

Sermon Summary #21

Independence through Dependence on Christ Philippians 4:10-13

One of the most helpful things I've learned in my years as a pastor is *the crucial role that self-awareness plays in our growth as Christians*. By self-awareness I mean the capacity to be honest and sincere when it comes to both our strengths and weaknesses. To be "aware" of oneself in the way that I have in mind is to be *conscious and forthright about our tendencies and inclinations*. To be self-aware is to possess a keen sense of the way we impact other people. To be self-aware is to have a clear grasp on why we react the way we do when we encounter adversity or threatening circumstances. It is to be in touch with how we think and what we value and why we make the choices we do.

The opposite of self-awareness is *self-denial*. I'm sure you've run into a lot of people who live in self-denial: they refuse to face reality; they live in a fantasy world; they are extremely naïve and typically either grossly overestimate or underestimate their gifts and talents and what genuinely accounts for who they are and what they do.

Stay with me here. I'm not turning into your friendly Sunday morning pop psychologist! I simply want you to examine your heart today regarding one issue. I want you to measure your self-awareness in one particularly important respect. Here it is:

Are you fully aware of or in touch with the extent to which your joy and happiness in life are tied to your physical and financial circumstances?

Or I could say it in a slightly different way with the same outcome:

Are you fully aware of or in touch with the extent to which your confidence in God's goodness and trustworthiness are tied to your physical and financial circumstances?

I'm not. I'm just being honest with you. I would like to *think* I'm aware of how much my happiness depends on my circumstances, but I don't have a lot of confidence. I would like to *think* that I believe God is good and trustworthy even when life turns bad. But sometimes I wonder.

And the reason for this is that my circumstances haven't fluctuated much over the years. When I look at my life in comparison with some people I know, I have to confess that I haven't suffered greatly nor have I prospered greatly. Things have been fairly stable for most of my life. I've never lost every last possession in an F-5 tornado. Have you? I've never been diagnosed with a debilitating illness. Neither one of my daughters has rebelled or walked away from God. I've never been fired from a job. I've never been beaten or imprisoned because of my Christian faith. So how am I to know the extent to which my joy and happiness in life are tied to my physical and financial circumstances? How am I to really know, with deep and abiding confidence, the extent to which my trust in God is tied to the good things he gives me?

My suspicion is that most people, Christians included, are not very self-aware when it comes to this issue. And one reason why they are not is because *they don't want to be*. In other words, most people don't want to understand how deeply and inextricably their joy and happiness are tied to their physical and financial circumstances. To be aware of that is painful. It's embarrassing. It's convicting. And most of all, it would call for us to make some pretty serious changes in our lives that most of us don't want to make.

Consider a couple of testimonies in Scripture. I trust that the people who said these things were extremely self-aware and were speaking honestly. After all, they wrote this under the inspiration of the Spirit!

"I say to the Lord, 'You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you'" (Psalm 16:2).

“Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you” (Psalm 73:25).

“For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one” (Hebrews 10:34).

Not only was their joy not dependent on their physical and financial circumstances, their joy actually *increased* when they were thrown into prison and had all their possessions confiscated!

Or what about what Jesus said in Luke 12:15 where he addressed an extremely wealthy man:

“Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

Does yours? Honestly, does it? Does your life consist in the abundance of your possessions? Most of us are quick to say, “Of course not. Never. Not in a million years.”

Or consider what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 4:3-4 –

“But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. . . . It is the Lord who judges me.”

Can you and I honestly say that our joy is not in any way dependent on what other people think of us or that our happiness is not affected by their judgments against us? Paul appears to be saying that very thing.

Nowhere else in the Bible is the importance of self-awareness in this regard more clearly stated than here in Philippians 4:10-13. I hear Paul say in v. 11b,

“I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.”

And I say, “Really? Have you ever suffered the loss of all things, Paul?”

“Well, yes I have, Sam.”

“Uh, O.K. But have you ever been persecuted and vilified and judged and rejected and gone hungry and been on the verge of an untimely death?”

“Uh, well, yes I have, Sam.”

“Oh, Right.”

“In fact, 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” (v. 12).

“Oh, O.K.”

So let’s talk today about how aware each of us is regarding our physical and financial circumstances and the degree to which our joy and happiness and trust in God’s goodness and sense of purpose and meaning in life are tied to them. But I’m warning you: it’s going to hurt.

