

Philippians 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Philippians chapter 4. Therefore my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord my beloved. I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women who have laboured side by side with me in the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life. Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. 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. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for 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. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble, 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. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.

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. And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you.

All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Philippians chapter 4, the conclusion of this epistle, begins by returning to themes from earlier in the letter. Paul had begun his treatment of appropriate Christian behavior in chapter 1 verses 27 to 28 with the following charge. Only let your manner of life be worthy of the Gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the Gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. Now, in the first verse of this chapter, he returns to the charge to stand firm in the Lord in the manner that he has described, summing up the main body of the letter. Paul describes the Philippians as those whom he loves and longs for, his joy and his crown. Paul's heart is knit to the Philippians. When Paul speaks about the people to whom he ministers, it is very clear that he relates to them in an intense and intimate manner. He regards them as his children. He yearns for their growth in the Lord. He constantly prays for them. He experiences anguish or deep sorrow at news of their sins or failings. He rejoices to hear of the prospering of God's truth among them.

Paul is no mere teacher of an ideology or religious system or philosophy. He is like a mother bearing children. He is concerned above all to see their health and their growth. He rejoices and boasts over their growth, like a grandmother might speak of her young grandchildren's milestones, taking the greatest to vicarious delight in their well-being. It seems as if there were two women in the church who were at odds with each other, Euodia and Syntyche. Paul speaks of them gently.

They have both served the gospel with Paul and his fellow workers and are to be honoured for their labours. He addresses each of them personally, entreating them to settle their differences and agree in the Lord. Their lack of agreement was presumably causing problems in the church, where they were prominent and important members. He also addresses a particular person, referred to as his true or loyal companion, to help the two of them to settle their differences and to pursue their ministries in the church.

[4 : 38] Who is the loyal companion? From the grammar we know that it is a man, but his identity is not clearly specified. Most likely it was Epaphroditus who was bearing the letter, was also referred to within it, and would be present when it was read. Rather than rebuking the women, Paul appeals to and exhorts them. And he asks Epaphroditus not to discipline them, but to help them, to reconcile and presumably also more generally, honouring them on account of their previous labours. Their names are in the book of life, a fact that when considered will encourage Epaphroditus to treat them appropriately, as a help to them in their growth to godliness. Once again Paul calls the Philippians to rejoice.

This is an exhortation to which he has returned on a number of key occasions in the letter. He began by speaking of the way that he himself rejoiced in his circumstances. Then he summoned the Philippians to join him, and in chapter 3 verse 1, call them to rejoice in the Lord. He wants their gentleness or reasonableness to be known to everyone. As Christians they should be known for their meekness. Everyone around should see their kindness and their forbearance with others. The Lord is near, both near to all who call upon him, and near in the sense of the imminence of his judgment. The Philippians should not be marked by anxiety, but should bring their concerns to the Lord in prayer. Just as their gentleness should be made known to everyone, their needs should be made known to the Lord. The result of their following these instructions would be a state of peace, a peace that comes from God himself, which cannot be accounted for by any merely human explanation. Such a peace would guard their hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Christ can still the stormy waters of our hearts and minds. When others around us are stirred up by anger, resentment, antagonisms and tensions, fear and anxiety, we can know the calm that enables us to think clearly and to act wisely. Paul is very clear about where such peace comes from. It comes from turning our attention to God in prayer and thanksgiving, from learning to rejoice, and practicing gentleness with our neighbours. It comes from God's work within us. The resulting peace guards our hearts and minds in situations of conflict. When there is conflict and trouble without, it is this peace that reigns within. Our hearts and minds will be protected from being caught up in all of this strife. We will be able to think and act with wisdom and grace when others are losing their composure, their wits or their clarity of mind. This section, concerned with rejoicing, prayer and thanksgiving, focuses upon key elements of worship and piety. In verses 8-9, however, Paul's attention turns to virtues that were more generally recognised among the pagans, as commentators such as Gordon Fee and Mournner Hooker have noted. He takes the language of Hellenistic moralism, but situates it within a very different frame, one established by the Christian gospel. The expressions that he uses here are common in Greco-Roman moral thought, but very unusual in Paul. Paul has earlier revealed a stark contrast between a Greco-Roman moral vision and the gospel, but now he shows the way that the gospel allows us to appropriate some of the riches of the Greeks and Romans. Fee argues that the words translated think about these things would be better translated as take into account these things. Paul's point is not so much to think on higher things, but as those who are living in two worlds, and as those who have counted as lost things that formerly gave them a sense of their worthiness, and things which they are highly valued, the Philippian Christians should carefully assess their heritage. Rather than completely writing off their Greco-Roman heritage, they ought to evaluate it more closely according to the gospel, and the criteria that Paul here enumerates, each of which must be considered in the light of the gospel itself. In the radical reassessment to which he has called them, they should not jettison everything. Paul's criteria are as follows. Whatever is true, that is, whatever things can be conform to the truth of the gospel, and aren't shrouded in lies. Whatever is honourable or noble, whatever is worthy of respect, irrespective of its origin. Whatever is just, that is, whatever is right and in concordance with God's righteousness. Whatever is pure, in other words, whatever is consistent with the holiness of God, and the holiness to which his people are called. Whatever is lovely. This is perhaps the most surprising of the criteria. It probably has to do with those things that properly excite our love and admiration, things that are beautiful, delightful, and admirable.

[9 : 12] This isn't an essentially moral criterion, suggesting that it is good and appropriate for us to find things in God's world pleasing. And a sort of faith that would abandon such things is not healthy. Christians should enjoy good music, for instance, not just for some moral end, but simply because it is good music. Whatever is admirable. Again, whatever rightly wins people's praise and admiration. Paul elaborates these two criteria a little by speaking of things that have excellence, or are worthy of praise. Paul had not just taught the Philippians in such matters. He had also presented himself as a worked example to them, as he had practiced these things in his own life. They should practice these things, and they would know the presence of the God of peace with them.

