



Summer 2016 Walking Through Philippians

Sermon Transcript
August 28, 2016

Learning the Secret
Philippians 4:10-23

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on August 28, 2016 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Pastor Ryan Warner. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Philippians 4:10-23

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² 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. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

¹⁴ Yet it was kind of you to share^[a] my trouble. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. ¹⁷ Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.^[b] ¹⁸ I have 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. ¹⁹ And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁰ To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

²¹ Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. ²² All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.

²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Introduction

I'm not terribly good at writing thank you notes. It isn't so much that I can't figure out what to say, it's more that I never think to do it and never remember to do it if someone else thinks of it for me. In fact, the preparation of this sermon has reminded me of a number of thank you notes that I've intended to write various ministry supporters this summer. The task has even made it to my weekly to-do list, which increases the odds of me completing them immensely, for which I am quite grateful.

I say all of this because our text today, the concluding portion of Paul's letter to the Philippian church, is essentially a thank you note. As we've spoken about before during our summer exploring the book of Philippians, the Philippian church had a history of financially supporting Paul's church planting ministry. So, Paul takes some time at the conclusion of his letter to thank the Philippians for their gifts to him. It is within this thank you note that Paul pens one of the most commonly quoted verses in the entire bible – right up there with John 3:16 and Jeremiah 29:11 is Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

Philippians 4:13 is the favorite verse of Christian athletes everywhere, inscribed on everything from lockers and wristbands to shoes and eye-black. While we can't know the intention or motivation of every athlete who inscribes this verse somewhere, it is pretty consistently interpreted as a suggestion that athletic achievement will come because of God's blessing. The idea is that I'm going to make this shot, or we're going to win this game because we can do anything we set our minds to if we believe our strength comes from God. And while this may not be a room full of professional athletes, we're all practiced at this way of thinking. "God, help me pass this exam." "God, help me win this job, make this sale, get this promotion." However, in truth, this verse has a lot less to do with empowering us to win the championship, pass the test or get the job than it does with our internal response to the end result, win or lose, pass or fail. It's not about what you can accomplish, but the state of your inner world when you can't.

Tension

Because sometimes in life there is just nothing we can do. Maybe everyone thinks you are a happy couple but in reality your marriage is falling apart. You've had the same conversations over and over but nothing changes. The person you once trusted the most is starting to become the person you trust the least. You don't want to separate, but the heartache is becoming too much to bear. Maybe that is your parents' story. Now they're divorced and you can't decide whether that's better or worse than when they were arguing all day and night. You spend your weeks shuttled from house to house unsure of where you fit, confused and bitter from the whole experience. What can you do? Maybe you faithfully worked for years for an employer, confident in your competence and performance, only to one day, because of some vague description of "the economy," you find yourself downsized right out of a job. And now more time has passed than you ever thought would, you still haven't found another job, and you are feeling desperately inadequate, aching to provide for your family. What can you do?

Maybe you've got all the ideas and intentions in the world, but your body just isn't cooperating. And doctors visit after doctors visit seems like nothing more than an incredibly expensive game of Whack-A-Mole. You find yourself constantly pleading with God to heal you, to take away these afflictions, but he hasn't. Maybe you've been struggling your way through school, and it seems to come so easy to everyone else, but not to you. Just trying to do your coursework makes you feel stupid, and you honestly wish you could just give up, but you know that isn't an option. Or maybe you finally finished school, and this was the time when everything in life was supposed to come together, but it's not. You're not working in the field you just paid all that money to get a degree in, but you do have a mountain of student loan debt to pay off. You're not happily married; you can't even seem to be able to meet someone you actually want to date. What can you do? Or maybe, like so many families, your financial situation is tenuous at best. When you say you are living paycheck to paycheck, you don't mean that you haven't been able to put much into savings for a while, you mean that each pay period is a momentary sigh of relief because it's keeping the bank account above zero! And there is never a break – as soon as you've scraped together the money to pay the unexpected medical bill comes the unexpected car repair bill, which came with a delightful little increase in your car insurance payments too. What once felt like a lean financial season has become a way of life and you can't remember the last time just you weren't stressed out about money.

On the whole, as a collection of people, we're stressed out. Some of you aren't facing any of those aforementioned scenarios. You've got a beautiful home, a wonderful family, a job you enjoy that even pays well too. Yet none of that is helping you sleep at night. Every day seems more stressful than the last. If it's not your own concerns, it's concerns for loved ones. For each of us, there is always something that is unsettled within, something that we want, maybe even need, to be different. This discontentment is no minor thing. It's painful. It causes our thoughts to race, our bodies to ache and our emotions to boil over. And this is the condition into which Paul speaks when he writes in his thank you note that he can do all things through Christ who strengthens him. Let us then look together at what Paul writes.

