

## Pauline Contentment in the Letter to Philippians

박영원 (충남대학교)

<sup>11</sup>*Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have.* <sup>12</sup>*I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.* <sup>13</sup>*I can do all things through him who strengthens me.* (Chapter 4)

The purpose of this paper is to investigate a literary and spiritual meaning of Paul's contentment in Philippians 4:11-13 by trying to analyze the passage in the thematic context of the entire letter. This study places a special focus on a literary and spiritual meaning of the Pauline concept of contentment with its relation to other theological issues found in Philippians or other letters in the New Testament.

In the first place, Philippians belongs to a genre of letter writing, and specifically it is considered a friendly letter written to Paul's fellow Christians in the city of Philippi, a Roman military colony, in the middle of the first century AD. In particular, Paul expresses in this letter his love and concern toward the Philippians with his idea of community and moral exhortations added to the important theological idea called Christology. The content of the letter has something similar to those found in the classical concept of friendship. It is no wonder, therefore, that writings about friendship in the analysis of Philippians abound in the field of New Testament scholarship. This means that people have exhausted the topic so much that it is hard for a student of the Bible to be original on the topic. Nevertheless, this study is an effort to understand Paul's idea of contentment as I understand it within the context of Philippians and other Pauline letters. In this regard, the topic is seen from a Christian perspective that does not focus on the similarity but does make a distinction between the Christian concept of friendship and pagan morality demonstrated in some of classical writings.

For a brief textual analysis, some biblical scholars have suggested a possible composite nature of this Pauline letter, especially in the part of giving thanks to the Philippians (4:10-20), because Paul delays his acknowledgement of receiving their gifts until the end of the letter, which scholars think is unusual for a letter of friendship (Hawthorne xxix-xxx). After going through various arguments, however, Hawthorne dismisses the idea of insertion in the letter and concludes that there is "no compelling reason to doubt the integrity of Philippians" (xxxii). Yet, even with these conflicting views on the textual unity of the letter, and with no definite evidence for either side of the arguments, there seems to be a thematic consistency throughout the Pauline letter that binds individual issues together and links them to the theme of friendship and the Apostle's concern for the Philippians based on the relationship that has been established since his first journey to Europe. Just as the whole Bible in the larger context shows its thematic consistency from the beginning to the end despite its complex textual controversies, so the thematic integrity of Philippians connects the text itself together and clearly demonstrates Paul's purpose of writing the letter to the Christians in Philippi.

In the historical context, the relationship between Paul and the Philippians must be a special one since it is the first relationship formed in Europe on Paul's second missionary

journey he makes after he has seen in his vision someone calling him to come across the sea and help (Acts 16:9). In addition, meeting a faithful woman named Lydia (14), converting her and her family members to Christianity as the first spiritual fruits in Europe (15), and probably building a church there with these people must be a proper reason for Paul to remember good things about the Philippians, as he clearly mentions at the beginning of the letter:

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. (1:3-5)

It is no wonder, therefore, that Paul shares with them spiritual things and they with him material gifts. Besides the various moral and spiritual messages elucidated in this letter, the Philippians' financial support for the Apostle is a good evidence of practicing their friendship, which helps form their unity in a more practical and more special way, a friendship of utility we find in pagan philosophy. For, Paul says, "no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone" (4:15).

As one of Paul's goals, among other things, of writing Philippians is "an exhortation to stand firm in the faith under pressure" (Krentz 113), the main passage about Paul's contentment may be regarded as a concrete example of his attitude toward material and physical conditions under extreme circumstances. The passage is placed between his acknowledgement of the Philippians' revived concern for him and his recollection of how they have shared gifts with him in the past, followed by giving thanks to the people for their financial support, and then by greetings and benediction for the conclusion of the letter. In this short passage, Paul expresses his personal contentment in all situations, using three pairs of contrasting phrases: "to have little" and "to have plenty," "being well-fed" and "going hungry," "having plenty" and "being in need." It is unusual in the Bible that the same message to be conveyed is repeated three times just in one verse (4:12). It needs no further elaboration to see that Paul is emphasizing here how well he is balanced and content in everything and in every circumstance. Yet, besides the repeated expression of contentment, Paul's negation of his need in verse 11, "Not that I am referring to being in need," seems to be somewhat contradictory to what follows: their gifts have helped for his needs more than once (16); he has been paid in full; he has more than enough, and is fully satisfied (18). The impact of the message of his contentment in all circumstances is so strong that his gratitude seems to pale in comparison, or it looks as if "thanks" is appearing right after "no thanks." Then, what does Paul's contentment in the main passage mean in the larger context of Philippians or other Pauline letters? Why does he declare his self-sufficiency and independence on the one hand, and imply his needs to be fulfilled on the other, which is indicated in his expression of gratitude for the gifts that have helped him in need?

