

## Philippians 4:10-23, Part 3

1. Over and over Paul tells the Philippians to be of the same mind as Christ and Paul and one another saying, in essence, that they should imitate him as he imitates Jesus<sup>1</sup>. This is exactly what Jewish disciples did in the ancient world; they imitated their rabbi. They did this by memorizing the rabbi's words; by learning their teacher's interpretation of Scripture; by imitating the teacher's actions<sup>2</sup>; and by making disciples. This is not to say that every Philippian was a strict *disciple* of Paul, but in both the Jewish and Greek worlds students were bound to imitate their teacher since imitation was the way to learn to think like the teacher.<sup>3,4</sup> Discuss the excerpt from Lynn Cohick's commentary on imitation (below).
2. If you are reluctant to be an explicit example for others, is it because
  - a. It doesn't seem humble
  - b. No one has ever modeled it for you (hah!)
  - c. Spirituality is a room without a ceiling, *not* a simple set of practices to be modeled
  - d. Only apostles are allowed to suggest others imitate them
  - e. It's better to leave others without an explicit model than reflect poorly on Jesus
  - f. It's inappropriate because we lack the teacher-congregation context of Paul and the Philippians
  - g. It's scary
  - h. We expand (incorrectly?) the range of things to be imitated beyond what Paul had in mind, to the point where it seems crazy to think of putting yourself forward as a model the way Paul did
  - i. We are, well, lazy and not intentional in our discipleship
  - j. It requires first doing those things you want others to imitate!

If imitation was important in the survival of the gospel in the early church, how can we translate this practice to our culture?

3. This church was alone in having a friendship relationship with Paul. The Corinthians were put out that Paul refused a friendship relationship with them (1 Cor 4:12; 2 Cor 11:7-11). In Thessalonica, Paul even went so far as to even reimburse them when they had him over for dinner (2 Thess 3:6-12). Imagine your guest insisting on handing you a twenty before sitting down to dinner! And all this was to avoid the twin dangers of support, that you either lose authority by falling into a patron-client relationship as the client or become beholden and look like you're out for the money. Paul was willing to make tents rather than risk jeopardizing his ministry with them in these ways.
  - a. In our modern churches we follow Paul's advice that ministers should be supported by their congregations. Should we be worrying more about the dangers of support?
  - b. Listen to Fee 32:18-39:28. How does this context affect our reading of this famous passage?

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<sup>1</sup> 2:2: "make my joy complete: **be of the same mind**"; 2:5: "**Let the same mind** be in you that was in Christ Jesus"; 3:15: "Let those of us who are mature **be of the same mind**"; 3:17: "join in **imitating me**"; 4:9: "Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me"; "I urge Euodia and Synthyche to **be of the same mind.**"

<sup>2</sup> As Sue Collins points out, this practice, which could be taken to extremes, is seen in devoted Muslims who will always enter a bathroom left-foot first and leave it right-first, which is what tradition says Mohammed did.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, the language Paul uses, "the things you have learned *and received* from me," is that of rabbinic instruction.

<sup>4</sup> Remember the examples in this letter: **Jesus** in his *willingness to suffer* for us; **Paul** in his being *willing to be used* by God in prison; **Epaphroditus**, who was *willing to travel* to Rome with news from Philippi; **Timothy** who is "*genuinely concerned* for your welfare."

*Fun quote:* “Abundance does not yield either knowledge or virtue. How so? Because just as penury occasions much wrongdoing, so does plenty. Many who have become affluent have become derelict. They do not know how to bear their good fortune. But not so with Paul, for what he received he spent on others. He emptied himself for others.” —Chrysostom

*Lynn Cohick on imitation:*

Paul’s example suggests a model of apprentice and master rather than student and teacher. This model of education was commonplace around the Mediterranean world, with its emphasis on manual labor and handmade crafts and a predominantly illiterate population. Boys learned their father’s trade; girls learned housekeeping and childcare from their mothers. Men and women worked in shops with their children helping them. Slaves (male and female) were apprenticed to master weavers or potters, to learn a trade that would add income to the family. People apprenticed or learned by watching and would then imitate the master.

What would our churches be like if we saw ourselves as apprentices trying to learn new skills and better ways of doing things from those who have had long experience in the ways of prayer, tithing, joyful living, and trust in God? What if we recognized that we also stand as “masters” before apprentices, that our actions should demonstrate a Spirit-filled walk? I wonder if we in the U.S. shy away from thinking about ourselves as “masters” to apprentices because it places greater responsibility on us to behave in a manner worthy of the gospel. Conversely, perhaps we rebel against considering ourselves apprentices, for we’d rather go our own way, find our own path, do it ourselves. (197)

Be still and know that I am God,  
be still and know that I am God,  
be still and know that I am God.

In thee, O Lord, I put my trust,  
In thee, O Lord, I put my trust,  
In thee, O Lord, I put my trust.

