

Resolutions In The Red | Philippians 4:10-20

The Rev. Dr. John Frederick | The Falls Church Anglican

Preaching Draft | December 31, 2023

(Small Group Discussion Questions on Page 6)

Introduction

It's New Year's Eve and we're continuing in our Philippians series. As we come to worship today, most of us are thinking: 'I've got a few more hours left in 2023, and then come the diets, the early morning workouts, the Bible in a year plan.'

Most everyone has a New Year's resolution or two on their mind. Everyone, that is, except, it seems, the e-commerce site *eBay*.

They recently sent me a New Year's email entitled "Say Goodbye to resolutions." They write:

"With a new year upon us, it's tempting to focus on ways we need to change. But we think you're pretty awesome just as you are. Ditch clichéd resolutions and begin 2024 by diving into joy—starting with sweet savings."

The email then proceeds to recommend a few customized hobbies for me to start in 2024. They write:

"Arts and crafts are not just for kids! Between crocheting and do-it-yourself soap-making, you'll be a handmade master."

(*eBay*: where are you getting your algorithm data from?) The email continues,

"Ditch the resolution; Buy a Pair of Driving Shoes. It reads: "there is no denying that driving shoes make driving more fun . . . a driving shoe is a *must-have*. [I love how committed they are to this utterly pointless shoe] Spoil yourself and get a driving shoe to press on the accelerator comfortably for hours."

eBay seems to think New Year's joy comes through purchasing things. Given the cultural commercialism of Christmas, they're probably not far off. But most of us reckon that true New Year's joy comes through success in tackling new projects—diets, disciplines, exercise, growth in character and virtue; stuff like that. To the extent that we're successful, we expect to experience greater contentment, greater blessings in life.

In fact, Christians will often say 'have a blessed New Year' to express our desire for well-being, positive circumstances, health, and prosperity in the New Year. And, for many (perhaps most) Christians, to be 'blessed' is equivalent with 'having favorable circumstances and outcomes.' If you have these, you're blessed.

But what about when the circumstances are not good? When tragedy strikes. When the New Year is marked by misfortune, failure to achieve goals, by heartbreak, loss, or grief—many of which occur through no fault of our own?

Are we no longer blessed? Were we blessed last year, but cursed this year? And, if so how do we get that “blessing” back? What is the theological category for our difficult circumstances?

This is precisely the focus of Paul in our passage today. Paul reveals what he calls “the secret.” Whether we are ‘in the red’ (operating from a place of need) or ‘in the black’ (operating from a place of abundance)—our blessing and contentment rests eternally secure in Christ; regardless of our circumstances.

For Paul, while the circumstances of life will vary; the **blessing of the gospel is never paused or removed**. Ours is an ever-present blessing based the faithfulness of Jesus Christ and our faith in him. It’s not ‘I’m too blessed to be stressed,’ it’s ‘**I’m blessed even if I’m stressed.**’

We’ll examine this teaching in three parts, focusing on the Gospel blessing that abides even when we’re spiritually in the red. We’ll look at contentment in the red (vv. 10-13), discipleship in the red (vv. 14-18), and gospel riches in the red (vv.19-20). Ultimately, we’ll see that Paul offers us a powerful corrective to the colloquial Christian equating of “blessing” with “positive life circumstances.”

I. Contentment in the Red (vv. 10-13)

In verses 10-13, Paul “greatly rejoices” (v.10) that the Philippians have partnered with him once again. He immediately makes clear that his rejoicing is *not* primarily linked to his shift in circumstances.

The “I have learned to be content in any circumstance” of verse 11 is parallel to the “I have learned the secret” of verse 12. The secret is Paul’s ability to find contentment in the most extreme circumstances of life. For Paul, **the opposite of need is not abundance; it’s Christ.**

This fundamentally changes what most Christians think of when they think of ‘being blessed.’ For Paul, you can have everything and be blessed, but you can also lose everything and still be blessed. That’s freeing because at some point, in some year, eventually we lose. On that day, you might look at your lot and say “I’m cursed, I need to regain the blessing.” Brothers and sisters, if you are in Christ you are not now cursed, you will never be cursed you; you remain blessed.

As Christians, we don’t resolve to be blessed; God resolved to bless *us*. Whatever struggle we experienced in 2023 or that we will experience in 2024 is a result of the unpredictable experience of embodiment in a fallen world. But even that exists under God’s providence. Paul tells us in Galatians 3 that Christ bore the curse on our behalf so that the blessing of salvation promised to Abraham might come to the Gentiles. We are blessed because he took the curse upon himself. [vamp]

This is why the apostle Peter says in 1 Peter 3:14, “even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed,” and in 4:14 “If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed.”

