

Does that seem like an odd way of saying “thank you”?

If you want to understand Paul’s attitude towards the gifts he received from Philippi, think about what he says to the Corinthians.

In 2 Corinthians 11:8-9, Paul says that when he ministered in Corinth:

8 I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. 9 And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way.

Philippi was the chief church (indeed, one of the only churches) we know of in Macedonia. So Paul calls the support from Philippi (Macedonia) “robbery.”

What does he mean?

In order to understand Paul’s attitude toward the Philippians, you need to see it in the light of his thinking about his own apostolic ministry.

In 1 Corinthians 9:3-18, he explains his economic stance:

3 This is my defense to those who would examine me. 4 Do we not have the right to eat and drink? 5 Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? 6 Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? 7 Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?

So Paul starts with the principle that the “laborer is worthy of his hire” – and points out that this is the principle laid down in the law:

8 Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? 9 For it is written in the Law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.” Is it for oxen that God is concerned? 10 Does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. 11 If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? 12 If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more?

Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. 13 Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? 14 In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

So Paul is zealous to defend the principle – the right of the pastor to material support. But he believes that his ministry will be more effective if he sets aside this right for himself:

15 But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting.

16 For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! 17 For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. 18 What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.

So he wants to make clear

- 1) that ministers should generally be paid
- 2) that he himself does not want to be paid
- 3) that if you give him money, you are (in a sense) sabotaging his reward – diminishing his claim to present the gospel free of charge.

So when Paul says in 2 Corinthians 11:8-9, that

8 I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you, he is essentially rebuking the Corinthians for being so selfish!

You (Corinthians) should not be relying on outsiders to pay for the ministry.
You should support those who minister to you.

And the rebuke is especially striking, because Paul has already said
(in the context of the diaconal offering for Jerusalem) in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5,
that the Philippians were a poor congregation:

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 2 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. 3 For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, 4 begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— 5 and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.

So the context behind this passage in Philippians 4

is that the Philippian church is poor – and yet generous beyond their means.

They delight in providing for Paul –
in spite of his objections!

Indeed, one could say that they have figured out the implications of what Paul taught on giving:
if Paul gains “honor” by preaching for free,
then *they* gain honor by supporting his preaching!

And so there is something of a friendly battle of honor going on here!

Paul wants the honor of preaching without charge.

The Philippians want the honor of supporting his preaching.

Paul is grateful for the support they give – and delights to honor them for it –
but at the same time, he does not want to encourage them in this!

Some of you may have experienced this in dealing with honor-based cultures.

In some countries, if you say to your host, “what a nice picture!”
The following day you may find it on your doorstep.
Especially if you are someone important to them (someone they honor),
then if you even hint that you like something,
they will make it happen –
even if they can’t afford it.

A pastor friend of mine was visiting in a church with a culture of honor.
After the service they had to stack the chairs, so as they were talking, he began to help.
The church had a couple of young associate pastors,
as soon as the visiting pastor stacked a chair,
they stacked two chairs for every chair he stacked.
He was busy talking with the senior pastor and didn’t notice
how quickly the associate pastors were working.
Finally the senior pastor pulled him away and explained –
“If you keep stacking chairs you will create a disaster,
because everyone else will see the associate pastors stacking chairs,
and then they will feel obligated to do even more.”

Paul understands that culture of honor –
and so he has to figure out how to thank the Philippians for their gift
without creating a sense of further obligation!

1. In Christ, I Am Content in Every Situation (4:10-14)

Paul begins by bringing together two of his key words in Philippians:
“Rejoice” and “think”

10 I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me.

Literally, “you have revived your thinking of me” –
it’s the same word used in Philippians 2 – when Paul spoke of having the mind of Christ.
It’s the same word he used to address Euodia and Syntyche,
urging them to have the same mind in the Lord.
And now he rejoices because the Philippians have revived their “mind” for him.

Now, he acknowledges:

You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity.
(If this is the Roman imprisonment, then he may be referring to his long stay in Palestine,
where he was imprisoned in Caesarea)

He’s not blaming them for taking so long –

and neither does he want them to think that he is in need:

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.