Thank You!

In order to understand Paul’s point we need to understand the context in which this famous statement appears. Let me explain.

I love my sister. She’s the only sibling I have. She’s four years old than me and I’ve learned a lot from her over the years. She sends me text-message prayers every Sunday morning, telling me how she’s praying for me as I preach. But she’s got some odd ways about her. One of them is her obsession with *Thank You* notes. I can’t recall the last birthday or Christmas that Ann and I didn’t give her a fresh supply of *Thank You* notes. She loves new designs and different textures of paper. And every so often, usually at Christmas, I get a fresh supply from her as well. I think it’s her way of reminding me of the importance of writing them. That’s especially important in this age of doing everything through email or twitter or text. A handwritten *Thank You* note is a very powerful way of expressing your gratitude to someone.

What you and I are reading in Philippians 4:10-13, and again in 4:14-20, is Paul's handwritten Thank You note to the church at Philippi. Let me remind you of what Paul said in chapter one, verse five. There he referred to the "partnership in the gospel" that the Philippian church had entered into with Paul. From the beginning of his ministry in Macedonia they had joined with him, not merely by praying for him but also by supplying him with financial resources so he could do the work God had called him to do.

In all likelihood, as was his custom, Paul has been dictating this letter to a secretary, most likely Epaphroditus. But as also was his custom, now that he has reached the end, he probably reached out and took the pen from Epaphroditus and wrote this concluding paragraph not only as a formal thanksgiving to them but also to express his deep affection for them as his fellow-believers in Jesus.

Some have wondered why Paul would have alluded to their financial support in 1:5 only then to drop the subject and now bring it up yet again here at the conclusion of his letter. We don't know, but part of the answer may be in Paul's personal perspective and policies concerning money. In a day when talking about money in church is either expected or avoided, we need to take a minute and consider Paul's financial policy (see especially 2 Corinthians 11:7-12). A quick summary will suffice.

First, Paul clearly believed that he had a right to be supported by those to whom he ministered (see 1 Cor. 9:1-19; Gal. 6:6; 2 Thess. 3:9; 1 Tim. 5:17-18; cf. 3 John 5-8; Luke 9:3-4; 10:4,7; Mt. 10:10), even though he consistently chose not to avail himself of it.

Second, we know that he actively solicited financial assistance for *other* Christians in need (2 Cor. 8-9; 1 Cor. 16:1-4), but only rarely did he actively solicit financial assistance for himself (Rom. 15:24; Acts 15:3).

Third, while serving in a city like Corinth he was not opposed to accepting financial assistance from other churches where he had ministered *in the past* (cf. Phil. 4:10-20; 2 Cor. 11:8-9). Thus, as a general rule, he would not accept support from a church *while* he was living in their midst and ministering to them (1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:6-12), but only after he had departed.

Since teachers, philosophers, and orators in ancient times were expected to charge for their services in proportion to their skill and gifting, Paul's refusal to accept financial support from the churches exposed him to the accusation of being a fraud. The false teachers had put Paul in a no-win situation: if he refuses remuneration he betrays his own awareness of inauthenticity, incompetence, and lack of authority; but if he receives remuneration it is because he is greedy and thus is guilty of peddling the gospel. Add to this the fact that manual labor, such as tent-making (Paul's chosen trade), was viewed by the Greeks with disdain.

Fourth, Paul knew that the reputation of the gospel was, to a degree, dependent on his own integrity. Paul's stature and position in the first century was not unlike that of Billy Graham in the twentieth. Evidently he didn't want to take any chances that someone might think he was in the ministry for the money. He knew the allure of wealth and chose to take extreme measures to guard himself from any possibility of temptation or grounds for slander.

Fifth, he wanted to be absolutely free to preach the truth without exposing himself to the pressure of those with money. In this way, he could not be charged with fashioning his message according to the whims of the wealthy.

Sixth, he wanted to set an example of the virtue of self-support and the inherent value of manual labor. If any were inclined to think that physical work was beneath the dignity of a Christian, Paul was determined to set them straight (cf. 2 Thess. 3:6-12).

Seventh, he wanted to avoid being a financial parasite or economic burden on others. This was undoubtedly an expression of his deep affection for his converts (see 2 Cor. 11:9-11).

