Philippians 4:2-13 *No Turning Back: I Can Do All things through Christ*

***Philippians 4:13***Today, we are going to talk about one of my favorite verses in the Bible. It is also, if this makes sense, one of my least favorite verses in the Bible. Let me explain.

The verse is Philippians 4:13. According to various online search engines, this verse is consistently in the top 5 for most searched for, most read, and most quoted verses in the Bible. It is a favorite for a lot of people. And I hope to show you today that it is a very encouraging, very hopeful, very important verse. If this verse is already one of your favorite verses, I hope you will appreciate it even more after today. And if it isn’t already one of your favorite verses, maybe after today it will be.

But, all this comes with a caveat. Because this verse can also be one of the most misunderstood, misapplied, and most quoted-out-of-context verses in the Bible. And the irony is, the way a lot of people use this verse has the effect of making it say the opposite of what it really means. For a lot of people, this verse has been turned into a slogan of personal empowerment—a declaration of self-achievement, ambition, and accomplishment. For many, this verse has been trivialized into some sort of motivating motto for material prosperity, career advancement, or athletic success.

The verse, again, is Philippians 4:13. **Here’s what it says:**

**13**I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

That’s the NIV translation, and it is actually pretty helpful for keeping the verse in context. A lot of us are more familiar with the old **King James Version:**

I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.

In more modern language—and the way I think many of us have it memorized—is the way the **Berean Bible has it**:

I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.

It is, again, a very good verse. But I’m not always crazy about the way I see this verse used. I’ve seen this verse quoted by athletes after a winning performance; or by artists at awards shows. While I appreciate the desire to give testimony about Jesus, and I recognize the great platform a Super Bowl win or a Grammy can give, the verse doesn’t always fit the context. Like the football player is implying that he was about to get tackled at the 5-yard line, but then Jesus came and strengthened his legs and he was able to carry three linebackers right over the goal line. Or the singer is saying: “I didn’t know if I could hit that high C, but Jesus gave me the strength to just go for it!”

If we are quoting this verse like it’s a super-magical formula for achieving all our hopes and desires, then we might be missing the point. This verse is not meant to imply that we can achieve whatever we want as long as we do it in the name of Jesus. If that were the case, there would be no sick Christians and we most definitely would have solved this coronavirus problem by now.

The key to understanding this verse—and the key to appreciating what a powerful and hopeful promise it is—is to see why Paul says it in the first place. We need to understand the context. **So here’s the verse again**, along with the verses that come immediately before it:

**10**I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. **11**I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. **12**I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. **13**I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

Remember the circumstances under which Paul wrote this letter: He’s in prison. He’s in financial distress. He’s hungry and wearing threadbare clothes. His very life is at risk.

The Philippians have taken up an offering for him—that’s what he is thanking them for in verse 10—but he wants them to know that whether his situation improves or not, he can endure it because of the strength given to Him by Christ.

Rather than a verse that can be quoted as an explanation for times when things are going really, really well for a believer; this is actually a verse that should give us hope even when things are really, really hard.

Believing in Jesus isn’t about having all your wishes fulfilled. It isn’t about getting your every prayer answered just the way you want and delivering a life of perfect ease and comfort for exactly 95 years and then you die quietly in your sleep. It just doesn’t work that way.

But believing in Jesus is about knowing--when life gets challenging and there is a possibility that we might feel sorry for ourselves, act in a selfish way, or give up on faith altogether—that we can keep trusting in Jesus and thus find the strength to be faithful even under duress. This verse is about staying true to Jesus even when things are difficult.

With that in mind then, we can look at the rest of the passage—starting at verse 2—and see at least 4 things that Paul is asserting we can do through Christ who gives us strength. Here are 4 difficult things we can do because Christ strengthens us.

***Agreeing in the Lord***First: **through Christ we can love across our differences.** Christ gives us strength to stay in relationship with people we have disagreements with. **Verses 2-3:**

**2**I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. **3**Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

This is one of the great mysteries of the Bible. This is the only place where we hear the names Syntyche and Euodia. We know nothing else about them other than what is written here. They are members of the church in Philippi, they have contended along with Paul for the sake of the gospel, they are co-workers, their names are written in the book of life, and they have beef with one another. That’s the mystery: what were they fighting about?

