

## Twisted Scriptures – “I can do all things...”

Philippians 4:13 September 3-4, 2016

### Introduction

- How many of you have heard of the Mennonites? **PP** I figured most of us would know them. The Mennonites were a group of Christ followers who emerged out of the reformation times based primarily on the writings of Menno Simons.
- The Mennonites were persecuted by both Catholics and Protestants during the time of the early reformation because they only baptized people who made a profession of faith while both Catholics and Protestants baptized infants. Thus, the Mennonites fled from the Western European countries in which they originated to Eastern European countries that accepted them.
- Eventually, the Anabaptist practice of only baptizing professed believers in Jesus caught on with several Protestant denominations and thus they were no longer persecuted for it. Instead, the pacifism of the Mennonites became the object of ridicule and persecution. As the violence escalated in Europe in the late 1800s, many Mennonites were forced to leave their countries yet again because they would not be conscripted into the military.
- Thus, a very large number of Mennonites came to live in the United States, especially in the Midwest and here in the Northeast.
- Why am I telling you about the Mennonites? Well, as we’ll see, the Mennonites embodied what it means to be able to do all things through Christ who strengthens us.
- **Philippians 4:13** is our Twisted Scripture for today and the final one in our series. The first thing we’re going to do today is look at how this verse is often twisted. **PP** Then we’re going to straighten it out and learn how to apply its proper understanding to our lives. So as you turn to **Phil. 4:13**, I’m going to pray.

### Twisted

- **Philippians 4:13** **PP** “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” This is a favorite verse of many people because of the message it seemingly offers. It’s often understood to be saying that as long as I have Jesus giving me strength, **PP** I can do anything I set my mind to or overcome any obstacle I am facing. Thus, it’s regularly used as a sort of biblical mantra for achievement or protection – a biblical invocation I can utter for strength before moving forward with the trial ahead.
  - You’ll see athletes writing it on their uniforms **PP**; thrill seekers quoting it as they jump out of planes; soldiers repeating it as they march into battle; people tattooing it on their bodies as their life verse **PP** or anyone else who’s facing a seemingly insurmountable challenge that wants to be reassured that they can get through it.
  - The problem is that this verse isn’t about God helping you to overcome the obstacle before you. This verse isn’t about achievement at all. Yes, the Lord will strengthen

us and guide us and defend us and uphold us with his righteous right hand; but this isn't the verse that says those things and we should stop using it that way because it's twisting the real message of the passage.

- So what is the real message of the passage? Well let's straighten it out – and in straighten this verse out we find that it isn't about achievement at all, it's about contentment. **PP** And to learn that, we start our reading in **Philippians 4:10**.

### Straightened – Context

- **Philippians 4:10** “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.”
- As always, context is key here and knowing a little background in Paul's relationship with the Philippians is also important.
- You see, Paul founded the church in Philippi on his second missionary journey (which we can read about in **Acts 16**) and he had a very close relationship with them. If we keep reading **verses 14-15** we learn that after he founded the church there the Philippians helped fund Paul as he continued on his missionary journey.
  - And now, while Paul is imprisoned in Rome, the Philippians have again sent Paul a monetary gift to help support him there. Thus, the gift of the Philippians was cause for Paul to rejoice in the Lord greatly and to thank them for their generous support.
- So that's important historical context, but we also need to know how scrolls were written and rolled up. **PP** You see, it's likely that this paragraph starting in verse 10 would have been the first thing the Philippians read when they received this letter. The end was almost always read first because, depending on how they rolled the scroll, it was either on the outside of the scroll or it was the first thing that unrolled when the scroll was unfurled; it was kind of like the address on the front of an envelope. And then they would go back to the beginning to get into the heart of the letter.
- So the first thing Paul does is thank them for their gift, but then he tells them that even if they hadn't been so generous he would have remained content. Paul had learned the secret of being content. **PP**

### Straightened – Contentment

- **Philippians 4:11-12** “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.”
- And so the first thing I want us to see is that this entire paragraph, including our twisted scripture – and really this entire letter – is all about contentment (and joy, which is virtually synonymous with contentment in biblical thought).