## Leader's Intro:

The interpretation of this final section of Philippians depends heavily on the fact that this is a friendship letter. In this passage Paul expresses thanks for the support sent by the Philippians. Two things have seemed strange to interpreters: Paul's thanks seem understated (in fact, here he never actually thanks them), and he waits until the end of the letter to really express it. Additionally, he uses a lot of commercial language and bends over backwards to say that he is really just fine.

As we've discussed, none of this makes sense until we consider that this is a "friendship" letter of the Greek form. Friends in the ancient world entered into what was essentially a contractual arrangement (and culturally that brought along the talk of credit and accounts), but in the ideal it was not utilitarian, but represented true (virtuous) friendship. This in turn meant it was important to not say thanks. To thank the other party would have been unacceptable, since friends knew they were on this hook to do this; they didn't need thanks and didn't want them. [There are certainly modern examples of relationships where a "thanks" would not only be weird but would signal dysfunction. But I am having a hard time putting my finger on one. Maybe imagine a wife who, after every night of intimacy with her husband, send him a formal thank you note. That would be truly weird, and honestly inappropriate. This is a case where the thanks would signal too *little* intimacy and make it seem more like a transaction.]

Furthermore, we see that this church was alone in having a friendship relationship with Paul. The Corinthians wanted a friendship relationship but Paul said no. In Thessalonica, he went so far as to even reimburse them when they had him over for dinner. (Imagine your guest insisting on handing you a twenty before sitting down to dinner!) And all this was to avoid the twin dangers of support, that you either lose authority by falling into a patron-client relationship, with him as the client [btw, Cohick (239-240) points out there *are* rhetorical markers of a patron-client sort (use of *charis*, use of kinship language), but it doesn't seem to be clear who is which], or become beholden to them or look like he's out for the money (Cohick: "Paul must negotiate the intricate social codes of patronage and friendship of his day, so that he does not imply either that he is the Philippians' client or that he is obligated to respond in kind to their gift"; 242). Paul was willing to make tents rather than risk jeopardizing his ministry with them in these ways. This explains some of the unique features about this letter: he deliberately avoids the language of hierarchy except in areas of discipleship (so, lots of talk of imitation, but he introduces the letter as a "servant," not an apostle. He is all about their growth and ministry, and in 4:10-20 he bends over backwards to keep them from feeling obliged to send another gift.

This passage also presents us with a particularly enjoyable task, which is understanding three famous, oft-quoted passages, in context:

- I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation (4:12)
- my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus (4:19)
- I can do all this through him who gives me strength. (4:13)

We handled the second of these above—at least, we provided the context. (Does that context prevent it from being used to give us confidence that God will supply *our* needs? Not so long as we understand that it *can't* guarantee us more physical supply that Paul received, and he was in jail awaiting possible execution.) Anyway, the excerpt from Fee's lecture directly addresses this one.

The above also speaks to the first and third. The third is a beautifully broad statement and the only real way to abuse it is to apply it to situations outside the realm of living for Christ in servitude to others.

So now to the first, which we have touched on previously. Note that in this passage Paul uses both the language of the Stoics (for whom contentment is found in self-reliance and indifference) and, unexpectedly, of the mystery religions (the "secret" being a key phrase there). From the rest of the letter we can infer that the following lead to contentment under duress:

- Rejoicing (with, given the psalter-based culture of Paul, would include worship)
- Thanksgiving
- Focusing on positive things in or out of the church
- Not complaining

- Following the example of Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus, and ultimately Jesus, in his pursuit of the good of others even to the point of death
- Knowing Jesus himself—i.e., a personal relationship with Jesus, distinct from all the above

The last requires some comment. Jesus made himself like a slave. But that is a statement of sacrifice, not of autonomy. When he put the needs of others first it never meant sacrificing his mission.

All of the above have in comment the central theme of Philippians, which is having the mind of Christ. If we want contentment (not a goal in itself for Paul, but a byproduct), we must change the way we think and let that change the way we act. In doing this we will find the power Paul talks about in chapter 3.

All of this stands in delightful contrast to the Stoics (contentment through indifference and self-reliance) and Western culture (which commonly suggests contentment through success, social tied and life balance). Paul models not self-dependence but Christ-dependence, and his contentment is *not* impassivity; he doesn't hide his negative emotions from the Philippians. But in the midst of his distress (*thlipsis*; 4:14) he has the sort of peace which enables him to experience joy in prison, no little thing.

McCallum has a good observation, in two parts: First, that contentment is (not here, but generally) best contrasted with *pleonexia*, loosely translated "lust," but broader than that. We are not content because we experience the effects of one form of lust or another, whether it's sexual lust or materialism or the need to be in control of our time or pride or dissatisfaction with relationships—the list goes on and on. Each of these represents the subtle belief that what God provides won't be enough. His second observation is that we develop contentment *not* as the result of some valley or mountaintop experience but by daily, in small ways, learning to turn from *pleonexia* to trust.

### Extra questions and observations:

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