Eighth, "by offering the 'price-less' good news totally free of charge, he was dramatizing in his own conduct the very appeal of the gospel as the good news of God's free grace [in Christ] (cf. 11:7; 1 Cor. 9:12b, 18)" (Harris, 765). What a remarkably effective object lesson of the nature of redemptive mercy!

All this to say that the reason why he waited until now to speak of their financial support of him was perhaps due to his reluctance to make a big deal of it lest people think he was in the ministry for the money. In any case, let's look closely at Paul's perspective on money and material prosperity.

Their Gift and his Gratitude

"I rejoiced in the Lord greatly" (v. 10a), says Paul, probably when Epaphroditus arrived from Philippi with the gift that they had sent to him. But the *reason* he gives for his joy is surprising: "that now at length you have revived your concern for me" (v. 10b).

Paul clearly did not intend for these words to be taken negatively or as a criticism of the Philippians, but he knew that there were some who would probably twist them in that way. So he explains both what he doesn't mean and what he does.

The adverb translated "now at length" or "at last" in some versions implies that there was a considerable gap in time since they had last supported him financially. He doesn't mean to say that he had been expecting something sooner and "*it's about time*" you thought about me and my needs. This is simply Paul's acknowledgment that communication between him and the Philippians had finally been revived after a lengthy period of no contact.

In giving thanks for their gift Paul is careful to point out that he knows the delay in receiving help is because of *a lack of opportunity, not a lack of affection or love*. They hadn't ceased to care for Paul nor were they reconsidering whether to continue financial support of his work. His point, then, is that circumstances evidently beyond their control prevented their commitment from blossoming forth.

I've never been much of a gardener or given to horticulture. My philosophy has typically been that if something ain't growing, cut it down and start over! In the late winter of 1983 we were living in Dallas when the city was struck with a long-lasting ice storm. It pretty much killed everything. We had a sweet gum tree in our front yard that took a hard hit from the storm. I can recall that as spring approached, most everything else in our yard started to recover and show signs of life. But not the sweet gum tree. I wanted to cut it down. It was ugly and useless. Ann wouldn't have it. She insisted that I be patient. Sure enough, after several more months what once appeared dead came to life and blossomed.

That is precisely the imagery Paul uses here in v. 10. The verb "*revived*" is a botanical metaphor that means to blossom or bloom again. There is a sense, then, that this is Paul's way of marveling at the Philippians' generosity rather than complaining at the absence of it. Just as in spring time a tree puts forth fresh shoots, thereby proving that it is alive, so also the Philippians' interest in Paul had at last found a way to express and demonstrate itself concretely and lovingly.

We don't know what it was that hindered the Philippians from helping Paul. Perhaps there was no one able to make the long journey from Philippi to Rome until Epaphroditus stepped forward and volunteered to go. There may have been an economic downturn in Philippi and they simply didn't have the money. Perhaps it was bad weather. Who knows! But clearly it was not for lack of desire, and Paul is careful to tell them he knows this to be the case.

He also wants to make certain that no one thinks his joy is over the gift itself, as if to suggest that he only loves the Philippians because of their generosity. He is aware that some might interpret his joy on receiving the gift as a sign of immaturity and weakness, as if he were like a child who had just received a new toy. Or possibly he had succumbed to materialism and was consumed by the size of the gift. Or maybe the expression of the joy would be taken by some as a veiled request for more.

Consider how some people articulate their gratitude. When they purportedly say "thanks" what they are actually doing is rebuking the giver for having given so little so late. Or they voice it in a way that makes you think they are expecting another gift, bigger and better the next time. Not Paul.

In any case, the apostle quickly proceeds in vv. 11-13 to declare that his joy over the reception of the gift was not because his happiness was dependent on material prosperity.

Some have suggested that when Paul says in v. 11, “not that I am speaking of being in need,” that he means when their gift arrived he actually didn’t need it because through some other means, perhaps inheritance, he had obtained sufficient funds to support himself.

No, I don’t think so. Paul says what he does not because he is in fact prosperous but because ***the issue of personal prosperity or poverty has absolutely no bearing on his joy in life.*** We are going to see later on in vv. 14-23 that his joy is primarily due to what he knows will be the spiritual fruit that the Philippians themselves will enjoy because of their generosity.