By contemporary Christian standards, suffering and blessing are non sequiturs; they cannot even appear in the same sentence. But for Paul, Peter, and Jesus, blessing is not something we use to have but lost; it’s not something that is still out ahead of us, that we long to acquire. Blessing is a stable state of our soul based on our saving relationship with Jesus.

It doesn’t come through your resolutions; it comes through God’s resolution to save the world—to save you personally—through Jesus. It issues forth in the one circumstance that will never change. That God is for you in Christ. That God was against sin in Christ, and that in Christ we find the true riches of eternal life.

This means that we may be in the red in terms of current circumstances, finances, health, lack of adventures/experiences. But we are never in the red in terms of our eternal inheritance in Christ. We abound in the economy of Christ even when we are poor (spiritually, financially, emotionally and existentially) according to the the economy of this world.

There is blessing in the red. There is contentment in the red.

We should stop acting like we have to re-win the victory that Christ already won for us in his death and resurrection in order to find a suitable and lasting content. Success in meeting the marks of our new year’s resolution, our plans; that’s not the metric by which we measure contentment as Christians; Christ is. If you belong to Christ run hard at your goals; but just remember that our hope is not in our goals; our hope is in the gospel.

This means that the “all things” that Paul speaks about in verse 13 when he says the famous line “I can do all things through him who strengthens me”—this is not a mantra for generic self-improvement.

[Application]

As if you can go from lifting zero weights (I don’t lift waits. Actually, I do but they’re my wife’s wights. Does that still count? They say Fila on the side) on Dec 31st to instantly bench pressing the same as Arnold Schwarzenegger in his prime on January 1st simply by believing in yourself and shouting loudly at Gold’s Gym ‘I can do all things through him who strengthens me’ before being crushed by a 200-pound bar bell that you wrongly thought God would help you bench press.

The “all things” that Paul can “do” refer specifically to his ability to be content in any and every circumstance. The take-away, then, is not “I can achieve any goal” because God will strengthen me, but I can remain content even when all of my plans don’t pan out the way I hoped they would.

Illustration [The Hike]

II. Discipleship in the Red (vv. 14-18)

Paul shifts from a focus on contentment in Christ through all circumstances to a life of discipleship marked by Christ's pattern of self-giving love. Notice the amount of attention he gives the Philippians and the significant nature of their ministry to Paul. He references the Philippians at least seven times in a quick burst of four verses.

- You (pl.) shared my affliction (v. 14)
- You yourselves, Philippians (v. 15)
- You alone partnered with me in giving and receiving (v. 15)
- You sent me help for my needs once and again in Thessalonica (v. 16)
- I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God (v. 18)

Verse 15 is especially important, because it contains two emphatic structures that repeat the pronoun "you" in the original language twice in the one sentence which is highly irregular. The original audience would have seen this a verbally shining a spotlight on the Philippians.

This reference to the Philippian's giving a "a fragrant offering and sacrifice" is easier understood if it is read in light of similar language in Ephesians 5:1-2:

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ² And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

When the Philippians give in this way, Paul expresses joy because they are imitating, embodying Christ's own sacrificial love. It's not that Paul seeks the gift (after all, he has already expressly stated that he is capable of being content in any circumstance). Rather, Paul is trying to highlight that the benefit of selfless giving is as powerfully at work on the giver as it is in himself as the recipient.

He writes,

- I seek the fruit that increases to your credit (v. 17)

Throughout the letter this theme of "fruit" comes up several times. The first occurrence is

- Phil 1:11 in which Paul says that the Philippians, by increasing in love, knowledge and discernment will be presented as blameless on the day of Christ Jesus, will be "**filled with the fruit of righteousness** that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."

The second occurrence is in

- Phil 1:22 in which Paul talks about his own ministry as “**fruitful labor** (*ergon*).”

This is interesting to consider, given that later in Phil 2:12-13, the verbal forms of “work/labor” (*kataergeo* and *ergeo*) appear when Paul speaks about “working out our own salvation with fear and trembling because it is God who works in us to will and work for his good pleasure.”

