

LIFE-LONG LEARNERS **(Philippians 4:10-13)**

If I were to write my spiritual autobiography and were to explore those factors that most contributed to my spiritual growth, I would certainly include a chapter entitled, “Sunday School.” Sunday School more than any other single thing has helped me grow in my relationship with God.

I had the good fortune and blessing of being raised in a family where Sunday School was a scheduled part of the week. On Sunday night, I never had to wonder where I would be the next morning. I knew I would be in Sunday School, and after that, I would go to big church, which is what my siblings and I called the Sunday morning worship service.

I am thankful that my parents didn’t send to me to Sunday School; they took me to Sunday School every Sunday. If I was not in Sunday School on any given Sunday, that meant either I was sick or our family was on vacation. I was in Sunday School as a baby, as a child, as a youth, as a college student, and in the years afterward, Sunday School has always been an important ministry of the churches I have pastored.

In children’s Sunday School, I didn’t just do crafts and have a snack. I was taught important truths that have stayed with me all of my life.

- I learned that the Bible is the authoritative and reliable word of God word because we sang, “The B-I-B-L-E, that’s the book for me. I stand alone on the word of God, the B-I-B-L-E.
- I learned of the certain love of Jesus because we sang, “Jesus loves me. This I know for the Bible tells me.”
- I learned that Black lives matter because we sang, “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world: red and yellow, black and white. They are precious in His sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.”
- I learned the great stories of the Bible. To this day, I still remember acting out the parable of the good Samaritan, and that must have been 50 years ago.

Other than a couple of men like R.L. Dooley and Bill Dove, most of my teachers were women. Those faithful women loved God. They loved their Bible, and they loved their students.

In high school, my teachers were Mrs. Ketner and Mrs. Heusel. They once asked me to teach Sunday School on a particular Sunday. I emphasize the word *once*. I was probably 16 at the time. I had never taught a Sunday School lesson in my life, and I don’t remember them explaining why they wanted me to teach. I don’t remember why I said, “Yes.” I didn’t respond to God’s call to preach until I was in college.

The week before I was to teach, I worked all week studying the text I had chosen— John 8:32 (“You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”) I thought about the passage; I looked at other verses related to that theme. When it came time for me to teach, it took all of 4-5 minutes to teach the Sunday School lesson. One of the students came in late and missed the entire lesson; so, Mrs. Heusel suggested I teach the lesson again, which I did. We still had at least 45 minutes left in Sunday School. They never

asked me to teach again.

Years later, however, I happened to be that pastor of Mrs. Heusel's mother, and when she died, I was asked to officiate at her funeral service. Some years after that, Mrs. Heusel's daughter-in-law passed, and I was asked to lead that service. This year, Mrs. Heusel was promoted. She had told her family that she didn't want a funeral. With much prompting from her family, she finally agreed to a graveside service but only if Matt Miles did it, which I did last month.

I have wonderful memories of Sunday School, fond memories, warm memories, and some of them are challenging memories. I remember Nina Critchfield. She was the Department Director for the College and Career Sunday School department. More than once I heard her say, "If you are not learning something new every day from God's word, you are backslidden."

Everyday? That's a high bar. I have chosen to soften Mrs. Critchfield's pronouncement. I would say, if you are not learning something new from God's regularly, you are backslidden. Even with that softened version, I think most of us would have to admit that we are backslidden because we are not learning something new from God's word on a regular basis.

The words *learn*, *learned*, and *learning* show up 81 times in the Bible—40 times in the Old Testament and 41 times in the NT. The church is meant to be a learning community. We have been called by Jesus to be His disciples. As disciples, we are students. We are learners.

As we get older, there are things you just don't need like you once did. When you get older, you don't need stuff. You don't need and you don't want a bunch of presents whenever your birthday and Christmas come around, and those come around more rapidly with each passing year. I don't think there comes a point when you don't need or want to go on long vacations.

There are many things you still need. You need to love and be loved. You never outgrow that. You need to laugh. The Bible says that a cheerful heart does good like a medicine. We might be able to get off some of the medicine we take if we laughed more. Another thing we need to keep doing is learning. We ought not to ever quit learning.

Today's text bears out the truth that we are to be life-long learners, and from the text, I want to emphasize three things that we need to learn and in which we are to grow. Look with me at Philippians 4:10-13.

Let's Keep Learning to Be Gracious Towards Others

Today, we are going to focus on individual growth, and next week we will turn our thoughts toward corporate growth. For that reason, today, we will keep our eyes on Paul, and next Sunday we will take a closer look at what the Church at Philippi did and how they exhibited Christian growth.

Notice what Paul does in v. 10. We have said before that this letter is Paul's thank you letter to the Church at Philippi. We don't know exactly what the church gave Paul, but I suspect it was more than a care package. Whatever it was, it was hand-delivered by Epaphroditus, and I think that a case could be made that Epaphroditus was part of the gift. It is likely that the Church at Philippi meant for Epaphroditus to stay on in Rome and

provide assistance to Paul as he needed it. Paul was under house arrest. Paul needed to someone to make a Walmart run for him. He needed someone needed to go buy groceries.