The key statement for us is found in v. 11b. It’s the word translated “***content***”. On hearing this, the Philippians would have immediately thought of the Stoic philosophers of their day who were committed to eliminating all external dependence; they would strive to detach themselves from any and all physical needs so that they could live without the help of anyone else. There is a story about the famous cynic Diogenes that illustrates the point. He noticed a child drinking out of his hands and immediately threw away his cup, declaring: “A child has vanquished me in economy!” (cited in Beare, 152).

For the Stoics, then, the self-sufficient, self-contained man was the one who had rendered himself independent of external circumstances and sources of support. All resources necessary for coping in life were to be found within one’s own heart and mind. The Stoic was dependent on neither people nor possessions.

So what separates Paul from them? He tells us in 2 Corinthians 3:5 – “Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but ***our sufficiency is from God.***” This is the grand paradox: ***the independence from the world and wealth that we as Christians strive to obtain comes through dependence on all that God is for us in Christ!*** The “sufficiency” or “contentment” pursued by the Stoical philosophers of Paul’s day comes from within oneself. Paul’s comes from without. Paul was not an independent man. He was ***wholly dependent on Christ*** and thus independent of the support and resources of anyone else.

Don’t misunderstand what he’s saying. This is not laziness or fatalism or yielding passively to whatever comes our way. Rather it is a detachment from anxious concern by having learned to live immune from the poison of circumstances. Paul doesn’t mean by this that we shouldn’t try to improve our lot in life, nor does he mean that we shouldn’t enjoy the material blessings God has given us. He simply means that whether he has a lot of stuff or nothing at all, his confidence in God and his joy in life are unchanged!

Notice how he expands on this and unpacks it for us in v. 12.

First, he said in v. 11 that he had “***learned***” to be content, and again in v. 12 “***I have learned the secret.***” The point is that ***contentment is not natural to human nature.*** This isn’t something we are born with. In fact, we are born discontented and dissatisfied. Contentment must be learned. And there is only one way this happens. The only way you can learn contentment is by finding Jesus Christ to be enough. You have to grow and deepen in your knowledge of him before you will experience any degree of independence from the stuff of this world. You learn contentment in the school of human experience, only as you face hard times and discover how in the midst of them Christ is sufficient for everything you need.

If you and I always lived without need, if everything was given to us in abundance, if we never felt stretched or challenged, Christ would have little opportunity to be glorified in our lives.

Thus to “learn” this all-important lesson one must progress through life, facing, embracing, and enduring hardship along the way. Like a child who starts out in the first grade, learning her A, B, C’s, and then moving on to reading and writing and eventually the ability to research difficult topics and write persuasive position papers, so too ***we have to grow and mature from one stage to the next until we find Jesus sufficiently beautiful and sufficiently powerful and sufficiently sweet that the loss of everything else hardly registers in our hearts.***

Second, he says he knows how “to be brought low” (v. 12a) and again he knows how to endure “hunger” and “need” (v. 12b).

When Paul says he knows “how to be brought low” he isn’t referring merely to financial poverty but to a way of life that was similar to the one Jesus embraced (see 2:8 for the same verb). To know what Paul has in mind we should consider 1 Cor. 4:11-13; 2 Cor. 6:4-5; 11:23-29.

He also has in view the dejection and oppression that comes from material lack. When you endure hunger and thirst and cold and physical suffering and persecution and opposition from your enemies, but remain constant and joyful through it all, rather than bitter and angry, you have “learned” the secret of being content in Christ.

Third, Paul also knows how to live in prosperity. You might say, “Whoop de doo! That’s no big deal; so do I! Living in prosperity is no problem!” Well, actually it is. It may well be easier to be a Christian when life is hard than when everything is going our way.

Paul is saying, “I know how to be abased and yet not crushed by it. I know what it’s like to thrive in abundance and yet not be unduly exalted.

Most people experience something altogether different. For them, when times are good, God is good and they’re happy. But when times are bad, God is bad, and they’re sad.

