

Series: Finding Joy

Title: Joy through Contentment

Text: Philippians 4:10-14

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Verse 10

In Philippians 4:10, Paul moved to talk about the financial contribution he had received from the church at Philippi. He said, “I rejoiced in the Lord greatly because once again you renewed your care for me. You were, in fact, concerned about me but lacked the opportunity to show it.” The apostle was overjoyed because of the church’s contribution to his mission work. He mentioned their generosity earlier in his letter (Philippians 1:3-5). In Philippians 4:10-20, however, he gave what we could regard as a detailed thank you note for the church’s gift.

In his second letter to the church at Corinth, Paul had given testimony of the way the Philippians had given to his ministry:

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that was given to the churches of Macedonia: During a severe trial brought about by affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. I can testify that, according to their ability and even beyond their ability, of their own accord, they begged us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in the ministry to the saints, and not just as we had hoped. Instead, they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us by God’s will (2 Corinthians 8:1-4).

We don’t know conclusively if the gift Paul mentioned in 2 Corinthians 8 was separate from the one mentioned in Philippians 4. However, we do know that the believers in Philippi “renewed” their care for Paul.

The word translated “renewed” in Philippians 4:10 was used in the ancient world to speak of a plant shooting up from the ground. The Septuagint used the word in such a way in Ezekiel 17:24. After a winter season, plants would seemingly come back to life as they sprouted up, showing off new, lush foliage. Used figuratively by Paul, the word depicted the Philippians’ renewed interest in his ministry. Just as a tree or plant might thrive again after the winter season, the Philippians generosity flourished after a brief hiatus.¹ They were constant and continual in their financial support of gospel ministry.

Through their gift, the church showed “care” for Paul. The Greek spoke of a special type of thinking. It portrayed thinking that involved the will and affections of the soul.² Previously in his letter, Paul spoke of how he thought of the church at Philippi in such terms (Philippians 1:7). Now, he used the same language to describe how the Philippians had thought about him through their charitable contribution.

The Philippians exhibited Christian care and concern, even though, according to Paul, they “lacked the opportunity to show it.” The apostle used a compound word

¹ Zōdiates, ἀναθάλλω.

² Zōdiates, [CD-Rom].

that roughly meant “without time.” Figuratively, it referred to one who didn’t have opportunity or occasion to perform a certain task. What inhibited the Philippians from giving previously? From 2 Corinthians 8:1-2, we learn that the church was of destitute financial means. A.T. Robertson has translated Paul’s words as meaning that the church did “not have a chance to give.”³ Despite their destitute condition, they flourished in the area of missions giving. Like the poor widow in Jesus’ day (Mark 12:41-44) they gave out of their poverty for the sake of the Kingdom.

The Philippians’ testimony debunks many modern excuses for negligence in giving. Sure, there may be seasons in which giving is tough, but Christian concern for the gospel will result in financial generosity, even in times of financial hardship. Too many modern believers allow misplaced priorities, negligent budgeting, materialistic desires, and obsessive hobbies to thwart their responsibility towards stewardship. The Philippians’ testimony revealed that Christian giving toward missions and ministry ought to be a regular habit in the lives of believers.

Verse 11

At different times in his ministry, Paul had been accused of doing ministry for the sake of money (1 Corinthians 9:9-11; 2 Corinthians 11:9). Consequently, he felt the need to defend himself when speaking of the Philippians’ gift, so he said, “I don’t say this out of need, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I find myself” (Philippians 4:11). All Bible preachers have perhaps felt the tension Paul felt. Declaring the Lord’s truth concerning Christian giving often evokes the ire of the stingy. Paul defended himself because he didn’t want anyone to accuse him of being a money-hungry preacher.

The apostle had no need to beg or poor mouth, because he had “learned to be content.” The original language of the New Testament spoke of knowledge gained from personal experience.⁴ From the hard-knocks of life and ministry, Paul had learned the secret of godly contentment. Some have pointed out that the apostle was “reared in the lap of luxury.” It is true that he was of an elite Hebrew tribe, the tribe of Benjamin (Philippians 3:5).⁵ Despite his previously affluent lifestyle, Paul had learned to be happy even in circumstances that involved beatings, shipwrecks, stoning, muggings, hardships, starvation, nakedness, homelessness, and prolonged thirst (2 Corinthians 11:24-27; Philippians 1:12).