- Content **PP** (Gk. *autarkēs*) means literally "sufficient to self" and referred to being independent of external circumstances. In fact, the word was used in reference to a country that supplied itself and had no need of imports.
  - So to be 'content' thus describes the person who needs nothing externally to be satisfied in life because all they need or desire is within.
    - So the circumstances they find themselves in will not affect their satisfaction with life; the possessions they have or don't have won't affect their satisfaction in life; the relationships they have or don't have won't affect their satisfaction in life; their jobs, their friends and families, their kids, their successes and failures, the unmet dreams...nothing external to them will cause them to grow discontent and dissatisfied and ungrateful for what they do have.
- Well, you might ask, why was Paul so content? How could he be like this? Because you don't just wake up one day independent and unaffected by fluctuations in all those external things.
- Well, Paul gives us the answer in our twisted scripture verse, **Philippians 4:13 "I can do all things through Him who gives me strength."** You see, **PP** this isn't Paul stating a mantra of achievement or overcoming in Christ; this is Paul giving his reason why he's content through all circumstances.
  - By God's grace, Paul had put all of his trust in Jesus and had submitted to him as much as he knew how. Therefore, Paul became independent of the external because of the internal riches that he now had through Jesus Christ.
    - What Paul had within him the truth, hope, joy, confidence, and new identity that comes with being a follower of Jesus Christ, and these things made him impervious to the fluctuations of his external conditions.
  - What Paul is saying here is that he is independent of the circumstances around him because he is so completely *dependent* on his Savior and Lord. And though the outcome may not be what Paul thinks is ideal, Paul trusted that God's plan was the best plan for him because he knew the unsurpassed riches he had as a child of God.
    - This echoes what James wrote in his letter when he said **PP James 1:12 "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trials, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love Him."**
- Of course, this runs counter to everything our world is trying to teach us and get us to believe. In fact, the reality is that while our faith in Christ should produce contentment within us, everything within this world is actually trying to make us discontent. **PP**

- Did you know that as of 2012 almost \$450 billion was spent annually on marketing? Almost half a trillion dollars a year is spent on trying to make you unhappy with who you are, what you have, how you look, and where you are in life so that you would buy the products or services that are being marketed.
- One marketing study found that **PP** “Consumers encounter countless advertising images during the course of everyday life. Many of these images are idealized, representing life more as it is imagined than as it actually exists...repeated exposure to idealized images raises consumers' expectations and influences their perceptions of how their lives ought to be, particularly in terms of their material possessions. The result of both these processes, for some consumers, is discontent and an increased desire for more”
- A social marketing historian noted **PP** “a change in American advertising after World War I, from conveying product information to manufacturing desire. The public, business people feared, was too frugal. To rev up the economy, products were associated with images, glamour, [and] personal identity. Marketing moved from fulfilling needs to creating them. Thirty years later, the post-World War II boom gave us planned obsolescence, whose most recent incarnation is the need for continual upgrading of our electronic gadgets.”
- One marketing adviser taught his students, **PP** “As an advertiser, it is your job to create discontentment inside the psyche of your prospects, and make them desire the change that you're offering”
- This is what our culture does...it's trying to sell us the lie of discontentment. And our flesh wants to take that lie and get us to pursue a life of gratifying our desires instead of being satisfied with the amazing gifts that God provides.
- So how did Paul overcome this? Well, there's a key word in **verses 11 and 12**, and if I were you I'd circled it. It's the word learned. Paul didn't just wake up one morning fully content. Nor is contentment something we can muster within ourselves.
- Contentment is something that we learn through experiencing Christ's power and faithfulness at work in our lives as we're gradually transformed into people that no longer chase after the desires the world says we should have and that our flesh longs for.
  - “Have learned” **PP** (GK. *manthanō*) means to learn by experience, to discover and so to genuinely understand and accept a teaching as true over time.
  - In the present context the idea would be that Paul learned through his experiences and came to know and have the contentment he describes. His spiritual contentment wasn't something he had immediately after he was saved. He had to go through many experiences, easy and difficult, in order to learn who was the source of true contentment.

