

Contentment

The Point: Be content in the power and provision of God.

Session Passage: Philippians 4:10-20

Philippians 4:10-12a

Connection to the Point. Paul expressed a contentment that had nothing to do with his circumstances.

Philippians. Paul wrote Philippians from prison in Rome with a desire to thank the church for a gift that they sent to him through Epaphroditus [*ih paf roh DIGH thus*] (2:25-30; 4:18). He updated the church on his situation, emphasizing that he was still pressing forward toward the prize (3:14). He urged the church to come together in unity (4:2-9). He concluded his letter with thanksgiving for their gift and assurance that he was content in his circumstances.

Rejoiced in the Lord greatly (v. 10). Joy is a prominent theme in Philippians. Paul prayed with joy for the Philippian church (1:4). He desired for the church to have joy (v. 25). He asked the church to come together in unity so that his joy would be complete (2:2). He encouraged the church to welcome back Epaphroditus with joy (v. 29). The apostle called the believers in Philippi his joy and crown (4:1). Paul rejoiced that Christ was preached (1:18). He rejoiced that his life was given in service to Christ (2:16) and asked the church to rejoice even if he wasn't released from prison (vv. 17-18). Twice he told them to rejoice in the Lord even though the church was experiencing some disunity caused by two women in the congregation (4:4). Joy and contentment are vitally related.

Renewed your care (v. 10). Paul's history with the Philippians began with his founding of the church during his second missionary journey (Acts 16:11-40). The church remained connected to Paul by giving monetary gifts to him. Several times they sent gifts to him while he labored in nearby Thessalonica (Phil. 4:15-16). Perhaps some time had elapsed since the previous gift from the Philippian church to Paul. The apostle was not rebuking them for their delay in sending a gift; rather, he expressed grateful thanksgiving that they continued to be concerned and supported him.

Lacked the opportunity to show it (v. 10). While Paul did not detail why, the Philippians to this point had *lacked the opportunity* to demonstrate their love for and support of the apostle through their gifts. This may have been because the apostle previously had no need for financial assistance while in prison. Or, for some reason the Philippian church may have been without the resources to financially support Paul.

Learned to be content in whatever circumstances (v. 11). Although Paul appreciated the Philippian church's gift, he did not find his joy in the gift given to him but in the Lord. Contentment did not come automatically to Paul, and neither does it to us. We must learn contentment. But what is contentment? Contentment was a primary virtue of Stoic philosophy, and it described a person who had cultivated an attitude of independence from all people and things so that he relied only upon himself. It included accepting reality, limiting desires, and focusing on personal growth through the cultivation of virtues. However, unlike the Stoics, Paul had learned that contentment was found not in himself but in Christ.

What circumstances helped teach Paul contentment? All of them taught him! Times of plenty and times of scarcity taught him to find his contentment in the Lord. Times of success in ministry and times of opposition taught him to be content in his relationship with Jesus. Paul faced many obstacles throughout his ministry (2 Cor. 11:22-33). He also saw amazing successes planting churches throughout Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece. Yet, he learned that none of those things alone could produce the type of contentment that Christ provides.

Make do with little . . . make do with a lot (v. 12a). This verse expressed Paul's definition of contentment. He learned to take contentment from a source other than the things that he possessed. The first phrase, *make do with little*, literally means "to be at a lower point" in Greek, to humble or humiliate. This was the same term used of Jesus in Philippians 2:8, where it says that Jesus "humbled" Himself in obedience to the point of death on a cross. Paul knew how to be content even when his circumstances humbled him, whether it was due to imprisonment, stoning, rejection, or any other trials. On the other hand, Paul also knew contentment in times of great abundance. Not everyone living in abundance has contentment. In the New Testament, the term is used of having an abundance of things such as food ("more than enough," Luke 15:17; leftover pieces of bread, 9:17; John 6:13), and possessions (Luke 12:15). It is also used to describe the growth of the early church (Acts 16:5), the overflowing grace that comes from being in Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:15), and the overflow of hope that comes through the Holy Spirit (15:13). Finally, it is used in the sense of excelling in building up the church (1 Cor. 14:12) and in the Lord's work (15:58; see also 2 Cor. 8:7). In this context, Paul was grateful for the Philippian church's gift. However, because his eyes were on Christ the apostle's contentment did not fluctuate with his circumstances regarding material possessions or anything else.

