

Radical Dependence

Scripture Passage: Philippians 4:10-20, NRSV

(10) I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. (11) Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. (12) I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. (13) I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (14) In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.

(15) You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. (16) For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. (17) Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. (18) I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. (19) And my God will fully satisfy 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.

Introduction

This letter to the Philippians is one of Paul's most personal and intimate letters. His love and partnership with the church in Philippi is evident throughout the letter. He writes to church from prison. While he does not shy away from the fact that he is in prison and in chains, it is easy to forget because the letter is full of rejoicing. We learn so much about Paul from this letter, but he continually shifts the focus to the advancement of the gospel. This letter is not only an update for the Philippians, but it is also an encouragement for them to keep pressing on, like Paul, towards the prize.

Throughout the letter we learn that the Philippians have not only sent Paul a gift, but they sent one of their own, Epaphroditus, to help aid and care for Paul. Being in prison in the first century was a serious condition. He needed the help and aid of others to survive. Prisons were not what they are today. They were essentially "holding tanks." Prisoners were generally awaiting "a court trial or perhaps execution," and many died waiting.¹ They did not have our rules and regulations. The prison guards were not concerned about humane treatment or rehabilitation. If there were rations, they were minimal.

This is why Epaphroditus was sent with the mission to care of the needs of Paul. However, Epaphroditus fell ill, and now that he was better Paul wanted to send him home with this letter. Paul wanted to update and show his appreciation for the Philippians.

It reminds me of when missionaries come home today on deputation or when they send letters home. Paul is saying, "This is where your 'World Evangelism Fund' money is going. I am in chains, but the gospel is spreading." In fact the gospel was spreading farther and faster because of his chains. The whole palace guard knew that he is in chains for Christ. There were some spreading the gospel with the wrong motives, but it was still spreading! Others were spreading the gospel with the right motives, and their boldness was increasing! Paul may have been in a terrible situation, but it emboldened the messengers all the more. The gospel was spreading, and for this Paul rejoiced!

The letter continues on like this, and he continues to encourage the Philippians. This is where the children's song, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice" comes from. Paul is rejoicing, and he wants the Philippians to do the same. He continues to pull the focus away from himself and any form of selfish ambition (for both himself and others) because Paul's focus is on the advancement of the gospel, rejoicing in the Lord, and giving God the glory.

The passage we are looking at today comes from the end of the letter. It is what many refer to as a "thankless thanks." There is a deep sense of gratitude evident, yet Paul never once tells the Philippians "thank you." He is busy rejoicing in the Lord, the one who is truly the provider here.

I have always found it interesting that he emphasizes that he is not in need and not seeking the gift. From our perspective, he was in great need; his situation was dire; he absolutely needed the help of others to go on living. But he wasn't being ungrateful. What he was trying to say is: "I am content." He knew what it was like have little, and he knew what it was like have plenty. In any and every situation, he was content. He did all of this through Christ who gave him strength. His dependency was not on others. He was dependant on God, and to God be the glory!

I was discussing this passage of scripture recently at a Bible study, and the topic of Philippians 4:13 came up. "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." A friend shared with me a story, and he gave me permission to share it here. He is a runner, and he told me that at his first half marathon he became severely dehydrated. He got sick and passed out. His friend stopped, and the medic came. They were trying to get him into the ambulance to receive IV fluids when he started quoting Philippians 4:13, "I can do all thing through Christ who gives me strength." He didn't want to quit the race. He wanted to keep going. He thought Christ would give him strength, but his body said, 'no, sometimes you can't do all things.'

I laughed at his story, but I know have done the same thing. I fill my plate so full with responsibilities, and I falsely think that I can do it all. But this is not Paul's point of verse 14. I noticed in the newest edition of the NIV, they updated the wording from "I can do everything" to "I can do all this." This was perhaps to help keep this verse in context. Paul isn't saying that God gives us incredible athletic abilities. He is not saying we can do all things. He is saying that whatever the circumstance are he can find contentment- thanks to the power of Christ.

Paul's dependency was never on the Philippians' gift or Epaphroditus' care. Paul was grateful for both, but he was dependent on God. Paul notes in the letter that "to die is gain." He was not afraid of dying in prison, but he knew that in living that his ministry would go on and produce fruit. It was the Philippians' aid that helped to produce more fruit, and Paul acknowledges this.

While he never used the words “thank you,” he clearly appreciated the Philippians’ gift and their partnership with him. In verse 17, Paul says he seeks “the profit that accumulates” on the Philippians’ account. The term used here in the Greek is an accounting term. The idea is “that of a bank account receiving compound interest.”² He seeks that the Philippians receive interest in their account for the money they have given away. I studied Economics, and I never learned about this kind of interest. You don’t have to know a lot about money to know: you cannot accrue interest on a gift (or money) that you ship hundreds of miles to give freely to a missionary in prison. That is not how interest works.

This account Paul is talking about is the same thing Jesus is talking about when he says in Matthew 6:20 to “store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither, moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.” or in Matthew 19:21, when Jesus tells the rich young man, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasures in heaven.”

The Philippians’ treasure was accumulating as the message of Jesus Christ was spreading. The interest on that gift is still growing today. Without their gift, I would not be preaching these words today. Never underestimate the power of a gift that goes towards the mission of advancing the gospel here on earth.

We know from the Old Testament that “tithes” means ten percent, but if we use the example of the New Testament and the early church, it is so much more. I might even dare to say it is 110 percent. In Philippians 2:17, Paul makes reference to his very life being poured out as an offering. I am not saying this as a challenge to empty your pockets right here and now, but I do want to challenge you to live a lifestyle of generosity for the sake of the advancement of the Kingdom of God.

In the gospel story of the rich young man, I really like Mark’s version. It is there we learn that Jesus loved this young man. In fact, it is the only time the author of Mark makes reference to Jesus’s love for a single individual. Jesus saw this man; he heard his question; and the writer says, “Jesus... loved him.”³ The young man wanted to know how to earn eternal life; he had been doing everything right. He followed the letter of the law, but when Jesus’s answered “sell all of his things,” the man walked away sad. The problem was not with his possessions; the rich young man’s problem was with his dependence on his possessions.

It is too easy to depend on our own riches to save us and to give us security and wholeness. “John Wesley wrote that it is hard for the rich to be good Christians, since it becomes too easy for them to trust in their wealth and not think they need to trust in God, too easy to love the world when surrounded by all its allurements, and too hard to escape pride in a society that so values wealth.”⁴ Jesus’s message here is a radical one; it is a counter cultural one; but it is the same message Paul professed when he said, “ I can do all this through him who gives me strength.”⁵ This is a call for a radical dependence upon God. May we each learn to live more and more in dependence on God. May we learn to trust that Christ has already met our every need.

¹ Fleming, Dean. *Philippians: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*. New Beacon Bible Commentary, Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2009, 26.

² Fleming, Dean. *Philippians: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*. New Beacon Bible Commentary, Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2009, 244.

³ *The New International Version*. Mark 10:21. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011.

⁴ Placher, William C. *Mark. Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2010, 147.

⁵ *The New International Version*. Php 4:13. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011.