

## **Side By Side: Gospel Partnership in Philippians**

**Content, Generous, Growing**

**By [David Strain](#)**

*September 7, 2014*

### **Philippians 4:10-23**

Now let me invite you to turn with me in your own copy of God's Word or take one of the church Bibles and turn with me to Paul's letter to the Philippians. We've come this morning to our concluding sermon as we've worked through Paul's letter. Pray for me as we begin to turn our attention to the next series, the book of Exodus, which we shall begin, God willing, next Lord's Day. Please be in prayer for that. We are going to be studying this morning Philippians 4 verses 10 through the end of the chapter. Before we read it, would you bow your heads with me as we pray? Let's pray.

*Lord, there have been so many voices clamoring for our attention this past week. We need Your voice; we need to hear from You. And so we pray that the Holy Spirit would take up His Word and speak it with life-changing power into every one of our hearts for the glory of Jesus' name. Amen.*

Philippians chapter 4 from verse 10. This is God's holy Word:

I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. I have received fully payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice

acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Amen, and we praise God that He has spoken to us in His holy and inerrant Word.

### **Paul's Parting Words: Contentment, Generosity, and Growth**

It is, I think, a mark of the remarkable pastoral wisdom of the apostle Paul that as he concludes his letter to the Philippian believers he does so dealing with three interconnected themes that speak very directly to some of the perennial challenges faced by believers in every age. If you look at the passage please, Philippians 4:10-23. In verses 10 to 13, we are introduced or Paul deals with the issue of Christian contentment. Christian contentment. Then in 14 to 20, the issue of Christian generosity. Those two things, as we'll see, are intimately connected. It is contented believers that are generous and our generosity reflects our contentment in Christ. Christian contentment then Christian generosity, and then finally in verses 15 and 16 and again in 21 and 22, Christian growth. What happens when a church is populated by believers who are content in Christ and set free to be radically generous for His glory? That church becomes effective in reaching the world. It grows and the Gospel spreads. Christian contentment, Christian generosity, and Christian growth.

#### **I. Christian Contentment**

Let's think about Christian contentment first of all. Paul is celebrating in verse 10 the generosity of the Philippians toward him. They had sent him Epaphroditus and with Epaphroditus practical gifts to maintain the apostle Paul during his season in a Roman prison cell. Paul is concerned to be sure as he congratulates them and rejoices over their kindness toward him that he's not covertly hinting that he would really like some more, and so he says, "Not that I am speaking of being in need," verse 11, "for I have learned in whatever circumstance or in whatever situation I am, to be content." He has learned the secret of contentment. One of the leading members of the Westminster Assembly of Divines that produces our confession and catechisms was a man called Jeremiah Burroughs. And Burroughs, in 1648, produced a book which is still in print today. I want to commend it to you most warmly. It is entitled, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. It is

an extended meditation on Philippians 4:11. "I have learned, in whatever situation I am, to be content." And Burroughs says of this verse that it contains, this is fantastically Puritan language, that it contains "a very timely cordial to revive the drooping spirits of the saints in these sad, sinking times." Here's medicine for your soul, he's saying. Medicine for your soul in a toxic world. And he also says, and I think this is an extraordinary statement, he says, "This Gospel text is the very life and soul of all practical divinity. All practical theology," he says, "is bound up in, flows from, is related to the message of this verse - contentment in every circumstance in Christ."

### **Consumerism, Stoicism, and Satisfaction in Christ**

If ever there was a day when the medicine, the cordial of this text was needed, surely it's our own. Contentment is hard to come by. It is a rare jewel indeed; I'm sure you'll agree. And it is incredibly precious as all who have discovered it will testify. Our culture is based not on contentment but on creating consumer appetite, right? Advertisers know that in order to sell their product, in order to produce a successful ad campaign they must make their target audience feel this is a necessary product - "We need it. I've got to have it." They must provoke dissatisfaction and discontentment with our lives for which their particular product is the only answer, the only remedy. It's all about being bigger, faster, cleaner, happier, sexier, smarter, freer, wealthier, healthier, happier than you could now or ever hope to be, provided of course you buy our toothpaste or use our detergent or drive our car or use our smartphone. "It's not just a new product; it's a whole new you." That's what they're saying. Our whole economy is predicated on dissatisfaction and discontentment. And as such, it runs totally counter to the rare jewel of Christian contentment that Paul has discovered. It is, in other words, a radically, profoundly countercultural thing today to be content. To be content; how odd contentment is!

Actually it was pretty odd in Paul's day too. The word that he uses for contentment he borrows from the school, the philosophical school of the Stoics. It's a word that means self-sufficiency, complacent, detached, independence, and self-satisfaction. Seneca, one of the Stoic philosophers said, "The happy man is content with his present lot, no matter what it is, and is reconciled to his circumstances." And on the surface it looks as though Paul is using this Stoic word for contentment in a terribly Stoic way. Look at the text again; verse 12 - "I know how to be brought low, I know how to abound in any and every circumstance. I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need." It sounds terribly Stoic. Paul is saying, "Circumstances do not dent my contentment. When I have an abundance and when I have nothing I'm equally content. When I've been raised up to the heights or when I am down in the guttermost I am equally content."