There is a part of me—and surely it a is a sinful part of me—that would love to have the juicy details. It’s tempting to think that when I get to heaven I’ll seek these two women out and find out what was going on. Hopefully, though, in heaven the desire to know such things will fade away along with the rest of my sinful nature.

Paul’s point here is not to sort out what they are fighting about, but to plead with them to get along in Christ.

Notice how he says the same thing to both of them. He doesn’t take sides. He takes the Lord’s side. “I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.”

It’s that last phrase that is the most important. And it should sound somewhat familiar to us. Remember chapter 2, verse 5? **“**In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.” That’s how Paul introduces the Christ-hymn. We keep going back to that passage. That’s the model for how we are supposed to treat one another—the J-curve—humbling ourselves in order to put the interests of others ahead of our own.

Paul is asking Euodia and Syntyche to live out the instructions of chapter 2. He’s saying: “[Euodia and Syntyche] make my joy complete by being like-minded [same word for being of the “same mind” here in chapter 4], having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. [Euodia] do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, [Syntyche] in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to you own interest but each of you [Euodia and Syntyche] to the interests of others.”

Euodia, put Syntyche first. Syntyche, put Euodia first.

Be united IN THE LORD.

That’s not easy. That’s difficult. I like to say that anytime you put two people in a room together, eventually there is going to be disagreement. When you have a whole community of people—whether that’s a church or a town or a whole nation—the opportunity for disagreement is exponentially amplified. And it’s especially true in a year like this one—an election year with unprecedented crises and big issues on the news every day. Sometimes it seems like every casual conversation has the potential to become a debate. We all have opinions, and we all hold our opinions strongly, and we want to share those opinions with others.

I feel that in myself. I am embarrassed by how eager I have been to get into arguments the last couple of months. There are important issues to be worked out, and it is clear that not everybody is going to see them the same way. Not in our country, not in our town, not in our church, maybe not even within our own families.

But Paul believes that we can still love each other across those differences. He believes that we can do as Jesus taught: pray for those who persecute us and love our enemies. Paul believes that we can forbear with another. And, if one has a complaint against another, we can forgive each other as Christ has forgiven us.

It’s not easy. But in Jesus Christ, it can be done. I can love those I disagree with through Christ who gives me strength.

***Do Not Be Anxious about Anything***Second, **through Christ we can live our way through anxiety**. Christ gives us strength to find peace even when there is much to worry about. **Verses 4-7:**

**4**Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! **5**Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. **6**Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. **7**And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

There are a thousand different things that can raise our blood pressure and give us great anxiety. But in Christ, the one who said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest," our anxieties can be leashed, and we can move through them.

There is so much about this section of scripture that sounds so good. Great verses abound here. “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” “Let the peace of God, which transcends all understanding…” “Do not be anxious about anything…” They are great verses, but it’s also easier said than done. It’s a good thing that these instructions come at the end of the book, because we need the gospel promises from earlier in the book if we have any hope of living these verses out.

“Do not be anxious about anything.” Have you ever tried that? Have you ever said to yourself: “I’ll just not be anxious about this thing that is causing me anxiety?” How did that work out for you?

But, thankfully, Paul doesn’t just tell us, he also tells us how.

Notice what he says right before he tells us not to be anxious. It’s the final phrase of verse 5, so we often don’t think of it going with verse 6, but it’s important: “The Lord is near.”

The Lord is near. Don’t be anxious.

That phrase is often taken to mean that Paul expects Christ’s imminent return. Christ is coming again soon, be ready. And that should make us tender and gentle. It should relieve our anxiety, because when He returns He will make all things better, and then we won’t have anything to worry about. It does mean that.

But, also, it means that the Lord is near spiritually. He is near personally. He is not far from each one of us.

And if that’s true, how much should that factor into the things that cause us to be worried? Do not be anxious about anything, the Lord is with you.