Why does Paul emphasize his contentment?

He has already told them to imitate him –
to imitate his pursuit of Christ and the resurrection.

And these verses here in 11-12 are flanked by references to anxieties and needs:

4:6 – “be anxious for nothing”

4:19 – “God will supply all your needs”

Paul senses that the Philippians struggle with contentment –
so he explains to them his own attitude toward material needs.

Paul understands that you struggle with anxiety.

You look at the world around you, and you realize that you cannot control it!
How do you respond?

Many Greek philosophers would have said that you respond with *autarkes* –
with “self-sufficiency and independence from external pressures.”

The word means “self-rule.”

We saw last week that Paul used a lot of Greek words for virtue,
when he commanded the Philippians to “think on” good things,
pure, noble, honorable, commendable things.

And now Paul uses one of the Stoics’ favorite words:

autarkes.

“I have learned in whatever situation I am to be self-sufficient.”

This seems like a strange word to use.

Why would Paul – who has been so emphatic throughout the whole epistle
about the importance of having the mind of Christ *together* –
now choose a word that is so obviously individualistic?

This is where we need to see that developing the mind of Christ
has individual effects as well!

As you develop the mind of Christ (his mindset of humility and self-sacrifice),
you are more independent – in the good sense of relying on him in all things –
which then fosters a healthy and joyful interdependence
as we lay down our lives for one another.

I think Paul is using this Stoic word (*autarkes*)

in the same way that he used all those “virtue” words –
to point us to our heavenly citizenship.

And therefore the translation “contentment” works just fine.

You are content – you are “self-ruled” –
because the Peace of God rules and guards your hearts and minds
in Christ Jesus.

Paul is saying that his contentment does not depend on whether he has enough to eat.
He has said repeatedly throughout the epistle that he “rejoices” in all situations.
His joy is not diminished by lack of food.
This is not a Stoic sense of contentment.

This is an eschatological joy that bursts through the tribulations of this life
because Jesus Christ has endured the cross and been raised up to glory.
And because Messiah Jesus has laid hold of me,
I press on to lay hold of that for which Christ laid hold of me!

Paul uses three verbs to describe his progress towards contentment:

“I have learned” (v11) – this is the verb related to the idea of discipleship –
this includes the idea of training, inquiry and discipline.

Contentment does not just “arrive” – it requires training.

“I know” (v12) – this is the simple verb “to know” –

because I have learned this through training,

I am now in the present possession of this knowledge of how to be content.

“I have learned the secret” – this is the verb used of being initiated into the mysteries.

It was normally used to describe the initiation into the mystery religions.

If you think of the verb “baptize” – or “baptizo”

you immediately think of the initiation into the Christian religion.

Of course, you can use the verb to refer to other things –

we speak of a “baptism by fire” to refer to someone’s difficult initiation
into a new job, or situation –

but when we do that, we are intentionally playing off of the parallel.

In the same way, Paul is playing off the associations of “mueo” here.

“I have learned the secret” or “I have been initiated”

into facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.

So when we talk about the “secret” of contentment,

we are not using the word “secret” in its modern sense of “the key principle.”

Rather, perhaps we should translate it,

“I have been initiated into plenty and hunger, abundance and need.”

In other words, learning the secret of contentment

does not involve identifying a secret principle that you need to learn.

I have learned (through training) in whatever situation I am to be content.

Therefore, I know (from experience) how to be brought low,

and I know how to abound.

In all things and all ways I have been initiated into plenty and hunger, abundance and need.

In other words, the “secret of contentment” is that there is no secret!

Paul is taking this language of initiation from the mystery religions –

with all their “secretive” knowledge –

and making fun of it!

The way to learn contentment – the way to learn to govern yourself –
is through developing the mind of Christ (humility and self-sacrifice –
the way of the cross) in every aspect of life.