- And I don't know about you, but that's an encouraging thing to me because there are certainly times in my life when I find myself discontent. How many of you can relate to that?
- This past week was the last week off before my kids went back to school. So my wife thought it would be nice to take a day trip to the beach. And what kids don't like the beach, right? So they make their way to the beach, it's a beautiful day, and apparently everyone else had the same idea because the beach was packed. On top of that, the waves were really strong and the sand at the beach they went to was super coarse. Needless to say, after a little while, the kids all started complaining ...which naturally didn't make my wife too happy either. And eventually they all went home in bad moods.
- And I think we're often just like my kids or like my wife. The Lord has something planned for us but it's either not to our liking, our something different than we expected, or we're around whiners and complainers and people who are discontent and that rubs off on us. Paul says, we've got to learn contentment.
- But how do we learn it? What truth do we need to learn in order to overcome the lies of the world seeking to make us discontent?
- Here's where the brilliance of Paul and the Spirit writing through Paul comes into view. Remember, this paragraph of thanksgiving for the Philippians gift and the subsequent encouragement to contentment was likely the first thing the Philippians read.
- The rest of the letter then provides instruction in learning how to be joyful and content.
- So I want to quickly touch on a few of the key points Paul makes throughout his letter in teaching us how to be content. I'm, going to frame it in terms of the lies the world wants us to believe vs the truthful reality we have in Christ.
- Let's turn back to chapter 1 of this letter where we see the first truth we need to understand to learn contentment.
- Truth #1: **PP** I'm a work in progress that the Lord will one day complete.
  - **Philippians 1:6** "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."
  - The world wants you to believe that you can work hard to get to a place in which you will be perfectly happy and satisfied. Whether that's how you look physically or your job position or how much money is in your bank account, the lie is that you can work hard and get yourself to a place of happiness and one day 'arrive'. That's a lie designed to keep you discontent.
  - The truth is that we can't work ourselves into a place of happiness...in fact we're so broken that there's no way we can work ourselves into a place of contentment.

- Instead, when we turn to Jesus, our old selves are swept away (2 Cor. 5:17) and He immediately begins the process of transforming us into the men and women that He has called us to be. And that process will continue until either He returns or we're taken home.
- We need to learn to be ok with the process of transformation. We're going to mess up, but that doesn't mean we're broken and that the Lord has given up on us. The enemy will seek to discourage us and make us feel a shame and hopelessness that causes misery and discontentment. But that's a lie. Our God will continue to lovingly, graciously, and merciful work in us as we become more and more like Jesus as we learn to trust and submit to Him in increasing measure.
- Part of learning to be content is accepting the process of becoming more like Jesus and embracing God's grace in a way that allows us to rely on the Lord's power to transform us to be like Him.
- Let's turn to truth #2: **PP** I'm the most satisfied when I'm focusing on others.
  - **Philippians 1:21-25** "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith..."
  - And then a little later on Paul encourages them to **PP** **Philippians 2:3-4** "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."
  - The world tells us that we'll be the most satisfied when we focus on ourselves and pursue what we desire. But Paul dispels that lie and reminds his readers that contentment and joy is found when we humbly serve others just like Jesus did.
  - The more we die to ourselves and learn to let go of the things that we crave and demand, the more we'll lovingly serve others and grow in humble contentedness.
    - Can't be duty...must be out of love for our Lord
  - Here's something I would write down to think about **PP** – discontentment is primarily the product of self-preoccupation. Discontentment primarily comes because your obsessed with yourself – your obsessed with your successes, your failures, your dreams, your desires, your needs, etc. The more we can learn to take our focus off of ourselves and place it onto others, the more we'll learn to be content.
- Truth #3: **PP** I'm neither defined by the world nor by my past.