The Secret

“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.” (Philippians 4:10-13)

Paul begins his thank you note like one might expect, confirming that he received their gift and that he appreciated it. “I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me.” Katelyn and I wrote lots of these nine years ago after our wedding. It was months after our wedding, but nevertheless, we wrote them. “We are so grateful that you joined us on our wedding day, and we appreciate the *fill in the blank* gift.” But Paul wants to be clear

exactly what he is thanking the Philippians for, and so he does not sign off here, but instead begins to explain that his gratitude is not because he needed a gift, for he is already content. “Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.”

So just what is this contentment of which Paul speaks? Because, honestly, that sounds like a nice thing to say, but, there are definitely situations you and I have been in or even are in now that are not bringing about contentment. In his classic work *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* 17th century preacher Jeremiah Burroughs writes, “Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.” Andy Stanley has said it this way: “Something on the inside is at peace even though the outside is not. It's the ability to stop striving on the inside.”

Would you agree, then, that contentment is something that you want? More so, would you agree that generally speaking, contentment is something that everyone wants? Are we not all striving for that which will bring us peace inside our hearts and minds, whatever we think that may be? Yet as Erik Raymond has said, “It seems as elusive as it is desired.” Paul's not unaware of this; he calls it a secret! Raymond continues in getting at why it is indeed so elusive. “Do you know why these verses are so profound? They are directly opposed to how we are conditioned and trained to go after contentment. Be honest, when you think about being happy, satisfied, or content, what do you often think about? You think about changing your circumstances. If I could only have a little more money, or this car, or this new job, or this new house, or if I could only get married, be healed of this ailment, or whatever. We go to work on things outside of us to make us happy inside. We think that we can achieve contentment by changing our circumstances. But this is not the way the Bible presents it. Instead of changing our circumstances God changes our hearts so that we can be content in the midst of changing circumstances.”

We all know from experience that a little more is never enough. But that knowledge does not seem to keep the allure of a little more from appearing to be exactly what we need. So in thanking the Philippians for their gift, Paul is reminding them that what's on the outside won't change what's on the inside. Neither his current circumstances of imprisonment, nor the delightful reception of their gifts have affected Paul's contentment. He is content in every circumstance – plenty and hunger, abundance and need. Contentment is not worked from the outside in; it is from the inside out. Again, this is completely contrary to how we naturally expect to find contentment and peace. But while it may be counter-cultural, and it may be elusive, it is not unachievable; it is not outside of our reach. In fact, the writer of the book of Hebrews commands it, saying, “Be content in what you have.” (Hebrews 13:5) So, what can we glean from Paul's thank you note to help us find this elusive, peaceful inward disposition?

It is Learned

Look again with me at verse 11. “Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have *learned* in whatever situation I am to be content. Contentment is learned. It isn't inherited, or discovered, or acquired. It is learned. And how do we learn but by practice and a great teacher. Our teacher

is the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that transformed Paul's heart, the same Spirit that transforms the heart of each and every follower of Jesus Christ. And where might the Spirit teach us contentment in difficult circumstances but in the midst of those very circumstances? One does not learn to be content facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need without actually facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. When we yearn for a little more money, a little more talent, a little more time, we are forgetting the promise of God's grace that is sufficient for us.

Again I think Raymond gets us to the heart of the matter. What I am about to quote is lengthy but not dense. "Through the gospel, God is working a change in his people. Part of this change that he is working is a change in how we value things. In Romans 1 we see the ugly pattern of sin. Tragically, we appraise created things as more valuable than God himself. We believe the hollow and hissing promises of the tempter, and like our first parents, exchange God's truth for a lie, and worship and serve creation instead of God...Now, it is important to understand this. We can define and express what sin is in a lot of ways. Sin is rebellion against God, sin is lawbreaking, sin is treason, sin is self-worship, sin is idolatry. You can nuance the language of sin to explain different facets of it. However, I wonder if you ever thought of sin in this way: sin is discontentment. Sin is discontentment with God. It is a discontentment with God himself, his word and his gifts to us." To restate this concisely, our discontentment is the sin of trusting in created things rather than God for our contentment. Thankfully, the power of the gospel "unfastens us from finding our meaning, purpose, and identity in created things and enables us to find it in God himself."