Last August, my wife and her eldest son, Jacob quarantined in the parsonage for ten days because Jacob got a positive COVID test. Before Jacob came over, I made arrangements to stay elsewhere while they were quarantining together. For ten days, I went by at least once a day, sometimes twice. I would go by to see how they were doing and to see if they needed anything. I remember going to Braum's to get Jacob a large chocolate shake because he is a large fella.

Paul was under quarantine not for ten days, not for two weeks, but for at least two-years because when Luke concluded the book of Acts, he tells us that Paul was still under house arrest, and it had been two years. We also know that 24-hours a day, Paul was chained to a Roman guard who was right there by his side. That guard did not practice social distancing. Paul needed someone on the outside to attend to his needs.

Paul wrote this letter to say thank you. It is interesting to note that nowhere in this letter does Paul actually thank them for their gift. Instead, he rejoices in the fact that they gave. In the same way, God doesn't need your gift. He loves it, however, when you give. It is in your giving that you demonstrate that you care.

We have a saying, "It is the thought that counts." When you are a child, it is the gift that counts. You are all about the presents, the gifts.

You are never going to give God something that He needs, and everything He wants He already has because God own it all. God, however, is pleased by your act of giving. Your giving demonstrates that He matters to you.

That is the way Paul felt. He felt honored. He felt cared for by the fact that the believers in Philippi would go to the trouble to give him something. It was likely money. Paul had to pay for his rented quarters. He had to pay for his groceries.

In his book, *Laugh Again*, Chuck Swindoll pointed out that there is a difference between appreciating and affirming. He wrote, "We appreciate what people do. We affirm who they are." Which would you rather receive—appreciation or affirmation? Swindoll went on to claim, "A mark of maturity is the ability to affirm, not just appreciate."

After reading what Swindoll wrote, I wrote in the margin of his book, "People are not just a tool through which God works but also a soul in which God lives."

Being the good leader he was, Paul both appreciated and affirmed the believers in Philippi.

In the version I use, v. 10 reads, "you revived your concern for me." That is a rather bland way to translate the verse because the word for revive actually means "to cause to blossom once gain. It carries the idea of springtime. The trees and flowers are bursting into bloom once again. One translator rendered Paul's words as, "Your care for me has now blossomed afresh." It is springtime in the hearts of the Philippian believers.

They would have supported Paul earlier if they had known where Paul was. Paul moved around a lot. He didn't have a blog or Facebook account where could post his current whereabouts. News travelled slowly in the ancient world. Eventually, news reached Philippi that Paul was under house arrest in Rome. As soon as they learned that distressing news, the believers in Philippi gathered an offering of support for Paul.

Paul writes to affirm their giving hearts and loving concern.

I think that through the years, Paul grew in graciousness. Do you remember the story about how young John Mark abandoned Paul and Barnabas on Paul's first missionary journey? Some think John Mark was homesick. Instead of soldiering on with the two, John Mark ran home. As Paul and Barnabas were making plans for another missionary tour, Barnabas wanted to give John Mark another chance. Paul said, "No way, Jose." He flat out refused to take John Mark. The disagreement between Paul and Barnabas was so severe that the two went their own separate directions with different partners. As Paul was nearing the end of his life, when he knew that he would be executed soon, he wrote a letter to Timothy. In the very last chapter that we have from Paul's pen, he wrote, "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me in ministry."

Paul grew. How about you. Are you developing a forgiving spirit? Are you feeding an affirming habit? Are you growing in graciousness?

Wine gets better with age, and so should we.

Let's Keep Learning to Be Content Despite Circumstances

Look at v. 11. Basically, Paul is saying, "While your gift was certainly appreciated, it really wasn't necessary because I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances are." This was not an inborn trait that Paul possessed. He had to learn this kind of contentment.

The fact is that all of us are born with a high degree of discontent. If a baby is discontent for any reason, that baby will let you know. She doesn't care if you are asleep. She will wake you up to let you know she is not happy. It matters not to him that you are tired. He will demand that you do something to remedy the cause of his discontent.

As we grow, we learn to mask our discontent. That doesn't mean the discontent goes away. We simply learn that we can't continue crying and wailing when things are not to our liking.

When I get hungry, I don't find my wife and yell, "Feed me, woman." I don't think that would go over too well. I am a bit more subtle. I will walk into the kitchen and ask, "What's for supper?" It is a kinder, gentler way of saying, "I'm hungry. Are you going to do anything about that or am I on my own?"

Discontent, discomfort, displeasure are realities that all of us deal with, and we respond to them in different ways. Some try to get other people to fix it. Others simply complain about it. Some weary themselves in attempting to overcome these problems through their own ingenuity and resolve.

Somehow, Paul learned how to not let these problems get the upper hand and rule over him. Somehow, he learned how to maintain a good attitude during bad times.

