

Book:	<i>Philippians</i>
Series:	<i>Rejoice in the Lord!</i>
Lesson 14:	<i>The Joy of Christian Benevolence</i>
Text:	Philippians 4:10-20
Date:	December 29, 2013

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Next Lesson:	Resolution Sunday Combined ABF



Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter



TEACHING TIP

After reviewing my past correspondence with you, I realized that I gave you the wrong end date for this semester. Originally, this semester was going to end on December 22, with the combined Resolution Sunday ABF occurring on December 29. However, that special Resolution Sunday was bumped to January 5, giving us one extra week in Philippians. So, we will end Philippians by spending two weeks (December 22 and 29) on this lesson—main point 1 (*contentment*) this week, and main point 2 (*sharing*) next week. If you have planned to be away on December 29 and are unable to find a sub, please let me know. Keith Funkhouser, Dan Elkins, Dave Moeckly, and Pastor Ben are good candidates for a sub.

INTRODUCTION

The passage to which we turn in this lesson serves both as a “thank you” note from Paul for the gift the Philippian church had sent to him, and as a practical theology of Christian benevolence.¹ On the one hand, Paul is grateful for the very helpful gift sent by the Philippians (vv. 10-11, 14), but on the other hand, he is careful to demonstrate his sufficiency in Christ alone (v. 13; cf. 2 Corinthians 9:8). That understanding—on both the part of the one in need and the one meeting the need—is foundational to joyful Christian benevolence.

This is the theme of Philippians 4:10-20—Christian benevolence, or meeting physical needs within the household of faith. And again, we notice immediately that this is another cause for joy. Paul finds tremendous joy (i.e., “I rejoiced...greatly,” v. 10) in the physical (as in material, not conversational) fellowship of the

THE ONE IN NEED: CONTENTMENT (vv. 10-13, 17)

church. And, while we could cynically assume that his joy is actually mere happiness in being the recipient of such material help, we discover in the passage that his joy is much deeper and more genuine than that. Moreover, the text teaches us that God receives joy from the benevolent care of His people for one another (cf. v. 18, 20).

Paul writes in verse 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.” This church family loved the apostle and had a burden to help him (i.e., “you were indeed concerned for me”; cf. 2 Corinthians 8:12), but for one reason or another they didn’t have an opportunity to help him until now. Perhaps this was due to their ignorance of Paul’s predicament, their inability to locate him, the absence of an able messenger (cf. v. 18), or their own financial plight (cf. 2 Corinthians 8:1-2). However, opportunity had recently presented itself, and they had “revived” their concern for Paul. The Greek word underlying “revived” is very picturesque, describing a plant that is blooming again. The picture is that their loving and willing concern had always been present, but now that their love was “in deed and in truth” and not “in word or in talk” (1 John 3:18), it was tangibly blossoming again (cf. 2 Corinthians 9:2; 11:9 for the first time their concern had been tangibly expressed to Paul).

Believers should seek the joy of Christian benevolence. Whether they are in need or in a position to meet a need, Christians should “rejoice in the Lord” (3:1; 4:4, 10) and “stand firm in the Lord” (4:1) by enjoying physical fellowship with one another. That is easier said than done, however, for both the selfishness of our flesh and the materialism of our world teach the needy to be dissatisfied and the prosperous to hoard or splurge. In this passage, Paul uses the physical fellowship between himself and the Philippian believers to call us to Christian benevolence and to model two spiritual ingredients that contribute to its achievement.

In order for a needy Christian to experience the joy of Christian benevolence like Paul, he must dependently cultivate (cf. 2:12-13) a spirit of contentment. When the first century Roman soldiers heard John the Baptist’s message to avoid impending judgment by “bearing fruits in keeping with repentance” (Luke 3:8), they asked, “What shall we do?” (Luke 3:14). John answered, “Be content with your wages.” Clearly, then, contentment is a fruit of true spiritual life. Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs defined contentment this way: “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.”²

For the American Christian, the temptation to discontentment is not usually tied to actual and acute deprivation (as it was for Paul in this passage), as much as it is usually due to wanting more or wanting something else (i.e., the sins of idolatry and materialism).³ Paul addresses those shallow believers in 1 Timothy 6:5-10 —

[Some are] imagining that godliness is a means of gain. But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

In our passage, actual and acute needs are being considered, and contentment in the midst of that is being modelled. Paul generally describes some of his needs as being “brought low” (v. 12), “facing...hunger” (v. 12), being in “need” (v. 12), and being in “trouble” (v. 13). Paul’s needs and troubles were probably similar to those faced at other times in his ministry. In 1 Corinthians 4:11, Paul stated, “To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless.” In 2 Corinthians