The result is the overarching theological principle taught across the whole of the epistle, namely that: **fruitful labor bears fruit in others and in ourselves.**

Christians often view sanctification as an entirely self-directed affair. But for Paul, **holiness comes as the fruit of selflessness.**

Holiness is meant to be others-centered, not self-obsessed. To the extent that we work out our salvation, we are not earning our salvation, but we are also not merely displaying that we are saved. **We are forming others through serving and we are being formed through serving others.** Or, as I put it a few weeks ago: the work that God is doing in us is never separate from the work that God is doing through us.

Coming back to New Year’s resolutions: If the focus of our resolutions is entirely individualistic, or self-directed, we may end up with a new set of abs but a seriously out of shape soul. Even worse, we may achieve physical fitness at someone else’s spiritual detriment.

And so, in applying this principle to our own lives we must ask: in what way do my personal attempts at growth and holiness contribute to doing someone else spiritual good? In what way do our resolutions build others up as much as ourselves?

Application [Who are we discipling?]

Most of us are asking: who would I be discipling? Who am I called to do spiritual good to in this new year? For many of us, it starts at the front line of our family. Only, we feel like we are incapable of meeting our own expectations; our own syllabus.

One thing I’ve endeavored to do is complete the Gospel of John with my son. We weren’t able to finish it. That’s a success. Growing up, do you know how much of the Bible I read in my house. None of the Bible. An imperfect, non-idealized, version of family discipleship is doable. You finish John’s gospel when you finish it. Why rush? Often I ask questions about what we’re reading. I take my time. The process is more important; and the inquiry-based approach is more effective anyway than idealistic, unachievable goals. Any Bible is a win, because God will work through it and it will not return to him empty.

III. Gospel Riches in the Red

Paul, then closes the section by ensuring that the Philippians know that God will supply all of their needs too. But it is the modifiers that are significant here. God will supply every need:

- according to his riches (v. 19)

- in glory (v. 19)
- in Christ Jesus (v. 19)
- to his own glory (v. 20)

You see, the reality is that bad things—evil things—happen to Christians, just like they happen to non-Christians. Paul is not over-promising here. He is not saying that no Christian will ever suffer tragedy. What he says that our ultimate need is supplied in Christ Jesus.

We may have an abundance of resources here and now. However, this can change. Yet, what cannot change is the abundance of blessing that is supplied in Christ Jesus, or by Christ Jesus, in a way that is glorious, and in a way that enriches us with the riches that last beyond our present circumstances. **Gospel riches remain even when our worldly circumstances are in the red.** Like Paul we count all things as loss for the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord. To live is Christ, and to die is gain.

In God's economy of salvation there is never a recession. There is never a lay off. There is **no possible foreclosure on our spiritual future.** It is forever secure in Christ.

When we try to transform “blessing” into favorable circumstances, all that we do is end up confused when we encounter suffering. The absence of suffering is not the blessing, perfect health is not the blessing, financial flourishing is not the blessing; Jesus Christ is the blessing.

Remember us, O God;
from age to age be our comforter.
You have given us the wonder of time,
blessings in days and nights, seasons and years.

**Bless your children at the turning of the year
and fill the months ahead with the bright hope
that is ours in the coming of Christ.**

You are our God, living and reigning, forever and ever.
Amen.

Study Questions

(1) For Paul, Christian contentment is not contingent upon our circumstances but abides immovable in Christ through the good and the bad. What role do Scripture and the sacraments play in helping us to be satisfied in Christ amidst the persistent difficulties of embodied life in a fallen world?

(2) In verses 14-18, Paul explains that the benefit of the Philippians gift to him also has a transforming effect on giver. Fruitful labor (ministry) bears the fruit of righteousness (sanctification/holiness) both in us and through us. How does this view of active gospel living

(where God works both in us and through us in an integrated way) change the way you think of Christian ministry, living, and work?

(3) God calls us to live in the red, giving ourselves for the sake of others, and living in the others-centered way of the cross. What are some ways that walking in the way of the cross has build you up in transformative ways even as you pour yourself out? How has the love of God through others toward you impacted your life and walk with Christ, and your resilience as a disciple?

(4) New Year's resolutions often get reconfigured as we find ourselves within the sovereign flow of God's providence in our lives. How can we keep a nimble, agile posture to our plans, being attentive to where our expectations can shift, and viewed not as a failure but faithfulness to Christ in laying down our priorities for his as they become evident in our life?

(5) Who are we discipling and what is the difference between making disciples of ourselves, and making disciples who, as Ephesians 5 says, walk as 'imitators of God'? Do you view family members, and perhaps children (or grandchildren) as those whom you are on the front lines for doing spiritual good, both in your resolutions and in your day to day walk with Christ?