A Study of the Book of Philippians

A Model of Contentment (Philippians 4:10-23)

“A proud man is never content; he is one who has a high opinion of himself. Therefore under small blessings he is disdainful; under small crosses he is impatient. The humble spirit is the contented spirit. If his cross is light, he reckons it in the inventory of his mercies. If it is heavy, yet he takes it upon his knees, knowing that when his state is worse it is to make him better.” ~ Thomas Watson

I. Overview

Paul would be amiss not to close this letter with a note of gratitude for the believers at Philippi. In so doing, the apostle once again provides his life as an example of how they are to live the Christian life. Similar to Paul, their lives are to be marked by contentment—whether in times of success or in times of difficulty. These words, thus, serve as a culmination of all that Paul addressed in this letter. In living a life of contentment, one must embrace joy, humility, and godliness.

II. A Model of Contentment (4:10-23)

A. An Expression of Gratitude (4:10-20)

While Paul expresses joy for their gift, he never formally thanks them for their generosity. Scholars have labeled this failure to express his gratitude as Paul’s “thankless thanks.” And yet, is Paul forgetting his manners, or is something else taking place? Observe some of the leading interpretations:

- The topic of giving and receiving was a touchy subject with Paul. Throughout his ministry, he personally labored so as not to charge monies for the Gospel message, nor to provide his opponents an accusation that he was in ministry for personal gain. Consequently, Paul delayed in addressing this topic of giving until the end of the letter—a delay that resulted in a friendly reminder not to infringe on his own self-reliance. In 1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-10, and 1 Corinthians 9, there appears to be a request for churches not to send him money for personal use.

- In ancient writings, verbal gratitude was withheld among intimate friends. However, these recipients are far more than friends, the context is vastly different, and the format of this letter does not fit this type of ancient genre.

- While grateful to the Philippian church, Paul sought to give ultimate credit to the Lord, the supreme Giver of all gifts. This view recognizes there is an implicit gratitude expressed by Paul for the Philippians (e.g., his expression of joy, the commendation in verse 14, “you did well”) (see R. Martin, Philippians, 164); while at the same time, this interpretation proposes that Paul’s greater theological concern is to glorify the Lord. A proponent of this view, David Briones, writes, “[Paul] attributes every accomplishment in their lives, especially the ostensibly mundane task of providing aid, to the creative activity of God, the ultimate giver of their gift. And if God is the ultimate giver in this relationship, then the Philippians operate as mediators of his divine beneficence (“Paul’s Intentional ‘Thankless Thanks,’ JSNT 34.1 [2011], 56). This recent interpretation seems to best explain Paul’s wording and overall context of the letter.
v. 10 - Observe that Paul appeals to the Lord as the third party of this relationship. The grammatical construction of this verse indicates the Philippians had “all along been taking careful thought for Paul’s welfare” (O’Brien, Philippians, 518).

v. 11 - Paul makes no reference to his actual financial circumstances. In fact, his entire ministry is free from any dependence on human resources.

vv. 12-13 - Not only has Paul found himself in both ends of the economic spectrum, but he also has learned how to live in whatever state he finds himself.

What is this “secret of contentment”? It is a self-sufficiency based upon a recognition of divine dependency. We must remember that contentment is not complacency or some state of false peace. Rather, this secret resides not in Paul’s inner strength but in his dependence upon the Lord (see 2 Cor 12:9-10). One commentator aptly notes concerning this verse: “Paul, thus, never allowed his weaknesses or perceived weakness to be an excuse for inactivity, or for a failure to attempt the impossible task” (Hawthorne, Philippians, 201-202).

The tense of the verb “coming to know” this secret indicates that this learning was not instantaneous.

v. 14 - Lest Paul sounds ungrateful, he concludes this paragraph by reiterating his gratitude for their support and their identification with him (1:5).

vv. 15-16 - These two verses are one long sentence in Greek. In this rather complex grammatical construction, Paul identifies the following two things the Philippian believers know:

- They alone helped him. Paul highlights the honor they deserve by courteously addressing them in a Greek transcription of the Latin, Philippenses. This title was used by Roman citizens living in the colony to indicate status (Augusta Julia Victoria Philippensium was the official name of the colony.). The believers lived up to the dignity associated with their earthly status. 2 Corinthians 11:8-9 is most likely a reference to how the church at Philippi assisted Paul.

- They supported him during his work in Thessalonica. After serving in Philippi, Paul traveled a few hours away to Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9).

v. 17 - Having noted his dependence upon the Lord (v. 13), Paul reiterates his lack of desire for personal gain. His major concern centered upon the givers, not the gift. “The advantage that accrues to them [the Philippians] as a result of their generous giving is God’s blessing in their lives by which they continually grow in the graces of Christ until the parousia [the coming of Christ]” (O’Brien, Philippians, 539).
v. 18 - This verse only reiterates Paul’s passion is not focused on things, but rather, Paul longed for individuals to glorify the Lord. The immense value of the Philippians and, in particular, Epaphroditus, far outweighed any financial gift they could have sent.

vv. 19-20 - These two verses, along with 1:9-11, serve as bookends to the letter. This section forms a climax and completes those concerns “in a soaring utterance of trust and praise, that would leave the readers with a sense of incalculable blessings still ahead” (G. P. Wiles, Prayers, 105).

The “riches” appears to entail both eschatological rewards and present provisions (see Fee, Philippians, 452). The great missionary to China, Hudson Taylor, wrote, “When God’s work is done in God’s way for God’s glory, it will not lack for God’s supply.”

How can Paul be certain of God’s provisions for the Philippians?

The guarantee of God’s provisions rests not only in the present, but it is assured for all eternity! No wonder Paul concludes this section with a doxology.

B. Final Greetings (4:21-23)

Paul concludes this epistle with a final greeting and a benediction—typical elements of epistolary literature in the first century.

vv. 21-22 - “Caesar’s household” - Rather than viewing this as a reference to family members of the Imperial house, it is far more likely a reference to slaves, freedmen, and soldiers who staffed the Emperor’s estate. This reference indicates that the Gospel was permeating into the very upper echelons of Roman society.

v. 23 - “Grace cascades from God to the patron, flowing in, through, and among participants ‘in Christ’, and eventually returns back as thanks to God, the supreme giver” (Briones, 64).

III. Intersect

In the latter part of The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment, the great Puritan author Jeremiah Burroughs lists over twenty ways to attain contentment. Below is an abridged and revised list:
1. In all our wants and inclinations to be discontent, consider the greatness of the mercies that we have and the actual worth of those things we lack (see Psalm 32:8; Ezra 9:13; 1 Tim 6:7).

2. Remember that our suffering in this world is brief (see 2 Cor 4:16-17).

3. Reflect on the heroes of the faith who have encountered far greater trials than we have (see Heb 11:37-38).

4. Note that trials in the past have actually been some of the greatest moments in our walks with the Lord (see Gen 50:20).

5. Take seriously the challenge of dying to self (see Col 3:5).

6. Walk in humility (see James 4:10).

7. Pray fervently (see James 5:13).

For further thought . . .

Based upon our study this morning, you may want to spend some additional time this week interacting with the following:

Paul states in Philippians 4:12 that he has “learned the secret of contentment”. Why do you think many believers are unaware of this secret? Could it be that some believers know this secret and fail to live accordingly?

Where are you personally in living out this secret? Is there a particular area that often hinders you from embracing contentment? What steps do you need to take to be satisfied with where the Lord has placed you? Be proactive in addressing this area of discontentment this week.

“Contentment is one of the most distinguishing traits of the godly person, because a godly person has his heart focused on God rather than on possessions or position or power.” ~ Jerry Bridges