- Paul writes in chapter **3:3-9** “For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. ... But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. **PP** Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith...”
- From a worldly perspective, Paul had a whole lot to boast about. But he learned not to be defined by any of his accomplishments nor any of his past failures – like killing untold numbers of Christians. He counted all of it as rubbish compared to His new identity in Christ.
  - By God’s grace, Paul had submitted to Jesus as Lord and accepted Jesus’s death as a sacrifice for all of Paul’s own mistakes. And because of the faith Paul placed in Jesus he received a brand new identity as a child of God.
  - The world wants to define us by our education, or our job, or our physical appearance, or athletic ability, or our achievements, or our failures, or any number of things that the world says are important.
  - The truth is that none of that matters...none of that defines a child of God. We’re loved by the creator of universe! We’ve been adopted into His family through the gift of God’s grace when we trust and submit to Jesus.
  - The more we learn to walk in our identity as children of God and push aside the labels of this world, the more we will walk in joy and contentment regardless of the circumstances in which we find ourselves.
- Paul wants us to learn that we’re a work in progress, that we’re most satisfied when we’re focusing on others, that we’re defined by our identity as children of God and nothing else, and finally, truth #4: **PP** I’m not home yet. This world is not my home.
  - **Philippians 3:20-21** “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.”
  - Heaven is our home. Our heavenly family is waiting for us to join them – either when heaven meets earth or when we die and go to them.
  - When we learn to have a perspective that we’re just passing through this life seeking opportunities to love God and love others we’ll learn to be content with whatever situation we’re in.



- Here's another thing to write down: **PP** a Christ-follower's degree of contentment in this world is a reflection of their degree of contentment regarding the world to come. The more the invisible, eternal realities grip our heart, the less the visible, temporal things of the world will have power to cause discontentment.

## Conclusion

- And this brings us back to our Mennonite brothers and sisters **PP** who fled persecution in Western Europe to Eastern Europe and ultimately into the United States. As they moved from place to place they learned a quiet confidence and contentment not rooted in their external circumstances but in their identity as children of God. They worked hard and lived simple lives as farmers but they learned to be content.
- But an interesting thing happened in the 1890s. As a terrible drought ravaged the Midwest, the crops of farmers were failing almost everywhere. When the government sent agents out to see if anything could be saved, they found that the only crops that were not only still viable, but were actually thriving, were those of the Mennonite farmers.
  - The reason, they learned, was that they brought seeds with them from Eastern Europe and those seeds had once been in Western Europe. You see, over time, in each new climate and environment in which they were cultivated the seeds grew stronger, hardier, and more resilient to the harsh circumstances around them.
- It was only because of this hardy grain of the Mennonites that our country didn't have a tremendous shortage of food. In fact, the drought allowed the hardy seed of the Mennonites to be planted elsewhere because all of the others farmers wanted it. It spread so much that it became the staple seed that everyone used.
- And when a terrible drought reached eastern Europe decades later, the same nations that had kicked out the Mennonites began to import huge amounts of food grown by them. The world wanted the fruit of what the Mennonites had learned over their centuries of remaining steadfast and living simple contented living in the face of persecution.
- And that's what we're called to be as well. **PP** We're called to be children of God who rely on the strength of our savior to remain steadfast through whatever circumstances we may face as we learn to be content in Him.
  - Just as the seed of the Mennonite grew hardier and more resilient through the harsh environments it went through, so too do we have to learn to be content amidst the things we go through as we see God's power and faithfulness at work in our lives.
- When we do that, fruit will be produced in our lives that those around us will see and desire. And no amount of deception and enticement by the world will be able to distract them from the life-giving truth we can offer about where true joy and contentment may



be found – in a deep and abiding relationship with our Master Teacher, Savior, Elder Brother, and King, Jesus Christ.

- Let's go from here asking the Lord for his strength to learn to be content, that we'd be able to do all things through Christ who strengthens us, and that we'd plant seeds of a contented life in all of those around us. Amen. Amen.