11:27, Paul admitted to being “in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.” Cf. 2 Corinthians 4:8-12; 6:4-5. MacArthur describes Paul’s present predicament:

He was a prisoner in Rome, confined to a small apartment (Acts 28:30) and guarded around the clock by a Roman soldier (Acts 28:16). He could no longer minister with the freedom he had once enjoyed. Being unable to work to support himself, he was in a dependent condition, probably existing on a bare subsistence level on help from generous friends. The only contact he had with the churches that were his constant concern (2 Cor. 11:28) was through letters or the occasional visitor who sought him out. Constantly looming over him was the anticipation of his trial before the emperor—the infamous Nero (cf. Acts 25:11–12, 21; 26:32; 27:24; 28:19). Commenting on this period in Paul’s life, F. B. Meyer wrote that he was “deprived of every comfort, and cast as a lonely man on the shores of the great strange metropolis, with every movement of his hand clanking a fetter, and nothing before him but the lion’s mouth or the sword” (The Epistle to the Philippians [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952], 242).⁴

Clearly, then, Paul had real and pressing needs (cf. v. 16), yet he writes in verse 11, “Not that I am speaking of being in need.” Now, Paul is trying to make an intentional, even ironic point with his use of grammar here. However, I believe the obvious contradiction in that translation (ESV) is unnecessary and unhelpful. Paul was obviously in need (thus, he *is* “speaking of being in need”—cf. 1:12, 30; 2:25, 30; 4:6), so an improved translation would more literally render the phrase “being in” (Greek, *kata*) with “according to” or “from”—“Not that I am speaking according to need” (or “from want,” NASB).

In other words, Paul is clarifying that he isn’t being motivated to write here by a consuming and overwhelming desire for relief from his predicament. He isn’t thanking them for their previous gift or mentioning his need again because he is overcome with

anxiety about how his needs are going to be met. Nor is he insinuating that his improved circumstance (i.e., their gift) is the source of his joy (even though it was a cause). And since that was true, he certainly wasn’t being driven by “felt-needs”!

This interpretation of verse 11a fits quite nicely with what Paul will say in verse 17a—“Not that I seek the gift.” Again, Paul confirms that he is not being manipulative or disingenuous in his writing. He was in need, but he wasn’t consumed by his needs. Rather, he was content.

1. ***The start of contentment (v. 11) — “learned”***

Paul confesses that contentment is an mindset he has had to “learn.” Like any other Christian virtue, contentment is not natural; it is “learned.” This word means “to come to a realization, with implication of taking place less through instruction than through experience or practice.”⁵ Paul’s instruction had occurred in the schoolroom of practically applying biblical living (i.e., “by faith and not by sight”; cf. Hebrews 10:34) to diverse situations. All the book-learning in the world cannot make a person content or guarantee that he has learned that lesson. It is only in the daily grind of life experience that this virtue can be learned from the Master Teacher (cf. v. 13; cf. Luke 9:57-58). You have to be put into a situation in which you are tempted to be discontent, in order for you to learn and practice contentment. So, for us, as it undoubtedly was for Paul, this must be an area in which we “work out our own salvation” (2:12-13) and “press on to make it our own” (3:12-14).



Application: How might one start learning to be content? *open discussion (Admittedly, a big part of the answer is given in subpoint 3 below—the “secret” of contentment. Also, consider the underlying reality of God’s providence [Lat. “to see beforehand”] in the “revival of concern” and “opportunity” in verse 10—how might this teach us to be content? Also see 2 Corinthians 4:17 and Colossians 3:1-2.)*

2. ***The scope of contentment (vv. 11b-12) — “whatever situation...in any and every circumstance”***

Paul affirms, “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” (vv. 11b-12). Clearly then, true Christian contentment spans the physical/material lows and highs of life.

- Lows
 - “Be brought low”: This refers to lowness (humiliation, abasement) that arises as a result of humbling oneself; it was used to describe Christ in 2:8.
 - “Facing...hunger”: This refers to lacking the basic means of survival.
 - “Facing...need”: This refers to being without or in short supply of something; lacking, deficient.
- Highs
 - “Abound”: This word is repeated at the end of the verse, but in its contrast with being “brought low” here, it is probably referring to abounding in prominence and recognition.
 - “Facing plenty”: This literally means to fill with food and thus be satisfied.
 - “Facing...abundance”: This is the same word as above, but since it is in contrast to “facing...need,” it refers more generally to being prosperous or having more than enough of something.