How could one be “content” in such hard circumstances? To understand Paul’s attitude, one must understand the meaning of the word he used. It was one that, in its basic form, referred to “a happy state of mind.”⁶ Using a compound structure, the term roughly meant “sufficient of himself.” In a good sense, it depicted a healthy type of self-sufficiency, portraying one who was adequately supplied with all he needed and

³ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

⁴ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

⁵ Weust, [CD-Rom].

⁶ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

was content with his lot in life.⁷ Socrates referred to the disposition as “nature’s wealth.”⁸ The stoics saw it as the ability to remain steady despite outward threats.⁹ Paul exhibited such a frame-of-mind, but he didn’t do so through the philosophies of the Greeks. He possessed it through the Spirit of Christ.

Verse 12

Paul elaborated on his experience of inner-calm, saying, “I know both how to have a little, and I know how to have a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content—whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need” (Philippians 4:12). In speaking of his experience of contentment, Paul used a technical term from first-century cultic worship. The word literally meant “to initiate with secret rites.”¹⁰ It was used of the secret initiations from mystery religions of the ancient world.¹¹ Roman mystery religions often had secretive rites like baptizing in bull’s blood and swapping special stones (Revelation 2:17). Paul used such concepts to describe a secret he had learned through Christ. In Jesus, he had learned how to be content in all of life’s circumstances.

From the apostle’s words, one sees that the experience of Christian contentment can thrive in all types of situations. Paul made this point by referencing several different domains of human need. First, Paul said, “I know both how to have a little, and I know how to have a lot.” According to Paul, he had experienced both good (“abound”) and bad (“abased”) times in life. Like Jesus, he was well-acquainted with humbling situations (Philippians 2:8), but he also knew what it was like to “abound” in life. As a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25-27) and as a “Hebrew born of Hebrews” (Philippians 3:5), he had often lived at the pinnacle of human achievement. However, such things didn’t serve as the basis for his contentment in life. Whatever his lot, whether exalted or abased, Paul had the ability to rise above earthly circumstances. He knew that contentment was not dependent upon one’s lot in life.

Second, Paul said he was content whether “well fed or hungry.” The phrase translated “well fed” was often used of fattened farm animals¹² Used of persons, it depicted one who was well satisfied, one who had eaten his or her fill.¹³ Paul was familiar with such experiences. He had eaten well at times. His Roman citizenship and erudite education had made such luxuries possible. However, Paul had also experienced hunger. His commitment to Christ had introduced him to hard times. He knew what it was like to miss meals, to go without food, and to be famished. A story

⁷ Zodhiates, [CD-Rom].

⁸ Roberts, [CD-Rom].

⁹ Weust, [CD-Rom].

¹⁰ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

¹¹ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

¹² Robertson, [CD-Rom].

¹³ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

from the book of Acts verifies these realities (Acts 27:21). Regardless, such things never diminished Paul's experience of Christian contentment.

Third, Paul said he remained content "whether in abundance or need." Paul used the Greek word rendered "abundance" earlier in verse 12. English translators have rendered that first use of the word as "a lot." At the beginning of the verse, the term referred to a general lofty position in life. As implemented in the latter part of the verse, the term referred to the abundant financial resources enjoyed by the one who lives in such a position. Paul would use it later in his letter to the Philippians to describe the way the Philippians' financial gift blessed him (Philippians 4:18). As used at the end of verse 12, the term revealed that Paul had lived in prosperity at times. However, the apostle had also experienced "need." The language depicted a poor man who worked hard to eke out a living.¹⁴ In his letter to the Corinthians, the apostle used the same term to describe the lean times he faced as a missionary (2 Corinthians 11:9). Paul had lived at both the pinnacle of prosperity and in the dumps of destitution. In both realms, he had maintained an inward posture of Christian contentment.

Paul's testimony has application for modern believers. The contentment Christ gives isn't contingent on human circumstances. One can have joy and satisfaction in life that is independent of earthly matters. In any and all circumstances, one can say, "I have learned the secret of being content."

