

I Have Learned the Secret
Philippians 4:10-23
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Read Philippians 4:10-23

"(Jesus) said, 'Blessed (rather) are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11:28)

Introduction

Arthur Brooks is a prolific author, Harvard professor, and president of the American Enterprise Institute. He has been named one of Fortune Magazine's "50 World's Greatest Leaders" and been awarded seven honorary doctorates. By all accounts, he is an accomplished man. Listen to how he describes his life, though:

"Time and again, I have fallen into the trap of believing that success and its accompaniments would fulfill me. On my 40th birthday I made a bucket list of things I hoped to do or achieve...: writing books and columns about serious subjects, teaching at a top school, traveling to give lectures and speeches, maybe even leading a university or think tank. Whether these were good and noble goals or not, they were my goals, and I imagined that if I hit them, I would be satisfied. I found that list nine years ago... and realized that I had achieved every item on it. I had been a tenured professor, then the president of a think tank. I was giving frequent speeches, had written some books that had sold well, and was writing columns for The New York Times. But none of that had brought me the lasting joy I'd envisioned. Each accomplishment thrilled me for a day or a week—maybe a month, never more—and then I reached for the next rung on the ladder."¹

Rajat Gupta was born to a poor family and orphaned as a teenager. By his mid-40s, he had worked his way up to becoming CEO of McKinsey, the world's most prestigious consulting firm. He left that work to take on roles with the United Nations and the World Economic Forum. By 2008, he was worth \$100 million. But he began using his role as a member of the board of directors for Goldman Sachs to gain insider information to make \$17 million in profits. The Securities and Exchange Commission figured out what had happened and sent him to jail for insider trading. Like Bernie Madoff, he was someone who had more money than he would ever spend, but it wasn't enough. The goalposts of what he needed always moved along with his income.²

Not being content with where we are in life can be a good thing that motivates us to step out of our comfort zone and try new and bold things. But discontent with what God has given us in life can lead us to either be like Arthur Brooks and keep trying harder and harder to achieve, but never actually finding the joy and contentment that we think will fill us; or be like Rajat Gupta and seek riches at any cost, whether we have to beg, borrow, or steal for them. Today's Scripture passage has the twin themes of contentment and generosity, and they very much intertwine to either bring you closer to God when you are satisfied and moved to being generous, or away from Him when you are discontent and stingy. And Paul will wrap up his letter to the Philippians that has emphasized being humble, others-centered, willing to suffer for the Lord, and motivated to work hard in your Christian life with a reminder that God will meet all of our needs in Christ.

¹ Arthur C. Brooks's article "How To Want Less," *The Atlantic*, 2/8/22, found at www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/03/why-we-are-never-satisfied-happiness/621304/

² Morgan Housel, *The Psychology of Money* (Great Britain: Harriman, 2020), pp. 37-49

One commentary I read framed this section well. It said that there are two opposite errors in regards to money and theology: one is **prosperity theology** that says that the stronger your faith is, the more you will be blessed with wealth by God; the other is **poverty theology**, that says the truly godly are those who have nothing. Neither of these is an accurate reflection of the Bible's teaching, so we need to turn away from both prosperity and poverty theology in favor of **Paul's theology** that you can be godly and content in either plenty or in need.³

The first four verses explain that

I. Paul Was Content in All Things (vv. 10-13)

¹⁰ I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. ¹¹ Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

The book of Philippians is a thank-you note of sorts, though obviously much more than that. The church in Philippi had sent a monetary gift to Paul with a man named Epaphroditus, who we saw in chapter 3 had become so sick that he had almost died while he visited Paul. Now Paul was sending him back to them with this letter. You can read into verse 10 and put it together with verses 15-16 to piece together the fact that the Philippians had been great supporters of Paul in every way since the beginning of the church's existence. For whatever reason, distance or circumstance, they hadn't been able to give in a while, but the apostle was grateful that they had given now.

Right after he thanked them, though, he said that he had learned how to be content no matter what his circumstances were. This may seem to nullify the thanks – as if he was saying, “thanks for the gift, but I didn't actually need it because I'm good no matter what.” I don't think that Paul was undercutting his thanks, he was simply explaining what he had learned in his time following Jesus. He had learned the secret of being satisfied no matter where he was or how he was faring, in plenty or want, in need or abundance. What is this “secret” that he had found? It's relying on Jesus to strengthen you in the midst of everything. He emphasized twice that he had “learned” this. We are not born with an inward contentment and grateful spirit; our fallen natures naturally chase after more and more, deluding ourselves that when we reach some level of acquiring or achieving that then we'll be happy and complete. We may be happy for a time, but it always wears off unless we learn to be content. So Paul embraced every situation because he recognized that that was where God had placed him; to be discontent would have been to show that he resented the sovereign work of God in his life. And the same is true of us.

“How much is enough?” If the answer is, “Just a little more,” then you've got a discontent heart.

“How much is enough?” If the answer is, “Whatever I've got,” then you glorify God with a content heart.