But Paul is not using a Stoic word in a Stoic way because the Stoics saw contentment as arising from one's self. Actually, so does our culture. The Stoics

say contentment comes from you - you make yourself content. So does our culture. Of course it wants to sell us things along the way, but the message is, "You can do it. You can be content if you simply purchase this." So Stoicism and the shopping channel both tell you contentment comes from yourself. Where does Paul find his contentment in every circumstance? Verse 13 - "I can do all things through him who strengthens me. I can face it all; I can deal with it all - the depths and the heights; I can be rich and poor, I can be hungry and I can be filled. I can deal with it all if I have Jesus. Jesus is enough." That's what he's saying.

### **"All Things"?**

Now we do need to linger here just for a moment because verse 13 has to be one of the misused, most misused and abused and misapplied texts in the Scriptures. "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." It doesn't mean that a believer in Jesus can do anything. Neither does it mean that no matter the challenge God has promised to fix it for you, to help you evade the difficulty. Some Christians even manage to make verse 13 say the opposite of what it actually means using it like a blank check to problems of health, wealth, and prosperity, arguing in this verse Jesus promises that you can "name it and claim it" no matter what it is that you happen to desire. Don Carson even points out how it sometimes gets used by well-meaning church leaders to pressure members into Christian service. "But Mrs. Jones, you can't say no to our invitation to teach ten-year old boys! Just because you've never taught a Sunday School before or just because you feel you have no gifts or calling or interest in this area, after all, Paul teaches us, 'We can do all things through Christ who gives us strength.'" "That," writes Carson, "is horrible."

It's not a blank check to apply willy-nilly every time we face some difficulty at work or sit an examination or need a get-out-of-jail-free card for some predicament or other we've landed ourselves in. No, the context determines the meaning of verse 13, doesn't it? And the context is about being able to be content in every circumstance. "And in every circumstance," Paul says, "I am able to do this through Christ who gives me strength." Where are the roots of real contentment, a contentment that does not ebb and flow, isn't blown and tossed by the vicissitudes of our world, that is not harnessed to the accumulation of stuff? Where is it found? It is found in Jesus and in Him alone. You will let yourself down. You will. Stuff gets broken or lost or stolen, circumstances change, but Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is a solid rock; all other ground is sinking sand. Built on the solid rock your house will stand. You will be content no matter what happens, no matter what comes. It will help you to say, "It is well with my soul. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord."

### **A Picture of Christian Contentment: Psalm 131**

It's the contentment that is pictured so beautifully in Psalm 131:

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.

O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forevermore.

What a lovely picture. A nursing infant sated, replete, and sleeping in its mother's arms - perfect contentment and utter security. That's what the psalmist has found; that's what Paul has found. And they both tell us where - "Hope in the Lord, Israel," David says; "I have learned in every circumstance therewith to be content because I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Jesus really is enough. I wonder if you believe that or if your life betrays your deeper idolatries - "Jesus plus...Jesus and...I can't be content with just Jesus unless I have Jesus and the approval of my peers, Jesus and the promotion, Jesus and the girlfriend, Jesus and my parents' praise, Jesus and the new car, Jesus and men's attention." "I love Jesus," we say to ourselves, but we unmask our idolatrous hearts when we show by the way we live that Jesus is not enough. But all of that is sinking sand, Paul says. Try and build your house there. It will come tumbling down. Don't believe the lie that the Stoics and the shopping channel are telling you. If you look for your contentment anywhere other than Christ it will melt away like mist in the sun one day. Christian contentment.

### **Restless Hearts until they are Resting in Christ**

And you know, let me say this too. We were meant to be restless and discontent when we look anywhere other than to Christ. We were made to root our contentment in Jesus. It would be wrong to be content if you don't know Him. Your contentment is an illusion apart from Christ. Augustine prayed famously, "Thou hast made us for Thyself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in Thee." We have restless hearts when we seek to satiate our appetites with money and sex and power and reputation and stuff, pad our dens with the accumulation of things. And our hearts crave more and more and more because they were made for more; they were made for Christ. It is Him that you need, Paul says. Christian contentment.

## **II. Christian Generosity**

Then secondly, Christian generosity, verses 14 to 20. Even though Paul is content, whether the Philippians can help him or not, he commends their generosity, doesn't he? "It was kind of you to share my trouble." The Philippians have responded time and again with mercy and grace supplying what Paul needs. They responded, verse 15, "in the beginning of the gospel." That is, as

Paul's mission expanded and began to reach Macedonia, it was only the Philippian believers that stepped up to help him. Verse 16, when he went to Thessalonica, the Philippians sent him financial support there, not just once but again and again. 1 Corinthians 11 and verse 9 we see is a pattern that continues. "When I was with you," Paul says to the Corinthians, "and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia," that is, Philippi, "supplied my need." And now years later Paul is in chains in Rome and the Philippians are still at it. Whenever they find out that Paul has need they send two things - they send money and they send people. This time they send Epaphroditus, one of their key leaders, to be an encouragement and a help to him. They give and they go. They were remarkably generous people, the Philippian believers, and Paul really does want that generosity to abound and to overflow, not for selfish reasons but verse 17, "because it pleases God." Look how he describes Epaphroditus' ministry in verse 18. He says he has received full payment and more. "I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God." When Christians are generous God is pleased. When Christians are generous God is pleased. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians chapter 9, I believe at around verse 12, "God loves a cheerful giver." There is a love in the heart of God that flows to sacrificial generosity in the hearts of His children. God is pleased with you when you are generous for His sake.