Now, let me also say this: this verse is a command—don’t be anxious—but it is not here to shame you if you have been anxious. Not primarily. It is here to reassure you.

Too often when we encounter the verses about anxiousness in the Scriptures, we think they are a club to beat us over the head (and Satan loves it when we do that to ourselves). But they are not a baseball bat for our heads, they are a pillow for our heads.

Philippians 4:6 is a place to rest. “The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything.”

It IS a command. If you willfully ignore it, then you are being disobedient and you will suffer for it. But it’s not here to shame you. It’s here to bring you comfort. When a little child comes crying to daddy or mommy after a nightmare, and they say to the child, “Don’t worry; I’m here” they are not shaming the child. They are comforting them.

Don’t be anxious about anything.

Easier said than done. But there is an alternative. Instead of worry, pray. “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” Instead of wringing you hands with anxiety, fold them in prayer.

And here is the connection back to Philippians 4:13. Through Christ we can live our way through anxiety. On my own, trying not to worry is an impossible task. Left to my own devices, I’ll simmer and stew and fuss and fudget until I’m a nervous wreck.

We are creatures of worry. Born to be anxious as the guppy is born to swim. But, in Jesus Christ I can hand my worries over. Through His strength, I can experience peace.

***Think About Such Things***Third, **through Christ we can link our thinking with our doing**. Christ gives us strength to turn our minds toward praiseworthy things; and to live in the light of what is beautiful. **Verses 8-10:**

**8**Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. **9**Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

At first glance, this seems simple enough. The whole idea of this sermon is that Christ gives us the strength to do difficult things. And thinking about true and lovely things doesn’t sound terribly difficult. We all enjoy a beautiful sunset, right? We can all appreciate an artful composition of music, can’t we?

Yes, we are made in the image of God, and thus we all have an innate sense of what is pure and admirable. And yet, we have all been affected by the fall, and thus we all have a tendency to think about less-than-excellent things.

Let me put it to you this way: where does your mind go when you gear it down to neutral? What tends to occupy your thoughts when you are not intentionally directing them? Do you spend your downtime contemplating the mysteries of the cosmos, or are you more likely to be distracted by the latest piece of juicy gossip? Do you spend your time thinking about all the good and loving things people have done for you, or are you more likely to be pre-occupied by that one thing somebody said that may or may not have been meant to hurt you? Is your mind more taken up with that which is edifying or that which is agitating?

It is true that thoughts enter our minds over which we have no control. But it is also true that we have a great deal of control over what thoughts we entertain. What thoughts we dwell upon. What thoughts we allow to take up real estate in our minds.

Have you ever had a thought that has taken up residence in your brain that you knew you needed to evict? We all have.

Some thoughts leave without a struggle. Other thoughts need to be tossed out on their ear, and they keep coming back for more. Like anxious thoughts, right?

Paul is still telling the Philippians how to counter anxious thoughts. You don’t just toss them out. You don’t just pray about them! You replace those thoughts...with better thoughts.

Paul is not saying that we should pretend that the worst things don’t exist. This is not the power of positive thinking. It’s not fake-it-till-you-make-it, just pretend like the opposite stuff doesn’t even exist.

The false, the ignoble, the wrong, the dirty, the ugly, the detestable, the worst, the unspeakable. Those things exist, and Paul is not saying that we should pretend they don’t. Paul talks about those things in his letters. He has talked about them in this letter.

Paul does not have an Instagram filter over his reality where everything is sepia-toned and fuzzy and bright and happy and perfect. He’s in prison, remember? He knows that this very well may end in his death. He’s not denying that.

And yet: Paul is in Christ, and the Lord is near. And even if he dies, He goes to be with Christ which is better by far. The gospel is true, so there are better things to dwell upon.

That’s what he’s talking about. He’s talking about the focus of your mind. He’s talking about what you dwell upon, what you end up thinking about, where your mind goes, where your mind rests.

And then, in addition to that, Paul again calls us to imitate what we’ve learned from him. Verse 9: “put it into practice.” Don’t just think about what is right, do it. Let your actions match your intentions.