One more thing that contentment is not – Andy Stanley says this well – It's not "Oh well, whatever." If you had asked me ten or even five years ago if I was content, I would have earnestly insisted that I was a very content person. But I had confused contentment with apathy. My always even-keel, nothing ever bothers me disposition was not a contentment in the sufficiency of God's grace for me but rather an inner rejection of my need for it. It was a sinful belief in my own self-sufficiency – not eternally speaking of course, but in living day by day. It is through the power of the Spirit that I am learning contentment through facing both abundance and need, be it financially, relationally, professionally or otherwise. Just consider Paul. There wasn't an ounce of "Oh well, whatever" in him. In Philippians 3 Paul describes how before he knew Christ he prided himself on his utmost obedience to the law, zealously persecuting the Christians for their supposed blasphemy. When Christ transformed his heart he did not then become passive but travelled the known world planting churches and proclaiming Christ to the point that it was continually getting him thrown in prison. This is not a man of "Oh well, whatever." The contentment that Paul had learned was not apathetic to circumstances. It was just undeterred by circumstances. Why?

Remember what Paul wrote in Philippians 3:7-8: "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." This is Paul's secret, the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. It is the strength of Christ in us that gives us the power, enables us, to find contentment in God. It can be found nowhere else.

Why Paul is Thankful

Remember how Paul is writing a thank you note to the Philippians for their gift? Now that we know that he isn't thankful because he needed the gift, he explains why the gift led him to rejoice greatly in the Lord.

“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 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. 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.”

Paul's rejoicing is in receiving their kindness and knowing they are pleasing God. Contentment in any circumstance does not prohibit us from receiving the kindness of others with joy. Sometimes our 3 and a half year old son will pick a flower off of one of the bushes along the front of our house while he and I are walking inside and say, "I get this for Mommy." He doesn't always do a great job of picking the flower, nor of handling it with care as he walks, but when we get inside and he holds out this now half-mangled little flower and says, "Here Mommy" Katelyn radiates delight in his kindness. This is not because in her circumstances she was in need of the little flower and now she has it. It is the blessing that comes in receiving the kindness of another. And this flower is the gift of a child whose thoughts are not consumed with the worries of tomorrow, how the bills will get paid, how the meeting will go, how the dispute will be resolved. He is free to give joyfully. And so Paul is thankful to receive the kindness of the Philippians, and because their willingness to give shows that this church, these people to whom Paul has invested, are trusting God to be sufficient for their needs. They are not clinging to what they have and stressed with the constant pressure for more. They give generously, and Paul is thankful, assuring them that indeed God will give them all that they need. And all of this brings our God and Father glory.

The Disposition of Our Hearts

So, here is our pointed question in response, courtesy of Burroughs and Raymond. We have all been guilty of wishing that our circumstances were better, but how many of us have complained that our hearts were not better? What a different perspective that would bring. For while it is undoubtedly our ingrained tendency to seek new circumstances, we can also allow the Spirit to use our circumstances to teach us to trust and depend upon our Father more and more. Contentment in Christ is a worthy hope for each of us.

For one thing, contentment in many ways inoculates us from the Enemy's temptations. Satan tempts us through our discontentment, so whatever the temptation, it appears to be the exact

answer to what our heart needs. Contentment, though, allows us to see the temptations for what they are, namely, unable to deliver on their promises and sees instead the sufficiency of God who absolutely delivers on his promises.

It's quite possible that the first step towards contentment for many of us is simply to own that you can't change you. All that inner striving of the heart, trying to change the outside in order to change the inside, is driven by the belief that you can, that you must be the one to make change happen. But you can't. The good news is that Jesus can, and does. What would it look like for you to begin each day reminding yourself that you can't change you, but Jesus can? Stanley has said it this way: "Embracing your inability is a prerequisite to experiencing Christ's ability." This is a valuable first step for all of us.

Hope for Today

I talked earlier about the frequency with which we see athletes reference Philippians 4:13, I think usually in a well-meaning attribution of their athletic abilities to the gifting of God. There was something, though, from the recently wrapped up Olympics that was very uncommon, but an absolute delight. After clinching silver medals in a synchronized diving event, US divers David Boudia and Steele Johnson were interviewed by NBC. When asked what it meant to win the medals amidst the pressure of the competition, Boudia acknowledged feeling the pressure, then said "When my mind is on this (diving) and I'm thinking I'm defined by this, then my mind goes crazy. But we both know that our identity is in Christ." When the interviewer turned to Johnson and asked how he was able to maintain his composure in his first Olympic event, he echoed his diving partner and mentor, saying, "The fact that I was going into this event knowing that my identity is rooted in Christ, and not what the result of this competition is, just gave me peace, it gave me ease, and it let me enjoy the contest. If something went great, I was happy, if something didn't go great, I could still find joy." I cannot think of a more apt description of the secret of contentment, the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus.

Therefore, may you allow the circumstances you face today, whether plenty or hunger, abundance or need, lead you plead with your Father that your heart be made better. As Christians we know that contentment will never be found through a change in our circumstances, but through the change of heart that has come and continues to come through the power of Christ. May your meaning, purpose and identity come from Christ. And may you count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus your Lord.