In v. 9, Paul urged the believers in Philippi to practice what they had learned from Paul. Then, in v. 11 he says, "By the way, here is something I have learned. I like how the NLT renders v. 11: "For I have learned how to get along happily whether I have much or little." The measure of Paul's happiness was not based on how much he had in his bank account. It was not contingent on how much stuff he had stored away for his use.

Paul used the word *learned* a second time in v. 12.

Have you divorced your contentment from your circumstances? Or, are they still wed? If your contentment is still dependent upon your circumstances, then you will be

decidedly discontent when you decide that your house is too small, your car is too old, your clothes are too out of style, your wage is too little, your marriage is too broken and your problems are too big.

Paul learned not to think or feel that way. He learned to trust God. He learned that the answer to his problems was not other people, and it wasn't even himself. More than that, his problems were not problems; they were opportunities for God to act on his behalf. This was not passive resignation on Paul's part. It was active reliance on God along with active anticipation that God was going to show up in a strong way.

When you grow to the point that you realize God's got this and God's got me, you can be content.

One of the great voices in Hollywood is the voice of James Earl Jones. He has been the voice of Darth Vader in every Star Wars movie. He has a rich, resonant voice that commands your attention. The interesting thing is that Jones was a stutterer when he was younger. He stuttered so badly that chose to be silent most of the time. To overcome his stutter, Jones began performing Shakespeare. He said, "If I hadn't been a stutterer, I would never have been an actor."

Still today, Jones keeps his script close backstage. Even after seven decades of being a performer, saying the words as they are printed is a struggle. He confessed, "I mangle a word or two every night because the consonants get into a fight with the vowels."

An interviewer once claimed that Jones' career has been a pursuit of happiness. Jones offered a different take. He said:

By taking one step at a time, I've found great treasures. Every step I take . . . It's just about being content, that's all. I don't know what the pursuit of happiness is. What do you mean pursuit of happiness? No, contentment. If that doesn't put a glow on your face, nothing really will.

Don't look for happiness in this life. It is too elusive. It is always beyond your grasp, and when you think you've got it, it slips away. Look instead for godly contentment. Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 6:6, "Godliness with contentment is great gain."

Let's Keep Learning to Be Confident in the Lord's Grace

One of the most quoted verses in Philippians is 4:13. You may think that you can't be content without those things that you have always wanted. Paul discovered a different reality. He discovered that he could do all things through the One who strengthened him. The NLT is clearer regarding the identity of this One that Paul mentioned. That version reads: "I can do everything with the help of Christ who gives me the strength I need." Specifically, with the help and strength that Jesus provided, Paul was able to be content in the most dire and difficult circumstances.

What I find interesting is the irony of this passage. Paul found a sufficiency within himself in circumstances that most people would describe as insufficient, but this sufficiency in Paul did not come from Paul, it came from the sufficiency of Jesus. As an example of that, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12 that he had a thorn in his flesh. This was a physical problem likely a medical condition that Paul found distressing. I assume it was

painful because thorns are painful. It hindered his ministry. Many guesses have been made as to what it was. Whatever it was, Paul wanted it gone. We read in v. 8, “Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.”

One preacher said that the words “three times” are a Hebraism. Paul doesn’t mean just three times. He again and again, repeatedly, Paul prayed that God would deliver him from this malady.

You have heard it said that God answers prayer in one of three ways: yes, no, and not now. Paul got a clear no, but added to the no was a beautiful promise. Listen to the answer Jesus gave to Paul. It is found in 1 Corinthians 12:9, “But He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.’”

Jesus said to Paul. “My grace is enough. My grace will enter in to this situation that weakens you. My grace will not take the weakness away, but you will be strengthened to do all that I desire.” Paul was satisfied with that answer.

What task, predicament, or situation do you face in which you need the strength which only Christ can provide? Is it medical, physical, financial, spiritual, emotional? Is it related to family, work, health, your walk with Christ? Whatever it is, you need to know the grace of Jesus is enough. It is equal, it is sufficient to meet the need you have.

Paul was independent of the problems he faced. He was not bound by them because he was dependent on God’s grace. The same is true for you and me. We are bigger than the problems we face because God’s bigness is at work in us and for us.

One day a billionaire, hedge fund manager gave a party on Shelter Island, which is located on the eastern end of Long Island in New York. One of the invitees at the party was the successful author, Kurt Vonnegut. At the party, Vonnegut spoke to Joseph Heller, the author of *Catch 22*, a very successful and popular novel. Vonnegut told Heller that their host makes more money in a single day than Heller had earned from all the combined royalties he had made from *Catch-22*. Heller replied, “Yes, but I have something he will never have . . . enough.”

Friend, if you have the grace of God at work in your life, you have enough. It will be enough to meet your every need. That realization comes only to those who keep learning and who keep growing.

That was Paul’s prayer for the Philippians that we read all the way back in 1:9. That is my prayer and you and me. Let’s keep on growing, keep on learning, and keep on becoming all that Jesus means for us to be.