In poverty stricken Ethiopia, Christlike contentment can be enjoyed. In materialistic America, Christlike contentment can be enjoyed.



Application: Put yourself in Paul’s sandals. What might “highs” in his life have looked like? *open discussion*

For us, what would the struggle with discontentment look like during the lows of life? What would the struggle with discontentment look like during the highs of life? *open discussion*

3. ***The secret of contentment (vv. 12b-13) — “do all things through Him who strengthens”***

Paul has already mentioned that such all-inclusive contentment must be learned. In verses 12b-13, he tells us the specific lesson plan that was so instrumental in his own enjoyment of contentment. “I have learned the secret of [contentment]: I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”

In order to understand what Paul is communicating here, we need to consider two key words—“content” (v. 11) and “learned the secret” (v. 12). Both words occur only here and were borrowed from secular philosophy.

The Greek word for “content” (*autarkes*) was a key term within Stoicism and essentially referred to self-sufficiency.

For [the Stoics] contentment described the mind-set of the person who had become independent of all things and all people. The Stoic line was, “man should be sufficient unto himself for all things, and able, by the power of his will, to resist the force of circumstances.” The Stoic Seneca put it this way: “the happy man is content with his present lot, no matter what it is, and is reconciled to his circumstances.”³ The Stoic ideal was a kind of self-contained superman who could rise above it all in independent self-sufficiency and serenity.⁶

Paul uses a term that would be familiar to his readership and redeems it with a biblical understanding. As he uses this word, he keeps the sense of independency from circumstances (i.e., that circumstances didn't dictate his mindset), but rejects any notions of self-sufficiency. Instead, he clarifies in verse 13 that his sufficiency was rooted in his relationship with Jesus Christ (as was his joy [3:1, 4:4] and stability/peace [4:1, 7]). "I can do all things," Paul writes, "Through [lit. *in*] Him who strengthens me." While this verse doesn't guarantee prosperity in athletics (to the chagrin of many popular Christian athletes), it does contextually promise that "whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything"⁷ through our resources⁸ in our relationship with Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Peter 1:3).

*Paul transformed the term with a "powerfully Christ-centered redefinition of contentment..." Paul and all who are in Christ are God-sufficient as opposed to self-sufficient. Contentment is rooted in the eternal God rather than in the temporal self. Thus while Paul and Seneca [the Stoic] may appear to be close, they are a universe apart!*⁹

Paul's contentment was independent of his circumstances, because he was fully dependent upon Christ! He knew that His resources in Christ were inexhaustible (cf. 4:19; Romans 8:32; Ephesians 3:8), and so even the valleys were warranted locations for contentment (and joy and stability/peace). Yes, this kind of unwavering contentment is unnatural, and yes, it must be learned; but, we are encouraged to discover that our Teacher is Christ Himself who is able to "strengthen" us to practice contentment (cf. Ephesians 6:10; 1 Timothy 1:12; 2 Timothy 2:1; 4:17; cf. Colossians 1:28-29; Philippians 2:12-13).



Discussion: Read the following passages and discuss how our relationship with Christ "strengthens" us to be content (even when circumstances are bad).

- 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 — *But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*
- Hebrews 13:5 — *Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"*
- Psalm 23:1-6 — *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*
- Habakkuk 3:17-19 — *Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; He makes my feet like the deer's; He makes me tread on my high places.*

Contentment is a sure sign of an individual who has been rescued from His sin and is now living in trusting submission under the sovereign and good lordship of Jesus Christ (cf. 1:1; 4:23). His greatest problem has been dealt with and his greatest needs are met in his relationship with Jesus Christ (cf. Romans 8:32), and so even in the valleys of life, he knows unmatched joy (4:4), incomprehensible peace (4:6-7), and unwavering contentment (4:13).

Illustration: One commentator relates the following illustration of Christ's strengthening us to be content (cf. Ephesians 3:16).

Fog had moved into O'Hare Field, the airport that serves Chicago, and my departure had been delayed. I was sitting in the terminal reading a book and quietly asking God to work out His plans for the trip. Near me was a gentleman waiting for the same plane, but he was pacing up and down like a caged lion, and the language he was using to describe the fog was making the atmosphere more dense! I thought to myself, "Here is a man without any inner resources."...