The answers to these questions can be found first in Paul's distinction between spirit and flesh, or spiritual and material, which is a consistent topic in his theology. If the passage can be seen as Paul's ambivalence toward receiving gifts, it is due to his preference for spiritual fullness over the mere fulfillment of needs in harsh realities. For him, receiving gifts is a material benefit, while living in contentment even with all kinds of physical difficulties is a spiritual benefit, as he declares in 2 Corinthians: "Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (12:10). So he teaches the Ephesians not to lose their heart over his sufferings because "they are your glory" (3:13). The culmination of Paul's testimony about

the issue is yet to be found in Romans: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us” (8:18). For the Apostle, need or suffering is not an obstacle to his apostolic life; rather, it is a blessing leading to a life of spiritual fullness, which is one of the paradoxes in Pauline theology. In this respect, his statement of satisfaction in the main passage is in accord with his consistent exhortation throughout his letters to “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Colossians 3:2).

Yet, he still gives thanks to the Philippians for their gifts he has received when in need. Unlike other Pauline passages, his statement here is quite personal in nature because he compares the Philippians’ generosity with the unwillingness of the other churches that do not share with him “giving and receiving” (4:15), though they too have received from Paul blessings of the Gospel. This sincere expression of gratitude is also grounded in Paul’s view on gifts in his other letters. Referring to his apostleship to the Corinthians, Paul compares himself with some laborers of the time to emphasize his deservedness of getting paid for his service in sharing the Gospel with them. The long passage in 1 Corinthians 9:3-14 demonstrates the rights of an apostle and compares them with those of soldiers, farmers, shepherds, and even temple workers. The main point is written in verses 11-12: “If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits? If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we still more?” This straightforward demand of compensation for his apostolic work seems to be somewhat contradictory when compared to his ambivalent response to the Philippians and their gifts. But it seems that Paul’s purpose in Corinthians is to rebuke their ingratitude, which is an evil not only from a pagan point of view but also from a Christian ethical perspective. For the Corinthians in the city of corruption, Paul’s moral teaching is necessary more than anything else.

In Philippians, on the other hand, Paul expresses his gratitude for their gifts as an example of giving and receiving in the spirit of friendship. This concept of gift is closely related to grace which is the gift of God that includes the giving of His Son to us. As defined in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, this act of giving found in God’s grace is essential not only for the vertical relationship between God who gives and man who receives, but also for the unity of community among the believers because

the supreme gift of God is not totally alien to the exchanges by which men are united among themselves and by which there exists between Him and us the bonds which reveal His image in us... [F]or Christians, it is the supreme gift, which summarizes all God’s action and all that we could desire for our brethren. (218-19)

Thus it is Paul’s sincere acknowledgement of the importance of sharing things with others as a valuable Christian virtue practiced generously by the Philippians. The rule is set in Paul’s mind regarding the relationship between the minister and the congregation as he teaches Timothy: “It is the farmer who does the work who ought to have the first share of the crops” (2:6). This is a kind of Paul’s pastoral education for his beloved young Timothy, who, he thinks his “loyal child in the faith,” should not be in need, just as a parent does make sure of his or her child’s welfare.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> 1 Timothy 1:2. I ignore here the controversy over authorship of the letter to Timothy. It could be possible that the author’s view on gifts here is different from that in other Pauline letters if, as some scholars believe, Paul is not the author of Timothy (See Introduction to Timothy, NSRV 2015). But the important thing is to understand Paul’s concept within the context of the whole New Testament,

