

Urban Legends – Part 6

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Urban Legends¹ *Philippians 4:13 (vs 10-20)*

In our summer sermon series, we are exploring some of the urban legends that exist around certain Bible verses and even in church history. You know what an urban legend is, right? An urban legend is a commonly circulated myth, that gets repeated throughout the culture and history as common knowledge, but which isn't true.² But it gets repeated enough that people just assume it must be true. This series is exploring urban legends around Scripture verses and church history.

Maybe you've noticed, but in all these urban legend Scriptures that we've been looking at, they happen because people take a passage of Scripture out of its biblical and cultural contexts and make it mean something that it was never intended to mean. And that can be a very dangerous thing...

Let me give you an example of how much trouble we can get into if we take Scripture out of context. Have you ever had one of those "daily bible verse" calendars or devotionals? Well, I once came across one of those "a verse of the day" calendars where you tear off the page for each day, and on one day it had this particular verse in it:

"Therefore, if you will worship before me, all will be yours." (Luke 4:7, kjv)

That sounds like a wonderful promise for those who worship God, doesn't it? It sounds similar to what Jesus said in Matthew 6:33 when he said:

"Seek first the Kingdom of God, and all these other things will be added to you." (Matthew 6:33)

But not so fast...let me add just a little bit of context. Let me give you the two verses before that Scripture and one verse after it, and you tell me if it changes the meaning at all:

¹ Sources for this series/sermon:

David A. Croteau and Gary E. Yates *Urban Legends of the Old Testament* (B&H Academic, Nashville TN 2019)

David A. Croteau *Urban Legends of the New Testament* (B&H Academic, Nashville, TN 2015)

Michael Svigel and John Adair *Urban Legends of Church History* (B&H Academic, Nashville, TN 2020)

Dean Flemming, *Philippians: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition, New Beacon Bible Commentary* (Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2009)

Eric J. Bargerhuff, *The Most Misused Verses in the Bible* (Bethany House Publishing, Bloomington, Minn., 2012)

Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997)

Earle L. Wilson, Alex R. G. Deasley, and Barry L. Callen, *Galatians, Philippians, Colossians: A Commentary for Bible Students* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007)

John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Phil 4:13

² David A. Croteau, *Urban Legends of the New Testament*, xiii.

And the devil led Jesus up and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said to Him, "I will give You all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. "Therefore if You worship before me, it shall all be Yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.' (Luke 4:5-8, kjv)

What do you think – kind of changes the meaning a bit, doesn't it? Do you get my point? Context is *everything* when you are reading and applying Scripture, my friends. *Scriptural* context (which is both the immediate context and in context with the rest of the Bible), and then also the *cultural* context into which it was written must be considered if we're going to read and study the Bible accurately.

The verse we're going to look at today is one of those that's become something it wasn't intended to mean. Our verse today is one of the most popular in the New Testament, if not the whole Bible, besides John 3:16. You'll find this verse on posters, people have it tattooed on their bodies, business people and athletes quote it all the time.

Today we are going to look at a well-known but misused verse that has modern day myth status – let's look at...

The Scripture: Philippians 4:13

Just in case you don't know what that verse says, I'll put it on the screen and read it to you, although many of you will recognize it right away:

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13, kjv)

How many of you have heard that verse before? Maybe you've received comfort and motivation from it, so are you getting nervous about what I might say? Well relax...let me just remind you: in each of these verses that we've looked at and corrected or clarified, the *accurate understanding* of the verse means *so much more* than the urban legend around it, because *the truths behind the passages are even more profound and more powerful* than the urban legend we've made them out to be. Hasn't that been the case so far? The same will be true here.

So, are you ready to tackle this one? Let's do it – here is...

The Legend.

Philippians 4:13 contains one of the most popular and encouraging promises of all Scripture:

"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13)

All of us have goals in life. Some of you want to be professional athletes. Others may want to be famous musicians or actors. Some want to start their own businesses. Whatever you want to do, all you have to do is remember this verse and claim it

daily. Put it on your mirror so you see it every morning and every evening. Apart from Christ you can do nothing, but through him – you can accomplish anything!³

There's a problem with that interpretation of the verse, though. For instance, one author gives this example:⁴ imagine two teens playing on opposing basketball teams. They could be boys or girls, it doesn't matter. They don't know each other, but they have something in common. They're both from healthy Christian homes where they've been taught to love and serve God. Each also knows a little about the Bible. In fact, they love the same Bible verse – this one from Philippians 4:13. The game proves to be a fierce competition. Both play all four quarters as hard as they can, and both play well for their teams. Both are motivated by that verse: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." But at the end of the game, only one kid and his team will be the winner. On the way to their homes after the game, they have totally opposite thoughts. One will tell herself, "You know, God is awesome – he really does give me strength! We won! What an awesome game!" The other one is thinking, "Where was God when I needed him? I guess his strength is not as strong as I thought it was."

