

PHILIPPIANS 4:13

For many this verse is trivialized — a personal motto or motivation. It has become a declaration of personal empowerment — winning a football game, losing weight, or gaining a job. Out of context, it is a boost of personal self-confidence. But in context, it has a very specific and different meaning. In context it is a verse about contentment and not about your dreams coming true and goals being met. It is about being content even when circumstances are hard. It's about what happens in your heart when you lose the football game and lose the job.

This verse has nothing to do with improving your circumstances at all. It has to do with being contentment and hardship in ministry. When ministry became hard for Paul, this was his declaration — ***I can do all things...***

CONTEXT (vv. 10-12): Paul is talking about contentment — even the most difficult and humble, he could depend on Christ who gave him the strength to persevere. In fact, notice verse 9 — he tells the readers to follow his example and then he mentions contentment. This is what they are to follow and us as well.

We live in a society that is fueled by discontentment — that what we have is not enough. Yet material possessions never bring satisfaction or contentment. Many Americans in jobs, marriages, homes, and standard of living. Discontentment keeps credit card companies in business. Discontentment leads men to mid-life crises. Believers and church leaders not only have the possibility of contentment but it is what we are to display.

Discontentment is dissatisfaction with the circumstances in which God has placed us; at its root it is a protest against the sovereign providence of God. Discontentment says to God, “I don’t like the way you have orchestrated some aspect of my life — something you have not seen fit to give me.” It can manifest itself in many ways: grumbling and complaining, protesting circumstances, greed, covetousness and the love of money, comparisons, anxiety and worry, lack of joy and patience, an unwillingness to wait on the Lord, quarrels and contentions. Discontentment is rooted in pride thinking we deserve more and that will produce strife and contention.

Contentment is characterized by thankfulness, peace, steadfast faith. It is accepting God’s sovereign control over all of life’s circumstances. It is the blessed assurance that God does all things well and is doing those for my ultimate good. It recognizes that I can trust the Lord with the outcome of every situation so that my joy and hope never waver in changing circumstances.

That is why Paul says that he can do all things through Christ who strengthens him. Though he had very little, he had gained Christ, and having gained Christ he had everything.

Observations of the context:

- ✓ Paul’s contentment was characterized by patience (v. 10) — it had been a lengthy time

(perhaps years) that the Philippians had been able to help them. Paul was not in a hurry to change the circumstances. He didn't mind waiting because his joy was not dependent on his present circumstances.

- ✓ Paul's contentment was something he learned (v. 11). Contentment is cultivated. Even *Paul* had to learn contentment. Cf. **2 Cor. 12:11-13**. God demonstrated his sufficiency (same root as contentment) and Paul learned contentment.
- ✓ Paul's contentment was not tied to his circumstances (v. 11) — he was content in whatever circumstances he was in.
- ✓ Paul's recognized his need for contentment when times were hard and when times were good (v. 12). Discontentment tempts not only the hearts of those who have little, but also the hearts of those who have much. He was content in both because his faith was anchored in Christ.

What were the circumstances when he wrote these words?

- ✓ It was written in the early 60s and he had been a missionary for about 13 years.
- ✓ Remember all that had happened to Paul in those years (2 Cor. 11).
- ✓ He is now a prisoner in Rome (1:12-14). He had been imprisoned in Philippi a decade earlier, and it was from those circumstances that the Philippian church had been born.
- ✓ Others were preaching to spite Paul.
- ✓ There were false teachers who were threatening the church.
- ✓ Paul is alone — only with Timothy — and he is about to send Timothy to Philippi.
- ✓ There is discord in the Philippian church.
- ✓ His circumstances are far from ideal and certainly not ideal.

In spite of all these things, Paul says, “I have learned to be content and to do all things...”

He has learned the secret of contentment (v. 12) — a secret of dependence on Christ.

If Paul needed to learn contentment, so do we. What lessons did he learn and what do we similarly need to know?

The principles of contentment that Paul learned are embedded in vv. 4-8. These are the themes and prerequisites to contentment.

1. We must find our happiness in the Lord (v. 4)

Paul has repeatedly instructed the Philippians to find their joy in Christ (1:4, 18; 2:2, 17-18, 29; 3:1). He talks about joy so much in this letter that it is often considered the theme of the letter. His circumstances have not dampened his joy. His circumstances would seem to dictate that his response should be anything to be joy.