Besides, for Paul, the act of giving and receiving is an essential component of friendship; it is not a choice, but a requirement in the community. This is a universal law God has made and practiced Himself, as mentioned above, by giving us His Son and grace as a gift. The circle of giving and receiving is complete when we also give ourselves for others as a gift, which Paul practices himself and encourages others to do so in his letters, as Jesus says: “You received without payment; give without payment” (Matthew 10:8<sup>b</sup>). This gift exchange is a process of character building exercise, so Paul emphasizes in Philippians the all-out effort of the athlete to outdo the others in virtue and to be better in giving for others.

But for himself and for the gifts he has received from the Philippians, Paul voluntarily forgets his own code of conduct and says, “You shouldn’t have,” “I am content,” though with many thanks, just as ordinary parents respond to their grateful children offering gifts to them. Paul exactly uses the parents-children metaphor in his true intention about the receiving of any material gifts from the Corinthians:

I will not be a burden, because I do not want what is yours but you; for children ought not to lay up for their parents, but parents for their children. I will most gladly spend and be spent for you. (2 Corinthians 12:14<sup>b</sup>-15<sup>a</sup>)

Paul’s ambivalence, therefore, is not only a result of his dichotomy between spiritual blessings and material gifts; it is also a result of his humble and grateful acknowledgement of true Christian friendship demonstrated in the giving and receiving relationship between the Philippians and himself as an apostle who deserves “the first share of the crops.”

Another form of Paul’s ambivalence is found in Philippians, which is also related to the division between spirit and flesh, or life and death. For the Apostle, it is their prayers and “the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ” that will deliver him from the present difficulties or his imprisonment (1:19). It can be assumed that this is Paul’s purpose at the beginning of the letter to acknowledge the prayers of the Philippians first, not their gifts, as the spiritual power strong enough to save him from his physical suffering, more important than the gifts that would satisfy his material needs. Nevertheless, in his imprisonment he also seems to show his ambivalence between life and death, measuring what is best for himself or for others or for Christ:

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 for you. (23-24)

Here we find that Paul’s choice between life and death is based on friendship of utility because he indicates his desire to live for the necessary benefits of the Philippians. It means Paul’s willingness to extend his physical suffering for the spiritual growth or what he calls “progress and joy in faith” (25) of the Christians in Philippi. And this is an example of Paul’s beautiful incorporation of spirit and flesh for the purpose of glorifying God by giving himself, his body, as “a living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1) for others, which is an act of imitating Christ, a central theme of this Pauline letter. Just as Christ’s Incarnation that is leading to His physical suffering unto death is offered for man’s spiritual benefit, a benefit of God’s reconciliation with man, so Paul teaches the Philippians what it means to suffer physically for the benefit of spiritual life and what it means to give and receive as an act of imitating Christ’s example in the relationship of friendship. In this context, it is natural that

---

which shows thematic consistency throughout his writings.

the Apostle writes or quotes in the next chapter what is called “a Christ’s hymn” that shows the process of Christ’s Incarnation from emptiness to exaltation, and offers it as a model we should all imitate (2:6-11). Christ’s emptying and giving Himself for the benefit of the world is the basis of Paul’s theology of love. The interaction between Christ’s love and our imitation of His example completes the circle of the loving relationship. So Paul’s sharing good things with others is built upon this relationship, especially a sharing between the teacher and the student of the Gospel, as he encourages the Galatians: “Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher” (6:6). In Philippians, therefore, Paul expresses his joy of giving and receiving based on the same friendship of utility because they already have shared in good things with him for his teaching. By giving himself, Paul is filled with the fullness of God, and by suffering, he becomes content for the benefit of others. This is the essence of Paul’s contentment in all difficulties and sufferings.