So, which one is right?

Let me give another example: at our house we have a water softening unit that takes salt pellets. We get the bags of salt pellets from Costco, and they are 50-pound bags. So, imagine I've bought four bags, and I'm unloading those bags from my car to the garage. Is it legitimate for me to try to carry four at one time and to say, "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength"? If I drop one, does that make me weak, or was it God's fault because he didn't give me enough strength? You get the point – obviously, that's not what Paul meant in this verse.

So, what *is* it that God is really saying to us through the Apostle Paul?

Let's do...

The Fact Check

...and figure out what the passage really means, then we will get to the point of it so we can learn from it and actually apply it as it was intended.

To do that, we'll need to look at...

The Context.

Let's look at what's going on in and around this verse and what the culture was so we can get the context.

³ David A. Croteau, *ibid*

⁴ Bargerhuff, *ibid*

So, does “all” mean ALL – is this verse saying that we can do any and every thing in Christ? Or is the word “all” limited by what Paul meant in the context and the original language? We’ll see!

Paul wrote this letter to the believers who lived in the city of Philippi. It’s the smallest of Paul’s letters in the New Testament, but it’s also one that is loved most by the church. For me, this letter is one of my favorites too.

Paul is writing to the Philippians from prison. Even so, it is filled with joy and warmth and is very practical. But that doesn’t mean it is shallow – it has some very deep and profound theological reflections, especially about Christ and about something called the “cruciform” character of a Christian’s life.⁵ Have you heard that term before – “cruciform”? It means living the crucified life in Christ; dying to ourselves and living a servant life for Christ and others. That is important to remember because it has to do with that verse we are looking at.

Okay, so first thing to pay attention to that this letter is a...

Thank-you letter

...from Paul to the church in Philippi. This is important to know so that you understand what Paul was getting at in that verse. Paul had a very special relationship with the church in Philippi. He was very fond of them, and they were fond of him.

Now in Paul’s other letters (especially to the Corinthians), we learn that Paul made it a habit NOT to accept any financial support from them. That’s because, first of all, Paul was an itinerant preacher – that means he would go from town to town, start a church, stay there a little bit until it had some leaders, and then move on. So he didn’t want to be a financial burden to them since those churches were church plants and they were young and still getting going. But also, if Paul asked for financial support, he might feel obligated to them, and he didn’t want that – he wanted to be able move on when he needed to. Paul wasn’t opposed to churches paying their pastors; in fact, in the letters to the Corinthians and to Timothy he insisted on it; just not for him because of the nature of his ministry.

However, Paul’s relationship with the Philippians was different. Paul considered them to be partners with him in his ministry; they prayed for him and supported him as he travelled and especially as he was in prison, which, remember, was where he was when he wrote this. *Their financial support to Paul was always unexpected, unrequested, and very generous. They loved each other.*

So because of this close relationship, Paul spent a lot of time...

Rejoicing

⁵ Flemming, *ibid*

...with them and over them.

The words “joy” and “rejoice” show up sixteen times in these four short chapters! That’s a lot of joy! What prompted Paul to write this was the arrival of a guy named Epaphroditus. He was from the Philippian church and was the delivery person who brought the Philippian church’s generous offering of support to Paul while he was in prison. Prison in that culture could be a horrible place – it was jail cells that simply housed offenders; there was no cafeteria or food service or recreational yard or televisions in their holding cells. So, if a prisoner was going to have food, or have anything else for that matter, he was totally dependent on what someone else brought to him. So you can imagine how surprised and excited Paul was to see his dear friend arrive from his dear church friends with a generous offering of support for Paul. This passage is a good example of the kind of generosity that we talked about last week – generosity that we *must* have as Christians. The Philippians were exactly that.

So Paul writes this letter to them to encourage them, disciple them, and thank them for their generosity and support. But if you were to read through the letter in one sitting, you’d see that his “thank you” is a bit muted. For example, in chapter four he writes, “thanks, but it’s not like I needed it.” Which seems strange, because he *did* need it. So what’s going on?