### **A Costly Generosity**

And secondly, the language that Paul uses, the language of worship from the Old Testament sacrificial system reminds us generosity in the Christian life should cost us something. It is an act of sacrifice. You remember the words of King David, 2 Samuel 24:24, "I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord that cost me nothing." You're not really giving sacrificially if it doesn't cost you to do so, if it doesn't require you to adjust your lifestyle to do so, not giving in a manner that pleases God if you give Him whatever's left once you spend what you have on the maintenance of your lifestyle. It's a principle that's taught powerfully in Luke 21:1-3, this idea of sacrifice in Christian generosity. Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box and He saw a poor widow putting in two small copper coins. And He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them, for they all contributed out of their abundance but she, out of her poverty, put in all she had." It cost her and Jesus commends the radical, sacrificial generosity of her heart.

### **The Theology that Fuels Radical Generosity**

And notice, verse 19, the theology that fuels this radical generosity. It's not a guilt trip that Paul is sending the Philippians on. Where will this kind of generosity come from? Verse 19 - "My God will supply all your need according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." It's the contentment principle again, isn't it? Jesus is enough! There are riches beyond your deepest need in Him. You cannot ever

out-give God. God is no one's debtor. You cannot out-give God. There are riches far beyond your deepest need in Him, and when you learn that and grasp that it gives you contentment of heart and cuts the knot, cuts the chains that bind you to the pursuit of the accumulation of stuff, living for the abundance of things. It sets you free to be radically generous. Content in Christ. No one who ever gave sacrificially trusting in Jesus ever found God lacking in the supply of their needs. No one, ever; no one. See if you can be more generous than He is. That's what Paul is saying. Test Him in this. He will show Himself faithful. He will supply all your needs according to the riches of His glory in Christ.

### **III. Christian Growth**

Christian contentment, Christian generosity, and then finally Christian growth. What happens when churches, when bodies of Christian grasp the contentment principle, resting in Jesus for all their needs, and begin to give in radical and sacrificial generosity? What happens? Churches like that begin to grow. The kingdom spreads. Isn't it profoundly attractive when you meet a Christian who is content, even in their worst trials, because they trust in Jesus? There's a depth, a serenity, untouched even by their tears, even by their trials. There's a contentment in Christ and it enables them to serve others even in their own poverty. When you see that it is profoundly attractive. It adorns the Gospel; it displays what the good news about Jesus does in a life when we live like that. And so people become Christians when they observe believers living in contentment and generosity.

That's what Paul tells us here. Verse 15 - he talks about the beginning of the gospel, the beginning of its expansion that is, in Macedonia, in Philippi, where a church was planted. Then he talks about Thessalonica; a church was planted there too. Then look down at 21 and 22. "Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household." There's been a Gospel infection spreading throughout the Roman Empire from one radically generous, contented heart, satisfied with Jesus from life to another to another to another, all the way into Caesar's own household at the very heart of the Roman Empire, at the seat of power; right into enemy territory the kingdom has advanced.

### **A Call to a Life that demonstrates Transforming Grace**

Let me suggest the one reason perhaps why your witness, my witness, might be weak and ineffective has less to do with our skill in presenting the Gospel words and more to do with our failure to back up our words with a life that demonstrates their truth. That's what Paul is calling us to - a life that demonstrates what the good news about Jesus does when it takes hold. It sets us free from the idolatry of materialism and teaches us to be radically generous because, after all, He has given us His richest prize - His Son who, though He was rich became poor that

by His poverty we might become rich. Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small. Love so amazing - that gives Christ to be my Savior - love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all. What won't you surrender for the glory and praise of God seeing what He has given to make you His? Will your words be backed up with a life that demonstrates what the Gospel does when it takes hold? Does it show in your pocketbook and in your bank balance as well as in your behavior? Christian contentment in Christ, leads to Christian generosity for Christ, leads to Christian growth to the glory and honor of Jesus Christ. Let's pray together.

*Father, we thank You for the Gospel, that it takes us and turns us inside out and upside down. It reorders our priorities. It makes us live for something else, to store up treasure in heaven where moth and rust do not destroy and thieves do not break in and steal. Help us, O Lord, to learn contentment in Christ, the rare jewel, the precious prize of godly contentment. Set us free from the idol of materialism to be radically generous, not to prop up any institution, but to bring pleasure to the heart of God and to see His kingdom advance. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.*

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

*This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.*

*Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.*

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

#### **Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine***

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, **subscriptions are free**. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).