While flying back to Chicago from upper New York via New York City, we had to stay in our holding pattern over Kennedy Airport for more than an hour. When the stewardess announced that we would be landing an hour late, a man across the aisle shouted, "Bring out the booze!" This was his only resource when things were going against him.¹⁰

Paul, however, knows that the "secret" to being joyfully content is to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18; cf. Philippians 4:23). This phrase "learned the secret" is borrowed from the false mystery religions throughout the Roman Empire and described initiation into closed cultic knowledge. Again, Paul redeems that term by suggesting that this kind of Christian contentment was an "open secret."¹¹

Paul's point is that Christian contentment remains a mystery to those on the outside and can only be learned from the inside by those who are in Christ. In truth, "Contentment is a...quiet secret known and cherished only by a few" (Bockmuehl).¹²

Application: Says Carson, "How far we know the secret of contentment and to what degree we are proving the sufficiency of Christ for all the demands of our lives are always challenging questions for us as Christians."¹³ Those questions must be asked, however, and we must respond to any deficiency by returning to chapter 3 (Lessons 11-12) where we were exhorted to find our joy "in the Lord" alone and to press on to know, gain, and be found in Him.¹⁴

4. The spirit of contentment (v. 17) — "seek the fruit that increases to your credit"

In verse 17, Paul describes the physical gift of the Philippian believers as "fruit that increases to your credit" or "profit which increases to your account" (NASB). Paul uses an accounting metaphor here to illustrate that underlying this physical fellowship was actually a spiritual investment. Paul recognized that when the Philippian believers sacrificially and generously met his physical needs, they were accruing spiritual treasure, just as Jesus promised throughout the gospels.

- Matthew 6:19-20 — *Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.*
- Matthew 19:21 — *If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.*

- Luke 16:9 — *And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by how you use worldly wealth [i.e., use your wealth for spiritual purposes], so that when it runs out you will be welcomed into the eternal homes [by those who have been benefitted by the spiritual use of your wealth].* (NET)

Jesus taught that “the only money that we will see again is that which we give away. And that money will return with compounded interest!”¹⁵ So, the Philippian church, in giving to the apostle, was enjoying a spiritual transaction. “The church gave *materially* to Paul, and received *spiritually* from the Lord. The Lord keeps the books and will never fail to pay one spiritual dividend! That church is poor that fails to share materially with others.”¹⁶

Now that we understand the clear, biblical teaching of that accounting imagery, let’s put it in its context—and this is where we discover the spirit of Christian contentment. Verse 17 is actually echoing and building upon verse 11. Paul states that he is writing these things, “not [because] I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.” Paul wasn’t “seeking” to have his needs met (even his dire needs), as much as he was “seeking” for fellow believers to know the same spiritual wealth that he enjoyed.

Even when he is the one in need or when his needs are being met, Paul is decidedly others-focused—he is concentrated on the Philippian believers and is deriving joy from their spiritual investment. In other words, “Even in acknowledging their support, his servant attitude surfaced. He thought of their growth and blessings.”¹⁷ “Their gift brought Paul joy not because of its personal material benefit to him, but because of its spiritual benefit to them.”¹⁸ In his physical poverty, the spiritually-rich apostle was rejoicing that the physically-rich Philippians were now experiencing true riches—spiritual fruit.

This is the spirit of contented Christian benevolence. The contented Christian is always more concerned about other people (especially about their spiritual lives), even when physically they are the most needy. Having learned to be content through a faith-filled dependency on His faithful Christ, Paul knew that by being an occasion himself for their generosity and then by receiving their gift, he was a channel through which spiritual fruit was being deposited into their account. That’s why he was rejoicing—yes, he was receiving a gift, but they were winning a reward!



Application: Considering what we have learned here, discuss the following questions:

- Should you publicize your personal physical needs? If yes, how do you publicize your needs in such a way that you are not “seeking a gift,” but “seeking the fruit that increases to others’ credit”?
- While declining someone’s offer of help may be appropriate in some situations, it may also be a reflection of what heart problem? *Pride (E.g., Paul didn’t want to get in the way of a spiritual harvest for the Philippians by arrogantly keeping his needs to himself or refusing to accept any help. Instead, in his concern for their spiritual fruitfulness, he rejoiced to receive their Christian benevolence).*

Transition: In order for a needy to experience the joy of Christian benevolence like Paul, he must dependently cultivate (cf. 2:12-13) a spirit, not only of contentment, but also of sharing, especially if he is in a position to meet a need. Without these two ingredients, it is possible to be the recipient or provider of benevolence, without ever knowing the joy expressed in this passage (cf. v. 10).