Or, to say it another way:

13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

This is almost too mild a way of saying it.
There are a couple different words for “do” in Greek.
Paul uses neither of them.

This word “ischuo” means “to be strong, mighty, powerful.”

The problem is that English has no transitive verb for this except “do.”

Perhaps we could say “I power all things through him who strengthens me” –
except that makes it sound like *I* am the source of power!

I like Silva’s translation:

“I am strong enough for all these things through the One who empowers me.”
The only problem is that this winds up with a passive “I am strong enough” –
which misses the *active* sense that I *do* things.

Perhaps the best way to get both ideas across would be to say,
“I mightily do all things through the One who empowers me” –
because the participle there – “him who strengthens me”
is the word *endunamow* – which means to empower, or strengthen.

I am strong to do all things –
I do them mightily –
but he hastens to add that he can only do this through Christ,
the one who empowers me.
(An echo of 2:12-13 – work out your salvation with fear and trembling,
for it is God who works in you both to will and to work for his glory).

Here again you see how the mind of Christ includes powerful action.

The mind of Christ includes doctrinal instruction
(the doctrines of the incarnation and the atonement are essential –
if you do not know that Christ was God come in the flesh,
and if you do not know that he endured the cross for our salvation,
then you will not have the mind of Christ!),
but the mind of Christ also includes powerful action.
If this mind was in Christ Jesus,
then it must also be in those who are united to Christ!

And that is why Paul concludes this section in verse 14 by saying:

14 Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble.

Verse 14 concludes the paragraph – and yet it looks forward to the following discussion as well.
Paul has rejoiced that he shares in the sufferings of Christ (3:10) –
and he has rejoiced that they “partner” (or share) in his ministry in 1:5.
And so now he concludes that they did well to share in his troubles by aiding him.

This launches Paul’s theological reflections on their giving:

2. But Your Gifts Are a Pleasing Sacrifice (4:15-20)

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.

As he began in 1:5 with the discussion of their “partnership” with him in the gospel –
(koinonia) –
so now he concludes by explicitly stating that this partnership
involved financial assistance.

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.

In verse 11 he had emphasized that his rejoicing in the gift was not based on his needs –
because he would be content whether he was hungry or full –
but now in verse 17 he explains that he rejoices because of the benefit to the Philippians.

“I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.”

Material and spiritual blessings are interrelated.

Much of Jewish thought in Paul’s day

had connected material and spiritual blessing the opposite way:
accumulation of material wealth was a sign of spiritual blessing.

Paul turns this around:

distribution of material wealth *results* in spiritual blessing!

Paul says that their care for his material needs

results in “fruit” that increases their “credit.”

This is very similar to what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount,
“lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven.” (Matthew 6:20)

What is the point of your earthly treasures?

The point of your earthly treasure – the point of your material possessions –
is to be used in helping others.

Certainly, taking care of your family –

your spouse, children, parents, other relatives –
all of this is important.

But also, in this context in Philippians 4, it includes taking care of your pastor,
missionaries, those who are preaching the gospel both nearby and far away.

Verse 18 makes this even more clear:

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.

This is a striking statement,
especially because Paul uses the same language in Ephesians 5:2.
“And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us,
a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

In Ephesians Paul calls Christ “a fragrant offering and sacrifice.”
In Philippians he calls our offerings “a fragrant offering and sacrifice.”

What is Paul doing here?

In the old testament, the sacrificial system centered on the shedding of blood.
Christ is the atoning sacrifice that removes our sin.
So it would be really easy to say that therefore the sacrificial system is fulfilled in Christ,
and we don't think about any other sacrifice but Christ.

But Paul says that the Philippians gifts are
“a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.”

Think back to the OT.

The sacrificial system was also an essential part of the economic structure of Israel.
The priests and Levites were funded through the sacrificial system.
Israel was a “kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19) –
and yet God chose a portion of the people of Israel (the tribe of Levi)
as those who would minister at the altar on behalf of Israel.