That’s a good question and it’s important for understanding the cultural context. First, in that culture, one was expected to be careful anytime you said anything to someone else about a need you had. To mention that you had a need was considered the same as asking someone for help, and to do that was considered somewhat rude and imposing. That’s because stoicism was the predominant philosophy of the day. There are lots of problems with Stoicism and we don’t have time to go into it (although you can tell by Paul’s writings that he had studied stoicism before he became a Christian. I wrote a graduate paper on that topic). But here’s where one of the many ways that stoicism was an issue: a prime value of stoicism was independence – that a person of noble character didn’t need anyone’s help. That, of course is anti-biblical, because Paul teaches in the Bible that the church is the body of Christ and that we need each other. So Paul’s thank you letter is trying to be polite, but also avoiding the sin of stoic independence. He’s thanking them for their generosity and support, while at the same time declaring his dependence on Christ alone in all situations and in every need. So then, he’s rejoicing over his *interdependence* with the Philippian church. Okay?

So because of those things, Paul then teaches that in Christ he has learned...

Contentment in Extremes and in Between.

It didn’t matter if Paul was in the great times or the hard times – he learned to be content. Again, this is not the independence of stoicism; it is a dependence on Christ and an interdependence on the church.

So, in the verse right before the one we're looking at – verse twelve, Paul shares this revolutionary idea of contentment. It was revolutionary for Paul's day, and it's revolutionary for our day, too. I've already said that in Paul's day, Stoicism preached a self-sufficiency, but it also expected an ambitious drive for success. The best way for a stoic to live was to not need anyone else, and at the same time, to pursue being rich and successful. In contrast to that, when Paul talks about being content, he defined success differently. Paul is saying that success is not achievement, it is a relationship with God and the church. Paul could be content if he had a lot or if he had a little; whether he was well-fed or hungry, in a Roman prison or roaming free, on sea or land, shipwrecked or safe. In all those extremes and in between, Paul was content. He had learned how to be abased and how to abound, and it didn't matter – he knew that no matter what, he had everything he needed in God through Christ.

All of THAT leads us to verse 13. I read that verse to you from the oldest and most popular English translation of the Bible, the King James Version. But the KJV was translated in the 1600s, and there have been lots of improvements in translation techniques and we've discovered more accurate early ancient manuscripts. So, there is actually a better translation of Philippians 4:13 than the one I read to you. I want you to listen to the King James Version first, and then I'll read you the New International Version. KJV says:

“I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.”
(Philippians 4:13, kjv)

Now that is *generally* true, but the more specific and more accurate translation from the NIV says:

“I can do all *this* through Christ who gives me strength.”
(Philippians 4:13, niv, *italics added*)

So, in the KJV the legend is that, “all” means “all,” as in, I can play in the NBA, or I can win the Superbowl, or I can make a million bucks if I believe hard enough. But more accurately, Paul isn't saying “all things,” he's saying, “I can do all THIS through Christ who gives me strength.” So what is the “this”? The “this” Paul is talking about is *contentment*. Think about it: the kind of contentment Paul is talking about is not something we can muster on our own; that kind of contentment takes the strength of Christ.

Let me give you a kind of paraphrase of verses 12 and 13 within their context of everything we've been talking about; Paul is basically saying: “Unlike the popular philosophy of the day, which is self-reliance and success, I have learned to rely entirely on Christ in all circumstances, and to be grateful for your love and support. It doesn't matter what I'm going through – with Christ and together with you – I have everything I will ever need. I can be in wealth or want, ill or elated, alone or in a crowd, in prison or free – I am content in EVERY situation. *And the reason I can be content in any and every situation is through Christ who gives me the strength I need, all the time.*” What Paul is describing is actually exactly the way Jesus lived, in his relationship with the Father. That's why Jesus could face the cross and say, “Not my will, but yours be done, Father,” and on the cross he could say, “Father, forgive

them.” This kind of life of contentment that is completely submitted to God is what’s called the “cruciform” life, and it’s the life that every Christian must live.

That is a little different than the urban legend, isn’t it? Better than the myth, this verse is about living out our faith in real life and it’s about having real hope!!! It means that we’re not defined by whatever we have or don’t have. Whether we are successful in the world’s eyes or not, that doesn’t define us. What DOES define us is our identity in Christ! I can be content at all times and in all circumstances through Christ who gives me the strength and the resources I need to do it – and often he does it through you!

Okay, so what is this...

Application: (of) Contentment

...that we can take from this passage? If we can’t really use this passage as a mantra for material success, or motivation for gaining some kind of superhuman abilities or winning sports events, what *does* this passage help us do? Well, it’s all about our relationship together with Christ and with each other, and how we live for him. So first of all it means that we can live in a constant state of...