THE ONE MEETING THE NEED: SHARING (vv. 14-20)

Referencing the same passage in Luke that we used to start our first point, we discover that the crowds responded to John's sermon to "bear fruits in keeping with repentance" (Luke 3:8), by asking, "What then shall we do?" (Luke 3:10). John answered, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise" (Luke 3:11). Clearly, then, sharing is a fruit of true spiritual life.

As we already mentioned, Paul's joy rests on the "revival" or "re-blossoming" of "concern" from these Philippian believers (v. 10). The word "concern" is a word that we've already seen in this letter. It literally means "to think" or "to give careful consideration to something." Thus, we could render this phrase, "You have revived your thoughts on my behalf." It is certainly no accident that Paul uses that word again here. Throughout this epistle, Paul has been challenging them to think a certain way, to think like Christ (2:5)—with humility (2:5-8), unity (4:2), ministry (2:2), and maturity (3:15, 19). Now, he is highlighting one specific manifestation of this spiritual mind—it is benevolent. Its desire for humility, unity, ministry, and maturity manifests itself in tangible concern. When provided with an "opportunity" (v. 10), the spiritual mind generously shares with those in need (v. 14). This is to think like Christ (cf. 2:5, 20-21).

While Paul has masterfully demonstrated that in various ways throughout Philippians, no text highlights the connection between "the mind of Christ" and generous giving as vividly as 2 Corinthians 8:1-15. In that passage, written some 5-10 years earlier, Paul used the Christlike benevolence of the Macedonians (the province of Philippi) to encourage the physical generosity of the Corinthians.

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can

testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also.

I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich. And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. As it is written, "Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack."



Discussion: What parallels do we see between what we've learned about the humble, ministering, mature, benevolent mind of Christ in Philippians and the "grace of generosity" in 2 Corinthians? Seeing these principles in both passages will help reaffirm our belief in them and enable our obedience to them.

- Verses 1, 6 — Generosity provokes generosity. An example of generosity (in this case, the Macedonians) is a biblical motivator for the generosity of others (in this case, the Corinthians).
- Verses 2-3 — Generosity isn't an amount, but a heart (or, in Philippian terms, a mindset). Thus, generosity can flourish even in great suffering (i.e., "severe test of affliction") and personal need (i.e., "extreme poverty").
- Verses 3-4 — Christian benevolence always exceeds expectations, both in amount (v. 3) and desire (v. 4).
- Verses 5 — Christian benevolence begins by submitting oneself to the Lord. Then, when God's will proves to be sacrificially giving to another, that, too, will be submitted to.
- Verses 6-8, 10-11 — Christian benevolence is more than just a desire to help or a burden for the needs of others; it manifests itself in true believers by becoming visibly demonstrable when opportunity arises.
- Verse 12 — Generosity is pleasing in the sight of God, not in accordance with the amount given, but according to the heart of ready obedience.
- Verses 13-15 — God has wisely ordained that physical fellowship be a means of supplying one another's needs. The idea is that there are two static groups—the needy and the supplied—but we may end up going back and forth between those two groups. And, when we are in the position of being well supplied, our spiritual responsibility is to allow our "abundance...[to] supply [the] need" of others. This will ensure that there is a healthy mutual experience of being "eased" and being "burdened," "that there may be fairness." This may fly in the face of how some people view fairness, even within the church.

- Verse 9 — The foundational motivation and enablement for such unnatural benevolence is found in the gospel. The good news tells the story behind "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ," and it is this—"though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich." Thus, all those who submit themselves to God (v. 5) do nothing less than shadow that display of grace with their own "act of grace" (vv. 6-7). This is what Paul means when he describes their generosity as "submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ" (2 Corinthians 9:13). No amount of sacrifice can steal the "joy" that comes from that ministry of Christian benevolence (v. 2; cf. 9:6-7, 15)—just ask the (earlier) Philippian believers!

What does 2 Corinthians 9:6-15 teach us about the motivations, results, or manner of giving? *open discussion*

Back in our text, Paul echoes what he wrote years earlier in 2 Corinthians and says, "It was kind of you [lit. *you have done well*] to share my trouble" (v. 14). The word "kind" is usually rendered "good" and refers to that which is right—it can describe something that is appropriate, commendable, or beneficial, and all those adjectives fit this context. Extending Christian benevolence to Paul was the right—the appropriate, commendable, and beneficial—thing for the Philippians to do, for in that way they were thinking like Jesus Christ!

And that is how He wants His entire body to think. The word underlying "share" (Gk. *sugkoinoneo*) has already been used in its root form three times in this epistle (1:7; 2:1; 3:10). This root word (Gk. *koinonia*) has been translated "partake," "participate," or "fellowship," but this is its most practical, and most overlooked, usage. Philippians 4:14ff teaches us that just as believers share a spiritual fellowship (in mission and union—1:7; 2:1), we are also to enjoy a physical fellowship (in suffering and sharing—3:10; 4:14-15).