Verse 13

Paul shared the secret of his contentment by saying, "I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). Paul's words are relatively famous nowadays. Many apply them to a variety of life's circumstances, claiming promises of Christ's help for all types of activities. Unfortunately, such a use of Scripture has caused many to miss the real meaning of Paul's assertion. One Bible scholar has said, "Some abuse this verse by taking it out of context. They assume Paul was making a comprehensive statement...some even act as if there were nothing they could not do."¹⁵

The ability of which Paul spoke was in reference to emotional and spiritual capacities. The context of the apostle's word makes such a reality obvious.¹⁶ For Paul, he was able to be content in all circumstance. He had an inner strength that gave him sufficiency in all things.

Paul's strength came from "Him who strengthens" the believer. The strengthening of which Paul spoke was moral and spiritual, not physical.¹⁷ His words were a clear reference the indwelling Spirit of Christ who inhabits believers at salvation (Galatians 3:2). After His resurrection, and before His ascension, Jesus promised that He would always be with His followers (Matthew 28:20). His promise was fulfilled when

¹⁴ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

¹⁵ Melick, Richard R. *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon. Vol. 32. The New American Commentary.* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991), [CD-Rom].

¹⁶ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

¹⁷ Zodhiates, [CD-Rom].

the Holy Spirit descended on the early church on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 1:8-2:13). In the church age, believers receive supernatural strength for spiritual feats as they yield their lives to Christ's indwelling Spirit (John 15:5; Galatians 5:16-23).

Paul's language in Philippians 4:13 depicted a continual enabling. One Greek expert has translated Paul as saying, "The One who is consistently giving me strength."¹⁸ Elsewhere in his letters, the apostle referenced his personal experience with Christ's empowerment (2 Corinthians 9:8; 1 Timothy 1:12; 2 Timothy 4:17). Furthermore, he urged other believers to tap into such spiritual strength (Ephesians 6:10 2 Timothy 2:10).

Paul's point in Philippians 4:13 was simple. He was able to experience an abiding contentment in life because of Christ. The indwelling presence of Christ gave him supernatural, spiritual strength. He was able to persist through all types of problems and difficulties because of His connection to Jesus.

Paul's testimony is instructive for us. True contentment in life is found in Christ, not circumstances. It is a sign of spiritual maturity when we know how to find joy and peace apart from the temporal things of this world. One has correctly commented: "One mark of maturity in Christ is that the mature know how to depend on the Lord in every situation of life, not only in those in which they assume they need help."¹⁹

Verse 14

Paul concluded his discussion regarding Christian contentment by saying, "Still, you did well by partnering with me in my hardship" (Philippians 4:14). The apostle didn't want to be dismissive concerning the helpful nature of the Philippians' gift. Yes, his ultimate contentment came from Christ, but the financial support of the church was a blessing as well.

Paul said that the Philippians "did well by partnering" through their gift. Their financial generosity was right, suitable, and proper, considering Christ's teachings on giving (Matthew 6:19-21; Acts 20:35). Though Christ was his ultimate source of contentment, the Philippians' financial partnership (Philippians 1:7; 4:15) was helpful as well. The church's monetary gift sustained Paul during "hardship." Paul had the various tribulations, pressures, and struggles associated with his missions ministry in mind (2 Corinthians 11:24-27). Though he ultimately relied on Jesus for contentment and sustenance, he understood that the Lord used His church to meet the needs of His ministers (Mark 6:7-9). Both Christ and the church contributed to his contentment.

Paul's experience is a model for believers of all generations. To experience inner contentment, the Christian needs a close, abiding relationship with Jesus. However, one also needs the body of Christ. By the Lord's divine design, the church is a means of emotional and spiritual support for God's people (Proverbs 27:17; Hebrews 10:24; Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:7). The Scriptural principles of the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-4) and the image of God in man (Genesis 1:26-27) indicate that these things are true.

¹⁸ Wuest, Kenneth S. *Wuest's Word Studies from the Greek New Testament: For the English Reader*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), [CD-Rom].

¹⁹ Melick, [CD-Rom].