Considering his sense of contentment, as well as all the other moral and ethical aspects of Philippians, it is easy to connect his ethics to the ethics of Greek and Roman philosophers and moralists, just as Peggy Vining points out in “Comparing Seneca’s Ethics in *Epistulae Morales* to Those of Paul in Romans”:

Since the age in which Christianity first made its appeal was also an age in which the ethical consciousness of the philosopher had been aroused, a comparison of the ethics of the pagan moralists to the ethics of Paul’s writing is almost mandatory for an understanding of Pauline ethics. (83)

Especially, Paul’s passage of satisfaction does not smack of any specific Pauline theology; it is like any other ordinary stoical insight into the philosophy of life without having anything to do with Christianity. This is not different from what Seneca calls “noble words” and “universal sentiments” as anyone can think of for moral instruction. While Seneca identifies the similar virtue of being content with Stoicism, he acknowledges that the same thing can be said even by Epicurus, quoting him: “Whoever does not regard what he has as most ample wealth, is unhappy, though he be master of the whole world” or “A man may rule the world and still be unhappy, if he does not feel that he is supremely happy.” He even includes an ordinary comic poet’s words and brings home his message in a cogent way: “Unblest is he who thinks himself unblest” (*Moral Epistles* IX 55). In this respect, it is possible to say that Paul’s theology is influenced by the same spirit found in these pagan philosophies since it has the universal characteristic available in all wise sayings from all over the world. For it contains truth and wisdom for all times and places.

Despite similarities in its concept, however, Paul’s contentment becomes completely different from any of these pagan moral insights when it is read in the context of the next famous Pauline verse: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (12). This is the power of the Apostle Paul, in whose hands a moral and material entity enters into a spiritual transformation that is far beyond what any philosophy can reach. Mentioning his contentment, Paul humbles himself by declaring that it is the result of the power of God that makes all things possible, not the result of his self-discipline as in a Stoic. This is Paul’s declaration of departure from any influence of or dependence on classical philosophy, if what Abraham J. Malherbe states is right: “There can no longer be any doubt that Paul was thoroughly familiar with the teaching... of the philosophers of the period... which he adapted and adopted to his own purposes” (68). For either Stoics or Epicureans, the main focus seems to be on how you appreciate your prosperity and become happy, not on how you accept your poverty and become content. If Greeks and Romans could be content in their situation, it

must be a result of self-discipline or a conclusion of philosophical speculations, as their philosophical moral tradition must have taught them to be so. For the Apostle, however, it is possible only through God who “strengthens” him. The power is not in us, but in God, which is consistent with Paul’s theology of grace. And, as mentioned above, this grace is the supreme gift of God, unthinkable and unlimited, without which Paul’s contentment is but a human effort.

Nevertheless, in Paul we find a trace of self-discipline even if the power of God is involved in his contentment. For he uses the words, “learning” and “know,” four times together in verses 11-12, strongly indicating that it is his hard won wisdom from his extreme experiences: “I *have learned* to be content”; “I *know* what it is to have little, and I *know* what it is to have plenty”; and “I *have learned* the secret of being well-fed.” Meanwhile, in the King James Version, Paul says, “I *am instructed*” in verse 12 (emphasis added). All these expressions indicate that his learning process is still going on when he writes the letter to the Philippians, as it is written in a permanent present tense. Who can imagine more extreme sufferings than those Paul has experienced for Christ, as he lists sufferings and dangers he has gone through in 2 Corinthians 11:23-27? Therefore, when he mentions his knowing and learning how to be content, it means he is still in the process of acquiring that knowledge through suffering, need, and hunger rather than comfort, abundance, and fullness. In other words, Paul’s process of learning is not a process of philosophical speculations or mental discipline like Seneca’s moral instruction to noble men. Paul’s being content is fundamentally different from Seneca’s notion that “The wise man is self-sufficient” or “nothing is necessary to the wise man” (51). For Paul, unimaginable sufferings and pains have made him to adjust himself to any circumstances only for survival and only for the glory of God. From the biblical evidence of his suffering, it can be inferred that Paul juxtaposes opposite words like “plenty,” “well-fed,” and “having plenty” not to show that he has been really in those circumstances, but to give a sense of balance for the purpose of emphasizing his contentment in the extreme conditions of his having “little,” “going hungry,” and “being in need.”