Verse 13 might be the verse that is taken out of context the most in all of Scripture: “*I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*” Is Paul talking about athletic success on the field or on the court? Is he talking about Jesus strengthening us enough to bench press 300 pounds if we put our minds to it? Is he talking about acing every test and getting accepted into an Ivy League college? No. This is not the magic verse that you get to apply to get whatever thing you want in life. It's not a blank check that God will fill out if you just believe Him enough and pray hard enough for His strength. This is not your motivational quote for all your efforts at dieting or achieving your goals.

³ Tony Merida & Francis Chan, *Exalting Jesus in Philippians* (Nashville: Holman, 2016), pp. 185-186.

If I had been translating the Scriptures, I would have put a colon after verse 12, so that it says, “*I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need (colon): I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*” If you think about it, it’s saying the opposite of what we want it to say when we tape it above our scale or over our bench presses. It’s saying that I can be content with my body because I find my identity in Christ, not in being thin and muscle-bound. It’s finding the ability to be content no matter what your bank balance or portfolio says, and no matter the state of your health, your job status, or your relationships. This is a verse that, in context, says, “No matter what lot in life God gives me - even if I’m having a hard time paying the bills, even if I’ve been fired for no good reason, even if I’m persecuted for righteousness’ sake – even then, God can give me the strength to feel joyful and content.” Christ strengthens me so that I find contentment always.

The next five verses acknowledge that

II. The Philippians Were Generous in All Ways (vv. 14-18)

¹⁴ Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. ¹⁵ And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. ¹⁶ Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. ¹⁷ Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. ¹⁸ I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.

Verse 18 indicates that the Philippians had given much more than Paul needed. But he wanted them to understand their giving in a much deeper way than just covering his rent, groceries, and basic needs. (If case you’re wondering, Roman imprisonment did not provide for much, that’s why Paul needed financial support even in house arrest.) The church in Philippi was one of the churches that Paul boasted about in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5; he was so proud of them that he held them up as an example to other churches; they were a poor church that loved to give:

“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.”

What they gave to Paul was counted as a fragrant offering to the Lord, and the Lord was well-pleased with it. In verse 17, Paul was not as excited about how much their gifts would help him as much as he was excited that they would be blessed and bear fruit from giving. They were sharing his trouble and acting as partners in ministry with him. Fruit can also be understood or translated as “profit”, so there’s a sense where Paul says they’re getting a good return for their investment. In the same way that we would be excited for strong returns on a stock or a rental property that we invested in, they got a good return on their spiritual investment.

The Bible is packed full of warnings against wealth and greed:

Ecclesiastes 5:10 – “*He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity.*”

Luke 12:15 – “*Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.*”

1 Timothy 6:9-10 – *“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.”*

Generosity is the best way to combat wealth and greed. The philosopher, Jacques Ellul, said this: “There is one act... which profanes money by going directly against the law of money, an act for which money is not made. This act is giving.”⁴ When we give, especially when we give sacrificially, we show where our true trust and loyalties lie. Your giving to missionaries and ministries is the same as giving directly to God, and it benefits you, bearing beautiful fruit in your life. Paul has been holding up men like Timothy and Epaphroditus as examples for the Philippians, and now he reminds them that they are wonderful examples as well of generosity, and we will benefit greatly from imitating them.

The closing and benediction to the letter remind every believer that

III. God Will Supply All Your Needs (vv. 19-23)

¹⁹ And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁰ To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen. ²¹ Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. ²² All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. ²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

OK, here is “misused and taken out of context” verse number 2: verse 19 – *“And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”* It’s tempting to hear in this verse that because God has all the riches we would ever need that you’ll never lack for anything. And maybe going a bit further, if you remain poor, you only have yourself to blame for not having enough faith or for somehow disappointing Him. Verse 13 says that God is fully able and verse 19 says that He is fully willing to meet whatever needs a believer has. But both of those verses need to be read in light of verses 11-12, that Paul had found contentment even when he was brought low, experiencing hunger, or in need. Don’t forget that Chapter 3 had told us that we would be sharing in Christ’s sufferings. Yes, God has all riches and can easily meet your needs, but that doesn’t mean that you won’t suffer or be in need. Learn the secret of contentment, and then you’ll never demand that God bless you and prosper you. You’ll always be thankful for what His supply.

The book closes with greetings for all of the saints, every member of the Philippian church, from every saint who is with Paul, even those who worked for the enemies of the church. Caesar’s household doesn’t necessarily mean his family members, it could mean people who worked for him – slaves, cooks, stablemen, soldiers, etc. And the final benediction, verse 23, is a bookend to the second verse in chapter 1, which said, *“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”* Everything that Paul has written in this book, every confidence and assurance of the Lord enabling His people to live as believers in this world, is guaranteed by our relationship with Jesus. We can’t do anything spiritually outside of our union with Christ. The grace of Jesus that comes to us because of His death on the cross in our place and His resurrection from the dead is what underlies every promise in this book and every challenge to live as worthy Christians.