Paul says something entirely different: “I know how to be deprived of a lot of material things and how to face adversity without thinking that life has lost its purpose; and I know how to possess wealth and health without being deceived into thinking that such is really what makes life worth living. ***I suffer no excessive depression when I lack the essentials of life, far less the luxuries; but neither do I allow myself to be puffed up and negligent of spiritual zeal when I find myself in the midst of prosperity.***”

Happiness or contentment or a deep sense of joy and satisfaction transcend bodily conditions and material possessions; genuine joy thrives independently of both turbulence and tranquility. Paul is saying, “***I can go to bed poor and hungry and maintain my spiritual and emotional equilibrium; and I can go to bed filled and prosperous and remain unaffected by it all.***”

Paul did not choose lack or loss or deprivation as a way of life. He simply says that he had learned to accept whatever came his way because ***the source and strength of his joy and contentment were not tied to stuff or physical comfort. His relationship with Jesus Christ made both lack and prosperity irrelevant to his daily existence.***

Some of you here today have grown up in wealth and prosperity. There’s nothing wrong with that. Praise God for his abundant blessings. But the question is: would you be content and joyful in Jesus if you were suddenly forced to live in poverty. Have you become so dependent on the ever-present and always available stuff of life, the luxuries and the gadgets and the knowledge that you’ll never go without a meal when you’re hungry, that you assume you deserve it all, that God owes it to you, that he’s not worthy of your trust if he doesn’t continue to supply you with all good things?

Others of you have grown up suffering lack, perhaps in virtual poverty. Perhaps you learned along the way how to cope with loss and deprivation in a way that honors Christ. What would happen if you suddenly became wealthy? Would abundance and prosperity corrupt you, or would you find yourself struggling with guilt at having so many possessions?

The issue for us all is resting and rejoicing in Jesus to such an extent that neither poverty nor prosperity has any affect on us, whether for good or ill.

Paul said in v. 12 he had “learned” to be content in all circumstances. In v. 13 he “knows” and again “in any and every circumstance” he has “learned” the secret of how to thrive. So what specifically had he “learned” and what was his “secret”? The answer is in v. 13. ***It was through the intimacy of his relationship with Jesus, or more literally, “in union with the one who infuses me with strength.”***

When he says it is “through” Christ he doesn’t mean merely that Christ is the instrumental cause. Paul is referring to his life “in” Christ, his daily existence in loving and trusting intimacy with Jesus who enables him.

He has in mind the beauty and glory of Christ's person, the wonder and love of his saving work on the cross, the power and sustaining energy of his resurrection life, the consistency and constancy of his intercession on our behalf, and the hope and expectation of his second coming.

Paul had learned that when a person becomes consumed with Christ, with his glory and his praise and immersed in his service, that the otherwise painful sharp edge of deprivation and loss and opposition simply doesn't carry the same painful punch it otherwise would.

The more majestic Christ appears the less glamorous and appealing will be the things of this earth.

Also, we must not wrench this text from its context and make it apply to everything in life. He is not talking about finding strength to walk on water or perform miracles or serve sacrificially or cultivate humility. He is talking about the ability to remain free of bitterness and envy and mistrust when his circumstances turn for the bad. He is talking about his ability to remain humble and not grow arrogant or prideful or self-reliant when his circumstances turn for the good.

In other words, the "all things" in v. 13 is not universal in scope. It is a reference back to the "in any and every circumstance" of v. 12.

Neither should this be manipulated to get people in church to do things they otherwise are not inclined to do. I would be badly twisting this verse if I used it this way: "Hey folks, we need your help in youth ministry. We need some mature adults to help lead the small groups. And you can't say No to this appeal simply because you've never worked with youth before or because you don't speak well or because you are convinced you don't have the spiritual gifts needed for this sort of thing. After all, you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you!"

The "all things" refers to the variety of circumstances in which Paul finds himself: be they an overabundance of food and physical comforts and safety and money for ministry and large crowds who listen to him and follow him or spending undeserved time in a prison in Rome or being vilified by his enemies or going without adequate food and clothing and being exposed daily to the possibility of execution.

Conclusion

Let's close with a challenge. Let's play fill in the blank.

"I can be content in life if only _____." If only what? "I can experience genuine and lasting fulfillment during my time on earth when I have _____." When you have what? "Life will prove to be worth living if and only if _____." If and only if what? "Life right now would be joyful and satisfying and I could truly enjoy all that God is for me in Jesus if it weren't the case that _____." If it weren't the case that what? "I can be assured that God is good and I can trust him with my life, if _____." If what?

My prayer and our aim ought to be to fill in the blank by saying: "I can be content and experience genuine fulfillment and believe that life is worth living and that God is good and trustworthy, *if I have Christ*. Period."

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