



# Learning to be Content

## Philippians 4:10-23

As we've previously noted, a recurring theme in Philippians is that of thankfulness. Throughout this letter, Paul has spoken of this sense of gratitude for the generosity and financial support of the Philippian Christians (1:3, 5; 2:25, 30). But it's only near the end of the book that he explicitly talks about their gifts to them. While this may seem strange to modern readers, Paul's practice becomes more understandable when we consider the conventions of the time when he lived.

Gift-giving in the Greco-Roman world was a practice shrouded in social rules and conventions. To give someone a gift signalled the beginning of a greater sense of commitment – to fail to give a gift in return would have been frowned upon, and to reject a gift was tantamount to declaring someone one's enemy. While Paul does make a reference in v15 to the 'matter of giving and receiving,' he also turns some of these conventions on their head in this passage.

Firstly, Paul is keen to stress to the Philippians that he is grateful for their support but not dependent on it. 'I have learned to be content with whatever I have,' he says, suggesting that if the Philippians' gift had not arrived, he would still have been ok. It's been suggested by some commentators that Paul is running the risk of seeming ungrateful, but it seems more likely that his words reflect how awkward it is to talk about money and financial needs and how such issues can complicate friendships. There are similar occasions when Paul seems reluctant to use his rights as an apostle to put others under pressure for financial support – see, for example, 1 Cor 9:13-18 or 2 Thess 3:6-9.

Secondly, Paul does not offer a gift in return to the Philippians. Rather, he suggests that their generosity to him will be reciprocated by the generous God, who will 'fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.'

Another way in which Paul alters the conventions of the time in which he lives is to be found in his claim 'to be content with whatever I have.' Stoic philosophers placed great emphasis on 'self-sufficiency,' a capacity to show oneself free from emotion or weakness. Paul, however, takes the language of self-sufficiency and transforms it into 'Christ sufficiency.' One commentator Gordon Fee notes that, 'The potency of what Paul does – which [the Philippians] would undoubtedly have picked up on – is to use language similar to that of Stoicism to describe an attitude to life that outwardly looks like theirs, but whose source, and therefore significance, is radically different.'<sup>1</sup>

What is also striking in this passage is the large perspective Paul has on everything which is happening. He does not see the Philippians' gift-giving as a mere transaction between two parties. Rather, he understands their gifts to be 'a sacrifice

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Fee, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: Philippians*, 1995, 432

pleasing and acceptable to God' who will 'fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.'

### **For discussion**

1. Do you think Paul appears ungrateful in this passage? If you gave someone a gift, and they replied that they would have been just as happy not to receive it, how would you respond?
2. Writing on Philippians 4:13, in his book *Pressure Points*, Peter Meadows says: 'Paul is talking about coping with the need to have the right attitude – something very different from holding up the verse as a cure-all for every overwhelming situation. Sadly, we misuse this verse from the Bible constantly, allowing our wrong thinking to permeate our attitude toward people and circumstances. As a result, we feel condemned ourselves and we condemn others for not being spiritually together enough to cope with difficult times when they come.'<sup>2</sup> Do you agree? How would you explain the meaning of this verse to someone who feels guilty about not being able to do more for God?
3. Paul writes of how, 'I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty.' Looking back over your lifetime can you identify specific times of plenty and times of need? In what different ways did you see God at work during those seasons?
4. Philippians 4:15,16 tells us that not all churches provided Paul with the financial support offered by the Philippians? Why do you think some churches are willing to share their resources while others become fearful or reluctant about doing so? In what ways might financial generosity have an impact on the wider culture of a church?
5. How fully have we grasped the idea that God will supply the needs of the church 'according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus'? Why is it that, in spite of this promise, we often find it hard to take risks, both as individuals and as churches?

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Meadows, *Pressure Points: How to survive in your stress filled world*, 1998, 101