The early church understood this very practical and physical dimension of fellowship (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32, 34-35; Romans 15:27). *The Didache*, also called *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, served as an early church instruction manual, as it commented on and explained New Testament teaching and applied it to its corporate practice. In Didache 4:8, our word “share” is used with the same kind of meaning—

*Thou shalt not turn away from him that is in want, but shalt make thy brother partaker in all things, and shalt not say that anything is thine own. For if ye are fellow-partakers in that which is imperishable, how much rather in the things which are perishable?*¹⁹

In a political context of capitalism and democracy, we tend to dislike and discount any ideas that smell of communism or socialism. Notwithstanding, this passage (and 2 Corinthians) very clearly teaches a mutual ministry of meeting needs through sharing. As we wrestle with the implications and structure of such Christian benevolence some 2,000 years later, let’s consider what this passage teaches regarding the obstacles and outcome of physical fellowship.

1. ***The obstacles to sharing (vv. 15-16, 19)***

In the practical theology of this section, we can see at least three potential obstacles to the sharing ingredient of Christian benevolence. If we’re not careful, it’s easy to allow these obstacles to excuse us from obedience in this area of Christlike sharing.



Discussion: Instead of simply teaching through the three obstacles below, consider reading the verse and asking students to identify and explain the potential obstacle.

a. ***Aloneness — sharing may be unaccompanied (v. 15).***

Paul writes in verse 15, “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” (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:9). While Paul envisions that Christian benevolence be a mutual ministry within the local church and among local churches, he doesn’t let us wait until someone else joins us. Like the Philippians believers experienced years before, when it comes to the matter of sharing with those in need, you may be the only believer participating. In such aloneness, submission to the will of God and obedience to His “mind” is more necessary than ever. This obstacle may tempt your immaturity of not wanting to be the only one involved in meeting a particular need, or in the more mature tension of simply not believing that you can meet the need all by yourself. Fortunately, though, that’s not the point. God simply wants your heart and your hands to be willing (and working, when the opportunity arises)—even if no one else’s are.

b. ***Repetitiveness — sharing may be ongoing (v. 16).***

When we submit ourselves to the will of God, we may discern that He is calling us to share repeatedly, especially if we are giving alone. Such repetitiveness in giving is what the Philippians had previously modeled. Paul commends them that “even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again.” Christian benevolence, because it is a heart attitude or mindset, doesn’t grow weary of loving Christian brothers and sisters “in deed and in truth” (cf. 1 John 3:16-18).

c. **Neediness — sharing may be sacrificial (v. 19).**

The Christian (or church) who is repeatedly giving by himself to meet a need will soon find himself facing physical hardship. And this is where true sacrifice begins. Sacrifice is not merely going without some favorite item, or cutting the budget back so that there might be more to give, or increasing one's tithe from 10% to 12%. True sacrifice means that you begin to share in the suffering of the needy person, just like Christ did with us. In the book, *Gospel in Life*, the author writes,

Galatians 6:2 tells us to carry one another's burdens. Picture how you help a person who is trying to carry a load that is too heavy. To help with a burden, you must first come very close to the burdened person, standing virtually in their shoes. Next, you must put your own strength under the burden so its weight is distributed on both of you, thus lightening the load for the original bearer. To "carry the burden" means to come under it and let some of its weight, responsibility, and pain come onto you.²⁰

This is exactly what the Philippian church had done years earlier according to 2 Corinthians 8:1-5, when "in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty...overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part, for they gave...beyond their means." In meeting Paul's needs, they took his burden upon themselves and encountered the hardship of it. Thus, according to verse 19, they came to experience "need."

With this fuller understanding of sacrifice in mind (i.e., that it actually begins at the point of sharing in the suffering of the needy person), the book, *Gospel in Life*, reminds us of the enabling motivation for such active love.

Galatians 6:2 then expands this thought. "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Obviously, Christ is the ultimate example of burden-bearing love. He bore the infinite burden of our guilt and sin on the cross, and it crushed Him. He did not simply share that burden with us, He completely freed us from it by bearing its entire weight. Anyone who knows this infinite, burden-bearing love has a breathtaking model who inspires and empowers us into the same kind of love.²¹

Paul put it this way in 2 Corinthians 8:9—"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich." May we "go and do likewise" (cf. Luke 10:37).