Conclusion

How are you doing with contentment and giving? I’d say that we have a major contentment problem today. I’m tempted to say that it’s selfish Americans, but it’s probably global. And it doesn’t matter if you’re rich or poor, we want more and we’re easily dissatisfied when we don’t get

⁴ Frank Thielman, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 245.

what we think we deserve. Most of us are pretty annoyed when we have to wait for anything longer than 2-day shipping, or when our streaming services don't work perfectly. I was yelling at my cell phone the other day because I was annoyed that I couldn't get my Google Maps to work, never mind the fact that I have a machine in my pocket that can navigate me anywhere I want to go instantaneously. I take it for granted, I take every amazing thing in my life for granted. There's a comedian, Louis C.K., who has apparently been cancelled for bad behavior; I don't listen to many comedians, but I saw a video of him on Conan talking about how discontent we are:

"When I read that the foundations of capitalism are shattering, I think, maybe we need that. Maybe we need some time where we're walking around with a donkey with pots clanging on the sides.... Because everything is amazing right now and nobody's happy... I was on an airplane and there was hi-speed internet on the airplane; it's the newest thing that I know exists. And... they said you can open up your laptop and get on the internet and it's fast and I'm watching YouTube clips – I'm on an airplane! And then it breaks down... and the guy next to me (is angry). Like, how quickly the world owes him something he knew existed only 10 seconds ago. And on planes, it's the worst because people come back from their flights and tell you their stories and it's like a horror story... 'It was the worst day of my life. We didn't board for 20 minutes and they made us sit there on the runway for 40 minutes.' (I just want to yell), 'You got to fly! It's amazing... You're sitting in a chair in the sky.' You talk about delays? New York to California in 5 hours. That used to take 30 years and a bunch of you would die on the way."⁵

Sometimes it takes a comedian to point out the contradictions in our lives, right? We are so far from learning the secret of being content in all situations. What would it look like if we Christians were counter-cultural and actually thankful for the amazing miracles that happen to us every single day, rather than acting entitled and whining when things don't work perfectly for us? We have these machines in our pockets that do everything for us, but we're all angry and annoyed and searching for happiness. Robert Hutchins said, "Our real problems are concealed from us by our current remarkable prosperity, which results in part from our new way of getting rich, which is to buy things from one another that we do not want, at prices we cannot pay, on terms we cannot meet, because of advertising we do not believe."⁶

I've heard a lot of people through the years say something like, "You know, if I ever won the lottery, I would give so much to the church" or "If I inherit a ton of money, I'll write a big check to the church" or "If I'm able to sell my company for a huge profit, the church is getting a big piece of it." And if I know the person well enough, I say something like, "Do you give generously now? Because if you wait until you have a huge windfall before you give, I have my doubts. What's changed between now and then? If you're robbing God now, why do you think that you'll stop robbing Him then?" That doesn't always go over great.

It's generally been the practice of this church not to have the pastor talk about money, particularly when the church is in need. And that's fine; and we're doing great financially, BTW. But you should hear it from me that you should give to the Lord out of what you make. Give generously and self-sacrificially, not because the church needs to fix up the building more or do some outreach projects or pay my salary. Give because the Lord loves a cheerful giver and He will reward you in some way, if no other way than shaping your character and making you more Christlike, and releasing money's grip on you, freeing you from its enslavement. I'll never promise that God will pay you back tenfold or anything like that, I have no idea how God will reward your giving, except that Paul says that it

⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PdFB7q89_3U

⁶ Donald McCullough, *Waking from the American Dream* (Grand Rapids: IVP, 1998), p. 73.

will bear fruit in your life. Malachi 3:10-11 quotes God: *“Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.”* Most of the time when testing God is mentioned in the Bible, it’s a very bad thing. That is the only place where it’s a good thing, where you’re invited to test Him. Give to Him, and then see if He does not move in your life and bless you for your obedience.

Today is Palm Sunday, the day that commemorates when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and the people of Israel hailed Him as the King of Israel: *“Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.” “Hosanna in the highest.”* What does Hosannah mean? “Save us!” The crowd of Israelites were swept up in the fervor of this Jesus, the miracle worker. They thought that He had come to free them from their Roman occupation and be a political Messiah. But when the Romans arrested Him and put Him to death on a cross, the hopes that He would save them died out very quickly. But what they didn’t understand was that He never promised or intended political deliverance; Jesus had always come for spiritual and eternal deliverance. His being defeated and killed, nailed to a cross, was the plan all along. God the Father used the life of His Son, the only perfect Person that ever lived, as an atoning sacrifice to pay the penalty for the sins of His people. God poured out His wrath on Jesus, punishing Him on the cross for our sins, so that we could be forgiven and free. Come back this Thursday night for our Maundy Thursday service to hear the drama of the night that Jesus was arrested that led to Good Friday’s execution that led to Easter Sunday’s resurrection. Holy Week is the culmination of all of God’s redemptive work on our behalf; you have to understand all of these events to appreciate God’s love and grace for you. God has supplied all of your spiritual needs through Christ. *To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.*

Benediction - Numbers 6:24-26 – *“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.”*