Philippians 4:12b-14

Connection to the Point. Christ provides the strength to be content in all things.

The secret of being content (v. 12b). The Greek term for *secret* means to be disciplined in or to learn a lesson. It appears only here in the New Testament. In the context of pagan religions, it was used to describe the initiation into the mystery religions, which claimed to have secret knowledge that could only be attained after becoming a member of the group. Paul's initiation into contentment came through serving and suffering for Jesus. "This knowledge is learned by walking with Christ, who is the sufficient one, and by developing a solid theology of material things. Things ultimately do not matter. Relationships matter."¹ Furthermore, whereas the mystery religions were only for the few initiated into the mysteries, the gospel is open to all who will repent of their sins and place their faith in Christ.

I am able to do all things (v. 13). This verse is a favorite for many, but often its application is not tied to its biblical context. Used for athletes entering sporting events or entrepreneurs starting new businesses, this verse often serves as a pep talk for new adventures. However, in its context, the verse has to do with contentment. Can the athlete show contentment when the scoreboard is reversed at the end of a game or competition? Can the entrepreneur have contentment when his business fails?

This saying must be understood in relation to the previous verses—times of plenty and times of scarcity. Furthermore, the first part of verse 13 must remain connected to the second part—**through him who strengthens me**. Paul's philosophy contrasted with the Stoic philosophy mentioned above. He did not achieve contentment from his own resources but from the resources of Christ.

The Greek word for *strengthens* usually refers to the work of Christ in the lives of individual believers (Eph. 6:10; 1 Tim. 1:12; 2 Tim. 2:1; 4:17). In his weakness, Paul was strong in the power of Christ (2 Cor. 12:9-

10). This strengthening took place *through* Jesus. While material needs and circumstances may and did change, Paul's relationship with Christ was certain and secure. Nothing can separate the believer from God's love in Christ (Rom. 8:31-39), and what God has begun in the believer He is sure to finish (Phil. 1:6)—He has justified, is sanctifying, and will glorify the believer (Rom. 8:28-30). In the context of this ongoing relationship with Jesus, Paul found the secret of contentment no matter what situation he faced. He had developed "spiritual equilibrium" through walking with Christ² and could thrive in any and all circumstances through Jesus.

Partnering with me (v. 14). Paul commended the Philippian believers for *partnering* with him through their gift. The Greek term translated *partnering with* means to have fellowship with and is a compound verb containing the word (*koinonia*) which Paul used earlier in relation to the joy he felt because of the Philippians' "partnership" with the apostle in the gospel (1:5).

The partnership between Paul and the Philippians no doubt also included prayer, active support (in sending Epaphroditus, 4:18), and shared goals. Though miles separated them, they still partnered together so that the world might hear the gospel. In the same way, we can partner with missionaries and pastors laboring in other parts of the world.

Philippians 4:15-20

Connection to the Point. Paul was thankful for the Philippians' generosity and knew that God would provide for them as well.

Early days of the gospel (v. 15). Perhaps Paul recalled the events surrounding his visit to Philippi during his second missionary journey. He received a night vision of a man pleading that the apostle come to Macedonia and help the people (Acts 16:9). The vision motivated Paul to go to Philippi, where he encountered a woman named Lydia, a God-fearer who had gathered with others by a river outside the city gate for prayer. Paul led Lydia and her whole household to Christ. At her insistence, Paul and his companions remained at Lydia's house and likely used it as a home base while they remained in Philippi (vv. 10-15).