Discussion: How has your understanding of Christlike sharing been challenged as a result of the practical theology of this passage? *open discussion*

In what ways did/does Christ's tangible love towards us manifest itself in aloneness, repetativeness, and neediness? *open discussion*

What other obstacles to our Christlike sharing might we face? *open discussion*

2. **The outcome of sharing (vv. 17-20)**

In the last three verses of this paragraph, Paul provides at least three outcomes of sharing that encourage our obedience in this matter in spite of the potential obstacles.

a. **The needy is supplied (v. 18a).**

Paul affirms in verse 18, "I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent." Paul uses three

different phrases to describe the meeting of his need by the sharing of the Philippian believers.

The phrase, “have received full payment” (Gk. *apecho...panta*), was used in commerce to refer to a receipt indicating that a bill had been paid in full. So, “this statement is in effect Paul’s receipt to the Philippians for their gift.”²² The word “more” (Gk. *perisseuo*) is a verb that can be translated, “I abound, overflow, have an excess, have more than enough.” It is used in John 6:12-13 to describe the twelve baskets of leftovers after the feeding of the multitude. Paul seems to be using it here to describe his physical provision, but he may be using it in the same way that he did in 2 Corinthians 9:8—“And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may *abound* in every good work.” The final phrase, “well supplied” (Gk. *pleroo*), refers to being filled up completely, like a cup of water about to overflow.

Clearly, then, Paul was overwhelmed by the generous sharing of the Philippian believers, and his needs had been amply supplied.



Discussion: Share an experience in which your Christlike sharing (i.e., bearing of another’s burden) led to the joyful meeting of another’s needs. Or, share your experience of being the recipient of someone’s generosity which alleviated your physical needs. *open discussion*

b. The giver is supplied (vv. 17, 19).

The second outcome is experienced by the giver himself. Even though sacrificial giving may cause the giver himself to incur difficulty, God promises to bless his generosity and provide for him. God does this both spiritually (v. 17) and physically (v. 19).

Spiritually, God blesses them with eternal “fruit that increases to [their] credit” (v. 17), for they have laid up treasures in heaven (cf. Matthew 6:19-20; 1 Timothy 6:17-19). Physically, God guarantees that He “will supply every need of [theirs] according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (v. 19). The word “supply” (Gk. *pleroo*), here describing the outcome of the giver (i.e., the Philippians), was used in verse 18 to describe the outcome of the one in need (i.e., Paul). Just as God uses the giver to provide for the needy, so he will use other givers to provide for the need of the previously generous. Thus, receivers experience God’s provision and givers channel God’s provision, and both prove God to be faithful to His word (cf. Proverbs 11:24-25; 19:17; Luke 6:38; 2 Corinthians 9:6).

The simple law of sowing and reaping, experienced years ago by this Philippian church (cf. 2 Corinthians 9:6), is a promise that we, too, can believe. Proverbs 3:9-10 encourages us, “Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.” Indeed, it is impossible to outgive God, as is evident in the the phrase, “according to [not *out* of] His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”²³ If you submissively allow your own Christlike sharing to be a channel of His promise to provide, you will experience such provision yourself.



Discussion: Share an experience of how personal needs, incurred from sacrificial living, were supplied through the sacrifice of another. *open discussion*

c. *The Lord is glorified (vv. 18b, 20).*

The final outcome of Christlike sharing is discovered in verses 18 and 20. Paul uses sacrificial language to describe the Philippians' gift. He called it "a fragrant offering [cf. Genesis 8:20-21, Exodus 29:18; Leviticus 1:9, 13, 17; Numbers 15:3], a sacrifice acceptable [cf. Leviticus 19:5; 22:29; Isaiah 56:7] and pleasing [cf. Psalm 51:19] to God" (v. 18b).

Paul saw the Philippians' gift as a sacrificial act of worship to God. Such spiritual sacrifices are required of New Covenant believers instead of the animal sacrifices of the Old Covenant. In Romans 12:1 Paul commands believers, "Present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship." The writer of Hebrews exhorts, "...Do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (Heb. 13:15-16). Peter reminds believers that they are "a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). Paul's joy that the Philippians would make such an acceptable sacrifice to God far surpassed his joy at receiving their gift.²⁴

Such heart-driven, tangibly-authenticated spiritual sacrifices accomplish the doxological desire of verse 20—"To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen." God is never more exalted than when His people model the sacrificially giving nature of His Son.

