greed and materialism. I see restlessness and turmoil all around. Much of it the result of a love of money, the exact opposite of contentment.

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But Paul saw Jesus. He learned his secret from Jesus. *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest,"* Jesus said in Matthew 11:28-29. *"Take my yoke upon you and*

learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” How quickly we come to the stability and safety of money as a rest for our souls and how easily that throne can be shaken. All the while, Jesus waits for us to find our contentment and satisfaction in Him – that we might find our joy in Him when we have nothing and when we have everything. We learn the secret from Jesus only to find that the secret **is** Jesus. He’s our strength, our significance, our escape, our reality, our provision, our contentment.

The Love of Money is a Trap

Maybe this student is a calculating criminal. Maybe she’s a pleasure-seeking opportunist who got in over her head. Maybe she’s just a weak human being, like the rest of us. Maybe she’s all those things. But she’s discovered something that we all need to know: The love of money is a trap. And now it’s time for her to find the One who sets us free from it.

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