Think and do joined together. This is why Jesus said, "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."

Think and do together. It’s not easy. But through Christ it can be done.

***The Secret of Being Content***Which brings us to the fourth and final difficult thing: **Through Christ we can learn contentment.**

Through Christ we can love across our differences, through Christ we can live through our anxieties, through Christ we can join our thinking and our doing, and through Christ we can learn contentment to live well wherever we're called to live. **Verses 10-13:**

**10**I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. **11**I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. **12**I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. **13**I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

The majority of people in our society are like thermometers. Their mood goes up or down depending on the circumstances around them. If circumstances are good, they are happy. If circumstances are bad, they are sad and restless and anxious. You can always tell the temperature by their mood.

But faith in Christ is meant to make us like thermostats. Our faith in Christ should set our mood. That’s contentment.

So: whether you just got a raise at work or you just got fired, whether you’re the most popular kid in school or the most bullied, whether the doctor gives you a clean bill of health or he tells you that you have cancer and you have three months left to live--no matter what situation you’re in, you can learn to be content because you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you.

Contentment is determined by faith in Christ. It doesn’t mean denying your feelings about wanting and desiring something you can’t have, but instead it means having a freedom from being controlled by those feelings. Contentment isn’t pretending that things are right when they are not, but instead it has a peace that comes from knowing that God is bigger than any problem we face, and that he will work them all out for our good. Contentment isn’t a feeling of well-being that is contingent on keeping all of our circumstances under control, but instead it has a joy in spite of circumstances.

Tim Brown is the president of Western Seminary and a teacher of preaching. Before that he was a professor at Hope College. He tells a story about one of his former students, Tim Vanderveen. Tim graduated from Hope in the early ‘90s and took a job in the corporate world where, in Professor Brown’s words, he “scurried up the ladder of success about as quickly as anyone can.” Until, one November afternoon, he called his old professor and said: “I’m not doing so good.”

Professor Brown said, “What’s up?”

Tim said, “I’m in the hospital in Grand Rapids. I got the flu or something. My folks are out of the country.”

Professor Brown asked, “Can I stop by and see you? Would that be okay?”

Tim said, “I’d like that a lot.”

By the time Professor Brown got there to see Tim, the doctors had already been. And it wasn’t the flu. It was leukemia. And that began a difficult three-year battle that Tim would eventually lose.

Three years later, Professor Brown walked into Tim’s room. His mother was sitting in the corner crying. Tim was lying on his side. There wasn’t enough energy for him to even sit up and look at the professor, so Professor Brown got down on one knee so he could look at him face to face. He said, “Hi, Tim.”

Tim said, “Hi.”

There was a long, awkward pause. Professor Brown had been a minister for twenty years and still didn’t know what to say.

It was Tim who broke the silence. He said, “I’ve learned something.”

The Professor knew this much at least: You don’t trifle with the words of a person who is about to die; you just listen carefully. So he said, “Tell me, Tim, what have you learned?”

Tim said, “I’ve learned that life is not like a VCR.”

(Now, for those of you who are younger: A VCR is what we had before DVD players. DVD players are what we had before TIVO. TIVO is what we had before everything was streamed.)

The professor didn’t understand what he meant by that. He said, “I don’t get it. What do you mean?”

Tim said, “Life is not like a VCR; you can’t fast forward through the bad parts.”

There was a long pause. And then Tim spoke up again. He said, “But I have learned that Jesus Christ is in every frame, and right now, that’s just enough.”

Professor Brown ends the story like this:

It was just enough when his parents rocked that little baby at the waters of baptism that Jesus Christ should be in the frame. It was just enough when he toddled off to first grade that Jesus Christ should be in the frame. It was just enough when he turned his tassel toward an uncertain future at Hope College that Jesus Christ should be in that frame. And it was just enough when he breathed his last here and his first there that Jesus Christ should be in the frame. <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2005/august/239.html>

I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength. With Christ in every frame, we can even do the hard things.