Paul had received a gift of support from the Philippians through Epaphroditus, something that would presumably have meant a very great deal to him while in prison. And now he expresses his rejoicing in the Lord on receiving it. However, the nature of Paul's thanksgiving is surprising. Rather than directly thanking the Philippians, he rejoices in the Lord for the new expression of their concern for him.

Then he downplays his need. He has learned to be content in whatever situation he finds himself in. He has been given such a sense of sufficiency by God himself, who provides him with the strength that he needs, a strength sufficient to whatever situation he finds himself in. He emphasizes the generous participation of the Philippians in his ministry, not just in their most recent gift, but in the past.

Their most recent gift was a renewed reminder of a partnership that he shared with them over many years. Again, Paul's response to the Philippians' gift is surprising. He explicitly declares that he does not seek the gift, but rather the fruit that increases to the Philippians' own credit. Rather than expressing his thanks directly to them and claiming that he is in their debt, as most people would do, he declares that God will supply their every need. As Peter Lightheart observes in his book, *Gratitude and Intellectual History*, the Christian approach to gratitude is profoundly subversive, especially within patronage cultures, where political and social advancement and dominance arise in large measure through unilateral impositions of obligation and the gaining of honour by means of gift-giving. Within the first-century world, the New Testament's teaching concerning gift-giving and reception was a threatening one, not least in how persistent it was in directing thanksgiving to God above all others. This determined rendering of thanks to God undermined the leverage of the powerfully obliging reciprocities that dominated social life and the hierarchies that they produced and sustained. It made possible the ingratitude of departing from tradition, of leaving father and mother to follow Christ, and of reneging on the imposed social debts by which patrons and powerful benefactors secured their social power. By firmly directing gratitude to God, it resisted the supposed entitlement of the wealthy to employ God's gifts to them as means of accruing power by imposing debts upon others. The new form of gift economy established by Christ and the apostles led to the eschewing of honour competitions, to releasing others from debt, and to the replacement of the vicious asymmetries of hierarchical patron-client gift relations with relations of mutual patronage. Lightheart remarks upon the apostle Paul's practice of thanksgiving in his letters, the manner in which it demonstrates the distinctive character of resolutely God-directed gratitude. Paul's expressions of thanksgiving in his letters, he observes, are offered almost exclusively to God alone, and Paul offers such thanks for benefits received by others, no less than for those he has received himself. Perhaps most startling to his contemporaries ears would be the way in which he responded to gifts given to him, not least when he expresses his appreciation for the support of the Philippians in this chapter. When he says, I thank my God for your remembrance of me, in reference to their support of him in his ministry, Lightheart remarks, by Greco-Roman standards, it is not adequate thanks. Paul was the one who received, the Philippians the ones who gave, and yet Paul's thanks are offered to a third party, the Father, the patron of both Philippians and apostles. Paul acts as if their gift was not directed to him at all, he calls it a sacrifice whose fragrant aroma is well-pleasing to God. Paul doesn't employ the language or perform the cultural courtesies associated with indebtedness. Rather than placing Paul in the Philippians debt, their gift is a token of their communion with him in his gospel ministry. Paul nowhere expresses an expectation or obligation on his part to repay them, but he directs their attention to God, their common benefactor, who acts as the guarantor of any debt that his servant Paul might incur. And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

[14:17] Lighthouse writes again, In the community of Jesus, the only debt is the debt of love. Thanks is owed, but it is owed for, rather than to, benefactors. Recipients of gifts are not indebted to the givers. They do not owe return payment. Givers do not impose burdens of gratitude on their beneficiaries. They cannot use their gifts to lord over recipients. The church's continual practice of thanksgiving cultivates a well-directed sense of gratitude, which has liberating political potential. When we repeatedly recognise and honour our great divine benefactor as the ultimate generous giver of every good and perfect gift, whatever hands we may have received them from, the power of lesser benefactors to wield control over us by their gifts is considerably weakened, as they can no longer command the sort of gratitude and obligations that belong to God alone. The economy of gifts ceases to be an engine of hierarchy and social inequality, when our thanks and obligation for all gifts is ultimately seen to belong to God alone.

All others are, at best, channels of and participants in God's act of giving. Furthermore, when God is understood to be the guarantor of debts, giving to the poor can be regarded as a matter of lending to the Lord, as we see in Proverbs 19, verse 17. Rather than placing the recipients of charity in a relationship of indebtedness to the givers, it frees both to engage in the transaction, trusting that repayment would be provided by a third party. As John Barclay suggests, the conviction that God would repay those who gave to the poor was complemented by the agency afforded to the recipient of charity in blessing the giver, or seeking recompense against the uncharitable, a principle that we see in Deuteronomy chapter 24, verses 13 to 15. In such a manner, the hierarchy of the cultural form of patronage was replaced by a mutual patronage, one reinforced by the Christian teaching that the one gift of the Spirit was represented in the many spiritual gifts of the members of the body of Christ. Such a practice of gift can produce the loving unity that Paul calls for, disarming the logic that drives antagonism and hostile competition. In verse 20, Paul concludes the section with a doxology, directing all towards God's glory. And the epistle ends with greetings.

Paul wants his greetings in Christ Jesus to be conveyed to every Christian in Philippi. The brothers with him, presumably his fellow workers, greet them. Also the wider body of Christians there, especially those in Caesar's household, presumably various servants and officials, extended their greetings. The reference to Caesar's household lends support to the idea that Paul is imprisoned in Rome. Finally, he invokes the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, desiring that it might be with their spirit. A question to consider. How might we practically go about applying Paul's criteria to certain aspects of our own culture?