While in the city, Paul and his companions were harassed by a slave girl who was possessed by a spirit who gave her the ability to predict the future. After Paul cast the spirit out of the girl in the name of Jesus Christ, her owners (who could no longer make a profit from her) dragged Paul and Silas before the city magistrates. These officials had them beaten and thrown into prison. (vv. 16-24). While the missionaries were singing hymns during the night, an earthquake shook the prison and opened all the cell doors. These events allowed Paul and Silas to share the gospel with the jailer, who along with his entire family converted to Christ (vv. 25-34).

Gifts (v. 16). Although Paul had left the city, the Philippian believers continued to support the apostle's ministry. The Philippians were the only church in Macedonia that provided for the apostle in the early days of his ministry (v. 15). They sent money and probably other forms of support to him while he was in Thessalonica, a city about ninety miles from Philippi.

The profit that is increasing to your account (v. 17). In thanking them for their gift, Paul used financial language, commending the Philippians for their investment in the work of the Lord (vv. 17-18). *Profit* translates a Greek word for "fruit." However, in the language of finance, the word referred to gain or interest accrued. *Account* is the Greek term for "word"; when used in the context of finances it has the meaning of settling an account. In Jesus's parable of the talents, the master who had given his servants

talents to use while he was away returned to settle “accounts” with the servants regarding their investment strategies in his absence (Matt. 25:19). The Philippians’ accounts were with the Jesus. While Paul benefitted from their gifts, ultimately such gifts were the Philippians’ offerings to the Lord. At the end of the age, all believers will stand before Jesus to be rewarded for all the deeds done for Him (1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:10). With this in mind, we also should use our gifts and abilities to bless others by giving to and participating in the Lord’s work.

In full . . . an abundance . . . fully supplied (v. 18). Using financial terms again, Paul made sure that the Philippians knew that their gift had met the needs that he had. **I have received everything in full** translates the Greek meaning to be paid in full or to receive full payment for what is owed. Jesus used the term for *received* to describe those who give to the poor, pray, and fast for the praise of others. He said “they *have* their reward” (Matt. 6:2,5,16; emphasis added).

Paul noted he had received *an abundance*, meaning he had more than enough. The Greek term is used in relation to Jesus feeding the five and four thousands and the leftover bread that remained on both occasions (Matt. 14:20; 15:37). The term is also used in the parable of the rich fool, in which Jesus warned that life is not to be found in “the *abundance* of his possessions” (Luke 12:15, emphasis added). In today’s culture in which great monetary wealth and an abundance of possessions (big houses, fancy cars, fancy clothes, and so forth) are often the measure of greatness, finding abundance in one’s relationship with God through Christ is truly counter-cultural. Finally, Paul said he was *fully supplied*, which emphasized again that he had all he needed, and the Philippians did not need to send him anything more at that time.

A fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God (v. 18). Using the language of Old Testament sacrifices, Paul noted that the Philippians’ gifts were *a fragrant offering*, meaning it was pleasing to God (similar sacrificial language—“pleasing aroma”—appears seventeen times in the book of Leviticus). “Their contribution was a ‘fragrant offering’ to God because of its sacrifice, its Christian motivation, and its significance to the spread of the gospel.”³

My God will supply all your needs (v. 19). Is this a universal promise? Is it conditional? Does God provide based on our faithfulness? The context of the passage is giving to support the needs of missionary labors. (Such passages as Matthew 6:19-34 relate to the broader issue of God providing for believers’ basic needs in general.) God blesses those who give to others serving the Lord by bountifully supplying their needs. Givers may fear that if they give what they have, they will have nothing left and will be in need themselves. However, God provides what is needed as we support the work of the Lord.

His riches in glory (v. 19). God can supply all these needs because of the glorious riches that are His, which He supplies “in accord with his glory and for his purposes.”⁴ **In Christ Jesus** is emphatic, meaning that the riches God supplies are available because of the individual’s relationship with Christ.

1. Richard R. Melick, Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, v. 32, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1991), 154.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 158.

4. Ibid.