

Content in All Circumstances

Philippians 4:10-13

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Background Notes

The church at Philippi was founded on Paul’s second missionary journey. It was the first church in Europe that was planted by the apostle Paul (read Acts 16). When Paul wrote this epistle to the Philippians, the church was about ten years old, and Paul was under house arrest in Rome, awaiting his trial before Nero (read Acts 28). It’s thought that Paul was released from this first Roman imprisonment and went on with his missionary travels, maybe getting as far as Spain. Sometime later, however, he was re-arrested and was imprisoned once again – that time in a dungeon in Rome.

It was during his first Roman imprisonment, or house arrest, that Paul wrote four books of the New Testament that are often called the “Prison Epistles”: Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon and Philippians.

In Philippians 4:10 Paul said, *“But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity.”* Apparently in the ten years that had gone by since the Philippian church was founded, the believers had tapered off in their financial support of the apostle Paul. But when they heard that he was in prison, they remembered their responsibility and sent a gift to him again. Paul appreciated this gift, so he wrote back to the Philippians to thank them for this gift.

A Christian brother named Epaphroditus brought the gift from Philippi to Rome. Verse 18: *“Having received from Epaphroditus the things sent from you.”* You might be wondering why Paul would need a financial gift. Wasn’t he a prisoner in Rome? Well, remember his situation. He was under house arrest, so he had to rent his own house - for two whole years. Acts 28:30, *“Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house and received all who came to him.”* This gift from the Philippians would certainly help Paul pay the rent and buy some food.

Doctrinal Points

1. The secret of contentment is adjusting, not abundance.

Verses 11-12, *“Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.”* Paul wanted the Philippians to know that even though he was very thankful for their gift, he wasn't feeling great need. His financial status was not a major concern for him. He wasn't independently wealthy – but he had learned the secret of being **content**.

What is that secret? The secret is that contentment comes by **adjusting to your circumstances** – whatever they may be. Have you learned that secret? Or do you still think that contentment comes from having everything you want? Or from having everything go your way?

No, the secret of contentment is **adjusting**, not abundance! That's what the God's Word is teaching here.

Paul said there were times when he had “an abundance” – when he had more than enough finances to cover his needs. During the times when he was prosperous, he had to learn to adjust to that situation as well. Some Christians can't handle “an abundance.” They just can't seem to properly adjust to financial prosperity. (Sometimes I wish the Lord would test me with “abundance” - do you, too?) [laughter] Paul knew how to handle money. He didn't hoard it – he would give it away when he had more than he needed. He knew that having “an abundance” was not the secret of contentment.

But there were also times when Paul was in need! He actually went hungry. And he had learned how to adjust and be content - even in the difficult and discouraging times.

Learning to adjust to your circumstances and learning to be content with what God is allowing you to have is not an easy lesson to learn! It goes on in the lives of young, middle-aged and older people alike. Sadly, I can think right now of some older Christians who haven't learned how to be content. They have enough money, but they're not satisfied in other areas. They think they should have something more or something better. They just can't seem to adjust to any change in their circumstances.

So learning this biblical principle of contentment goes on all of our lives. Remember, the secret of contentment is adjusting, not abundance.

At this point, some of you may be saying that you understand the biblical principle – the secret of contentment is adjusting, not abundance – but your problem is adjusting. You just can't seem to adjust. Read on!

2. The secret of contentment is Christ, not circumstances.

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (v13). Here's a verse that is frequently pulled out of context – and because it's almost always quoted out of its actual context, it's badly misunderstood.

More than once I've heard Christian athletes quote this verse to explain why they were able to win a race or score the winning touchdown. I've heard financially successful Christians use this verse to explain why they've been successful in business. These Christians are to be admired for giving the Lord the credit for their success, but they really quoted the verse ***out of its proper context***.

And I've heard this verse quoted by Christians who take on more responsibilities than they can handle, and they think that they can do it without proper rest or resources, because *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."* I'm so sorry, that's taking a promise ***out of its context!*** This verse is not promising success, or superhuman strength, or doing the miraculous or impossible.

Do you see the problem? The ***context*** of this verse is not about winning races or scoring touchdowns or business success. It's about ***adjusting to circumstances and learning how to be content!*** This verse promises that we will have the ability to adjust to whatever circumstances God may permit to come our way – whether smooth sailing or rough seas in life. It's saying that we will be able to handle the situation, good or bad, because Jesus Christ will give us the strength!

Quoting this verse out of its context can discourage the unsuccessful Christian athlete or the Christian whose business went bankrupt. Were they unsuccessful because they didn't have enough faith, or because they didn't trust the Lord enough? No! In fact they may have more faith - but less athletic or business ability. The answer is that the context of this verse is not success in athletics or business or anything else. The context is about adjusting to any and all of life's circumstances, and thus learning to be content.

Are you facing adverse circumstances right now? Do you need strength to adjust to a particularly trying situation in your life - maybe in your family, or in your job, or in your ministry? You ***can*** adjust! You ***can*** handle it, because the strength of Christ is available to you! It's there, and it's promised. You don't have to be an emotional yo-yo. Emotions go up and down, and discontent will build, when you're not adjusting to your circumstances in a biblical way.

We can adjust to any situation in life through the strength of Christ. There are ***no exceptions*** to this promise when it is claimed ***in its proper context***. What a great promise!

Remember, the secret of contentment is found in Christ, not circumstances.

Practical Applications

1. Let's give our fellow believers "the benefit of the doubt."

"But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity"(v10). Apparently a considerable amount of time had passed since Paul had last heard from the Philippians, but notice that he gave them the benefit of the doubt: *"you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity."*

Let's give our fellow believers the benefit of the doubt. Unfortunately, I have a Christian friend who does not practice this principle. When he hears of a fellow believer giving a large gift to the Lord's work, or going the extra mile in Christian service, he always seems to believe that they had a hidden motive. He never gives his fellow believers the benefit of the doubt. Are you like that? Yes, in some cases there may be a hidden motive, but let's at least give our fellow believers the benefit of the doubt!

Paul did that with the Philippians. Who knows why they delayed, or why they didn't share with him for a certain length of time, but Paul assumed the best! He gave them the credit for wanting to share, even though they lacked the opportunity. Let's give our fellow believers the benefit of the doubt.

2. Let's pray for our fellow believers who are *not* in need!

We always pray for our fellow believers who are in need of a job or a better financial situation - and that's good. But what about our fellow believers who are *not* in need – who have more than enough to meet their needs? I'm sure you know Christians who are in this category.

Paul said he had to learn how to handle those "times of abundance," as well as his times of need, so don't be jealous of fellow-believers who have more money than they need. Pray for them! They the Lord to show them how to properly use their abundance!

A few years ago a Christian man came to me for counseling about some money that he was about to inherit. He said that he was afraid that he wouldn't know how to handle all that money, and he wanted to know what he should do. I answered, "Let's pray that if you won't be able to use the money properly, it won't come to you." At first he was unwilling to pray that prayer – but after thinking it over he finally did agree!

Let's pray for our fellow believers who are *not* in need!