Additionally, praise to God should be our natural response after considering His wonderful design of Christian community. That God would issue the promise of verse 19 and then accomplish its fulfillment through Christlike benevolence is a marvelous reality. Indeed, such fellowship with one another and with the Father is a privilege of being graced together in the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. vv. 21-23).

CONCLUSION (vv. 21-23)

In commenting on our passage, John Calvin wrote,

He who knows how to use present abundance soberly and temperately with thanksgiving [i.e., contentment], prepared to part with everything whenever it may please the Lord, giving also a share to his brother according to his ability, and is also not puffed up [i.e., sharing], that man has learned to excel and to abound. This is an excellent and rare virtue.²⁵

May "God...make all grace abound to [us], so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, [we] may abound in [the] good work" of Christian benevolence (2 Corinthians 9:8).

ENDNOTES

¹ “In this paragraph the apostle feels the need to do two things: to express appreciation for the gifts sent from Philippi, and yet at the same time, very sensitively, to emphasize the spiritual principle of dependence on the Lord rather than on human help” (D. A. Carson et al., eds., *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, 4th ed. [Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994], 1258).

“Perhaps they expected Paul to be joyful because of the gift but, as the context clearly reveals, his joy was in the Lord. Spiritual relationships brought the most satisfaction: their love for him because of Christ’s love and his love for the Lord. Thus it was natural for a material gift to become an occasion for Christian joy” (Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 32, *The New American Commentary* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991], 153).

² *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (Reprint; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1964), 19, quoted in John F. MacArthur Jr., *Philippians*, *MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2001), 296.

³ In other words, when an American Christian is struggling with discontentment, it’s not usually because he has such pressing physical needs that he doesn’t know how he will subsist another day. It is often because he is simply dissatisfied with the way in which or the degree to which his needs have been met.

⁴ MacArthur, 296–297.

⁵ William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 615.

⁶ R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel*, *Preaching the Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 183. Hughes attributes the quotes to Peter T. O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 521. He also footnotes Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, *Black’s New Testament Commentary* (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 260.

⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2005), *Php* 4:13.

⁸ The Greek word underlying “I can do” means “to have requisite personal resources” (William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 484).

⁹ Hughes, 183. Quote attributed to O’Brien, 521. He also credits Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 427.

¹⁰ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 98.

Also, “The apostle does not, of course, mean that he could physically survive indefinitely without food, water, sleep, or shelter. What he is saying is that when he reached the limit of his resources and strength, even to the point of death, he was infused with the strength of Christ. He could overcome the most dire physical difficulties because of the inner, spiritual strength God had given him” (MacArthur, 303).

¹¹ Carson, 1258.

¹² Hughes, 185. Quote is attributed to Bockmuehl, 261.

¹³ Carson, 1258.

¹⁴ “Jeremiah Burroughs observes, ‘A Christian finds satisfaction in every circumstance by getting strength from another, by going out of himself to Jesus Christ, by his faith acting upon Christ, and bringing the strength of Jesus Christ into his own soul, he is thereby enabled to bear whatever God lays on him, by the strength that he finds from Jesus Christ.... There is strength in

Christ not only to sanctify and save us, but strength to support us under all our burdens and afflictions, and Christ expects that when we are under any burden, we should act our faith upon him to draw virtue and strength from him’ (*The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, 63)” (MacArthur, 304).

¹⁵ Hughes, 192.

¹⁶ Wiersbe, 98–99. This passage is not suggesting that we can or should attempt to earn something from God, but is merely reaffirming God’s desire to reward and bless the faith of His obedient children—in this particular instance, their faith-filled obedience of generosity (cf. Proverbs 11:24-25; 19:17; 22:9; 28:27; Luke 6:38; 2 Corinthians 9:6; Acts 20:35).

¹⁷ Melick, 157.

¹⁸ MacArthur, 307.

¹⁹ Joseph Barber Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, *The Apostolic Fathers* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1891), 231. Words not highlighted indicate the underlying Greek word, *sugkoinoneo* or its root *koinoneo* (*koinonia*, noun).

²⁰ Timothy Keller, *Gospel in Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 65.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² MacArthur, 307.

²³ “The phrase according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus reveals the extent to which God would supply the Philippians’ needs. He would do so according to His riches, not out of them; His giving to them would be relative to the immensity of His eternal wealth, that is, as generously as is consistent with His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. The New Testament repeatedly presents Christ Jesus as the source of all of God’s riches” (cf. Colossians 1:19; 2:3, 9; Ephesians 1:3; 1 Corinthians 1:4-5; 2 Peter 1:3) (*Ibid.*, 308).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 307–308.

²⁵ John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 292 quoted in Hughes, 185.