This is not a call to find joy in the ever-changing circumstances of life. This is a call to find joy in the ever-powerful and sovereign God. It reflects the words of Ps. 34:8. When our joy is found in Christ and not our circumstances our joy can be found in every circumstance. It doesn't change because Christ doesn't change.

Rejoice — Rejoice *in the Lord*. Your joy is not in your circumstances or your ministry, but in your Savior. God is not dead; therefore our joy need never be extinguished.

We need to preach to ourselves with Job, “I know that my Redeemer lives!” When we are anchored in the rock of ages, we have no room to lose hope. The source of our joy is not dead.

2. We must clothe ourselves with humility (v. 5a)

The word **gentle** can be translated caring or considerate or kind. It points to the humility of Christ in ch. 2. It is a word of graciousness that does not respond to difficult with bitterness or anger.

How is graciousness and humility connected to contentment? Note v. 2 — There was turmoil in the church at Philippi — discontentment was the source of that disunity (as in Js. 4:1ff). Unfulfilled desires result in quarrels and fighting. And the heart of the issue here particularly was pride (cf. 2:3-5). Christ’s infinite kindness and graciousness is seen in His humiliation. We are to emulate Christlike humility to those whom we serve. The interests of others should be placed above our own. We are servants, not CEOs. When needs are unmet, the proud heart becomes frustrated and discontent. The humble Christian realizes that the only thing he deserves is hell and anything else he receives is grace.

If we are to kill discontentment, we too must clothe ourselves in humility.

3. We must fix our hope on heaven (v. 5b)

The Lord is near is a recap of what he has said a few verses earlier (3:17ff). The Philippian false teachers had fixed their hope on idolatrous desires. According to 1 Tim. 6 discontentment is not a small sin for those in spiritual leadership — it is in fact an indication of a false teacher. The true teacher seeks godliness accompanied by contentment.

Paul is condemning the discontented false teachers (vv. 17-19). The antidote is in vv. 20-21. **The Lord is near** is a concise recap of everything he has said at the end of chapter 3. If our joy is the coming of Christ, why would we be discontent with the loss of things in this world and the loss of carnal desires. A heavenly hope views things in this world with a proper perspective.

As the undershepherds of Christ, we will one day appear before Him to receive our reward. And the true nature of our trivial pursuits will be revealed and the only thing that will matter on that day is His approval — “well done, good and faithful servant.” If we keep that thought at the forefront of our minds, how could we ever be discontent? Only His approval matters.

4. We must seek God’s help in prayer (vv. 6-7)

Don’t let the familiarity and commonality of these verse keep you from missing the point. Rather than growing anxious in circumstances, Paul went to his knees before the Lord.

There is much in our world that can tempt us to be anxious. Even if there are earthquakes and

the Middle East erupts and we never receive the things we thought we deserved, we can cling to the truth of these verses.

Paul will not always answer in the way we think that he should (e.g., 2 Cor. 12). He pleaded for three lengthy and prolonged seasons of prayer and God did not answer the way he desired. Why? To make Paul dependent on Christ and His strength. It means that we must acknowledge and depend on Him in every circumstance.

5. We must set our hearts on what is true (v. 8)

Here is a list of 8 things that should control our thoughts. Godly living starts with godly thinking. Discontentment begins in the mind. It suggests that contentment could be yours if only things would be different.

Sometimes people say, “I just can’t help how I feel.” If we want to change what we want to feel, we have to change how we think. The temptation may be very real. The apostle Paul would begin by telling us to set our hearts on what is real.

Verses 9-13 follow from this section for a reason — his life is the overflow of the reality of these themes in his life.

The prerequisites he establishes in vv. 4-8 are applied in vv. 9-13. This was his life.

At the end of his life, Paul still held on to this same perspective. Note 2 Timothy 4 — five years after he has penned this letter to the Philippians. He has been betrayed by Demas, he is alone and does not have his books or even cloak, his enemies want to see his demise; he is now destitute in a Roman judgment. If my ministry ends like that, can I still be content?

Even in this dark hour, he did not lose heart. Look at what he says in vv. 17-18. In spite of his extremely difficult circumstances, the Lord strengthened (same word from Phil. 4) him... Those verses summarize the heart of Phil. 4:13. No matter the circumstances of Christ, we can be content and do all things through Him who strengthens us.