Earlier we looked at Paul's usage of that priestly system
as an example of how the Christian ministry functions (1 Cor 9:13-14):

13 Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? 14 In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

The once-for-all atoning sacrifice has been offered in Jesus Christ.
But the economic principles of the support of the ministry remain fundamentally similar.
And so the Philippians gifts are a fragrant offering and sacrifice –
even as they imitate the self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

I think it is instructive that neither here nor in the Corinthian correspondence
does Paul get into the amount.

Some would say that because Paul endorses the economic principles of the OT system,
therefore that is evidence that Paul endorsed tithing.

Some people say that because tithing is Abrahamic (not just Mosaic)
therefore it continues after the Mosaic law is discontinued.
But Paul here is saying that the *Mosaic* economic principles are valid –
even the economic principles of the sacrificial system!

The principles.

He does not attempt to enforce the details!

This is not the time or place to go into the whole biblical teaching on giving.

I will only say that the Old Testament system included:

the tithe on the increase of your crops, flocks, and herds;
the firstfruits of your harvest (and of your flocks and herds);
the gleanings of your harvest (left for the poor);
and the bringing of burnt offerings, grain offerings, peace offerings,
sin offerings, and guilt offerings – as well as freewill offerings –
at appropriate times

Translating all that into “10% of your gross income” strikes me as awfully simplistic.
And it does not surprise me at all that the apostles never felt the need to go into detail.

After all, Paul’s argument is that we should “have the mind of Christ” –

that we should love one another self-sacrificially –
and your mission – your purpose as the church of Jesus Christ –
is to partner with those who preach the gospel to the nations,
so that the funds of those who work in the workplace,
and the time and gifts of those who preach the gospel,
would come together in such a way
that the gospel would go forth to the ends of the earth.

If you are really poor, then probably 10% of your income would be very sacrificial.
If you are comfortably middle class, then 10% of your income would be barely noticeable.

When we had two children and made \$20,000 a year,
it was a sacrifice to give \$2,000 a year.

But as our income increased, we made a point of giving a higher percentage every time.

And as our giving increased, we tried to keep in mind:
the regular ministry of the church,
other preachers of the gospel,
as well as the poor.

(Incidentally, some of these may not be tax deductible –
don’t assume that IRS rules must govern what you can give to.
They *will* govern how you pay your taxes –
but don’t worry about whether you get a tax deduction!)

Indeed, self-sacrificial giving should not cause you to worry at all!

Because giving with the mind of Christ,
partnering in the work of the gospel,
reminds us – as Paul says in verse 10:

*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.*

God's own resources – his riches in glory –
are more than adequate for anything you may face.
We should not divorce the material from the spiritual.
They are not mutually exclusive categories.

God's eschatological riches – his "riches in glory"
are Spiritual riches – but they include material resources as well.
The God who owns a cattle on a thousand hills is able to provide all you need physically,
as well as spiritually.
And – because we are pressing on towards the resurrection *of the body* –
we know that all of our bodily needs will be taken care of!
Sure, I may die of starvation –
but in my death, my body (as well as my soul) belongs to Jesus,
and therefore my God will supply every need –
as he raises my body in glory at the final day!
To live is Christ –
to die is gain!

But if you put together the whole flow of Philippians,
you will see another way in which this happens:
after all, why hasn't Paul died of starvation?
Because of the Philippians.
One way in which God supplies all our needs is through each other.
The church should be the place where the world begins to see
the irruption of the kingdom of God into this age.
The restoration of creation that began at the cross
should begin to be visible in the church.
No Christian should ever starve to death
(remember the famine relief for Jerusalem
that Paul organized in Macedonia and Corinth).

And you see this sense of corporate identity in Christ in Paul's final greetings:

3. Final Greetings (4:21-23)

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.

You can see, even in how Paul closes his epistle, how Christ-centered he is.

He does not simply say – "Yours truly" – but
23 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Even so, may our speech and behavior be characterized by the mind of Christ
as we humble ourselves and take up our cross –
as we press on towards the resurrection,
because Jesus Christ has taken hold of us!