Paul’s passage of contentment is also to be understood in the entire context of Philippians. Christ is at the center of the letter with His humbleness and emptiness demonstrated as essential Christian virtues to be imitated. They are essential because Christ’s Incarnation is based on His humble nature and made possible by His emptying Himself. No such an example is found in any philosophical writings or any moral and ethical teachings of the world. No matter how they embellish the virtue of friendship with philosophical embroidery or ethical beads, it is just a shadow of the truth, the ultimate example of friendship only found in Christ. In the same way, He is the example of Pauline contentment. When Paul says, Christ “emptied himself” (2:7), it implies that He was full and abundant before emptying Himself. Christ must be content, too, when He has given up His heavenly fullness and abundance according to another Pauline verse in 1 Corinthians: “If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing” (13:3). Thus Paul follows every step of Christ until he wishes to empty himself completely: “even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you” (Philippians 2:17). This is another example of Paul’s contentment in the matter of his physical nothingness or complete emptiness for the salvation of the Philippians.

Therefore, Paul’s contentment must be seen in relation to Christ’s suffering. Paul is here transcending the material aspect of satisfaction to the spiritual level of contentment far beyond the level of moral or ethical teachings of Greco-Roman philosophical tradition. In the

larger biblical context, it is what Paul is pursuing throughout his letters in the New Testament. This is a shift from the material world, the pagan and classical moral world, and the rabbinic world of the law to the Christ-centered world of grace. Paul's ambivalence toward the act of receiving shows him to be a humble servant of God, who is reluctant to accept gifts, but quick in giving himself for others. Aside from this ambivalence, Paul shows his unshakable faith in spiritual things in the face of the dualistic world, when he writes about the grace of God and the law, uncircumcision and circumcision, Spirit and flesh, or light and dark, as he commands in Galatians:

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. (5:16-18)

For him, the sharing of the Gospel and spiritual things is more important than the sharing of material gifts, so that he is encouraged, not by any worldly things offered to him, but through the faith of the Christians (1 Thessalonians 3:7).

Nevertheless, if one of the purposes of writing the letter to the Philippians is for Paul to acknowledge his receiving the gifts, it not only achieves the goal, but also goes beyond an ordinary letter of gratitude with a spiritual meaning added to it. Paul's expression of contentment in all circumstances teaches the Philippians what it means to live and suffer for Christ and how to imitate Him by emptying oneself to be fulfilled with the fullness of God even without any material benefits. Even though giving and receiving is a valuable virtue in the classical concept of friendship, and an important element in the relationship among Christians, it is so only when it furthers the faith of the community and gives spiritual benefits to all members of it. It is quite regrettable today that some religious leaders select only a material part out of Pauline exhortations, and emphasizes the importance of receiving as teachers in their ministry. As Paul mentions his contentment before giving thanks for the gifts, they should think first about what it means to be content before they think they deserve "the first share of the crops." For Paul, material aspects in his mission cannot be the first priority. It is not riches or wealth but all his sufferings and difficulties that make him rejoice in Christ, for, he believes, God "has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well" (1:29). If Seneca failed to change Nero with all his moral lessons, Paul has been successful in changing the world with all his spiritual messages in his letters, which is one of the most significant paradigm shifts from the classical world to the world of early Christianity.

## Works Cited

- Attridge, Harold W., gen. ed. *The HarperCollins Study Bible: Fully Revised and Updated* (NRSV). New York: Harper One, 1989.
- Hawthorne, Gerald. F. *Word Biblical Commentary: Philippians*. vol. 43. Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983.
- Krentz, Edgar M., "Military Language and Metaphors in Philippians," *Origins and Method: Towards a New Understanding of Judaism and Christianity*. ed. Bradley H. McLean. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993, 105-109.
- Leon-Dufour, Xavier, ed. *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. trans. P. Joseph Cahill and E. M. Stewart. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1988.
- Malherbe, Abraham J. *Paul and the Popular Philosophers*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989.
- Seneca, Lucius Annaeus. *Moral Epistles*. trans. Richard M. Gummere. *The Loeb Classical Library*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917-25.
- Vining, Peggy. "Comparing Seneca's Ethics in *Epistulae Morales* to Those of Paul in Romans," *Restoration Quarterly* 47.2 (2005) 83-104.