Trust.

We know that the Father loves us and will give us whatever we need to get through whatever we are going through; we can count on him! That’s what we learn in contentment – God is trustworthy, so therefore we have trust...

(to persevere).

We can make it through any situation. We learn this in the hard times, but we need to learn this in times of affluence, too. Research has shown that over 70 percent of people who suddenly gain money will lose all that money plus whatever else they had within a few years.⁶ That’s why they call it the Curse of the Lottery.

Not only does Paul know how to be content in want, he knows how to be content amid plenty. Very often, when we have a lot, it feeds on itself, and it generates an appetite for even more – for excess. Paul knew how to cope with both. This is not because he was a stoic self-sufficient man. *It was because Paul was a Christ-sufficient man.*⁷

We can’t abandon contentment in the good times. But there are valuable lessons in contentment during the hard times, too.

⁶ Croteau, *ibid*, 164

⁷ Earle L. Wilson, Alex R. G. Deasley, and Barry L. Callen, *Galatians, Philippians, Colossians: A Commentary for Bible Students* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007), 234.

If you've ever watched the winter Olympics, you've heard the voice of former figure skater Scott Hamilton. Hamilton won the National and World Championships in 1981 before winning a gold medal at the 1984 Olympics. Hamilton and his wife Tracie have four children, including two children adopted from Haiti. He's also a committed follower of Christ.

Hamilton has learned in his faith to be content, and he has an interesting perspective on perseverance. In a 2018 *New York Times* interview Hamilton said: "I calculated once how many times I fell during my ice-skating career—41,600 times. But here's the funny thing: (he said,) I got up 41,600 times. That's the muscle you have to build in your psyche—the one that reminds you to just get up."⁸ Hamilton is making a great point that getting up is trust in God that results in perseverance. Contentment means I can persevere through all things and get back up *every* time!

I can do that because I have...

Confidence

...in God. As I practice contentment, I learn that God can be depended on. As I live this life of surrender to him, I learn that I can face every situation – not with stoic determination or self-confidence, but with confidence in God that I'll get through it one way or another, because God is with me and for me! And because of that, I have the confidence...

(to dare)

...to do great things for God! One of the things that Paul makes clear in this passage is that, behind everything he did, he had *only one primary motivation all the time*: the advancement of the Gospel. Paul knew that he could dare to do anything for the sake of the Gospel and introducing people to Jesus. And so can you and I. This verse doesn't mean you can dare to ace a test you never studied for or bat 400 in baseball or make millions from your couch, but it *does* mean you can dare to tell your neighbors, friends, and even strangers about how much God loves them. You can dare to trust that God will use you every day when you ask him to.

We were in Salem at the end of this week taking care of some things at my parents' house, and I got to see my cousin, Bud, who many of you have been praying for because he has pancreatic cancer. He's still getting treatment, but so far, the cancer that had spread elsewhere is either gone or diminishing! Keep praying! But Bud told me that every day he asks God to use him, and that a couple nights ago he had a dream that he was able to present the Gospel to someone in order to lead them to Christ. He didn't know who it was, but he knew it meant it would happen soon. But in his dream, he didn't have the words to say it. So he's been praying and reading the Bible to make sure he's prepared the moment that God brings that person into

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/18/sports/olympics/figure-skating-nbc-scott-hamilton-.html>

his path. Bud is practicing contentment in the face of cancer, and so he has the confidence to dare to do great things for God and lead someone to Christ. And I am confident that God will do it through Bud!

All of this comes to us because we have the...

Contentment

...of surrender to God, knowing that God will take care of us. We are living the cruciform, or crucified life of surrender to God.

One of my mentors in college had a plaque on his desk that I read every time I was in his office, which was a lot. It was a quote from Andrew Murray, and it said this: "God is ready to assume full responsibility for the life wholly yielded to Him."

Contentment means we have *that* kind of confidence, and because we do, we learn the incredibly wonderful ability...

(to rest).

We can be at peace in all things, not stoically self-sufficient and striving, but contentedly Christ-sufficient. At peace not because we have some sort of magic motivation to do whatever we want, but resting stresslessly because God will provide all we need in all things and at all times in order to best live for Him.

So yes, persevere through all things, and at *all times* dare to do great things for Christ, and you will experience a life of rest...*because you can do all this through Christ who gives you strength!*

Prayer

Pastor Jason:

From Ephesians 3:20-21

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.