

### **Philippians 4 (11-13) – The Secret to Self-Control**

Imagine yourself, living a life of purpose with zeal, but it is not a life that is pleasing to God. And then God gets a hold of you, and changes you. Now you have a new life, a new Master, a new message, and a new mission. God gives you a personal mandate, to go and reach people that have never been reached before. He teaches you His way, and you are given power to accomplish all that He has sent you out to do in His name.

At first, people don't really believe that you're really changed, and find it hard to accept you. After a while the mature ones get the clue, and bless your mission. Now although your new family is rooting for you, there is a whole lot of resistance from your former crowd, who seem determined to stop you no matter what it takes. They take it very personally, and are looking to inflict pain on you. But even though they manage to get the religious crowd all riled up against you, they fail to stop your message. You are seeing miracles right in front of your eyes, and you're being used as an instrument for God in ways you never dreamed of.

As you travel along, the persecution intensifies, and pain and prison await you in most places. Gangs of enemies chase you and in one instance, you are beaten and left for dead. Still, God is on the move, and He delivers you from all these situations, and your message spreads out further and faster than ever.

Time passes, the pressure mounts, and you're thrown into impossible situations. Things start to fall apart. You are healing others, but when you encounter an ongoing problem in your own life, God says He won't deliver you from this one. You go back to visit with the people and in the places where you gave your message to, the places where so many miracles happened, and now they have turned to other messengers, and even other messages. They question your authority at every turn and even accuse you of some sort of selfish agenda. Yet it is other charlatans who are out there taking your message and using it for their own selfish gain.

And now you find yourself in prison once again, and it looks like it is going to be quite an extended stay this time. It might be the last place you ever live. How are you ever going to finish what you set out to do, what God Himself sent you to do? How can He not let you complete the mission, to fulfill the ministry that He gave you, and that He empowered you for? How can you not wonder if He has turned His back on you? Your former family will never accept you again. Your new family, the ones you brought up in the faith, they have seemingly rejected you also. Even some of your closest ministry companions have deserted you. You feel lonely.

At this point, you might be tempted to just forget about it all, and indulge yourself in selfish behavior and sinful pleasures that might ease the pain of such rejection. Instead, you decide to write to one of your churches, one that is in the midst of a possible split, and you talk to them about having joy in Jesus despite any and all circumstances.

Amazing, and only the power of Jesus could strengthen you to be able to do that. But that is exactly what Paul did, as I have just described his life to you, and as he wrote to the Philippians. Paul had learned something that we need to get a hold of. The faithful life he lived in spite of situations proved and the words he wrote confirm that he had learned the secret to self-control.

This passage doesn't seem to be speaking about self-control directly, but about contentment. Still, self-control is a necessary inference, because Paul's situations were often out of his control, and yet he didn't descend into a sinful mentality. We don't have to either. He was content and in control of himself. We can be too. Contentment is related to self-control because a person whose situation seems out of control doesn't have to descend into a sinful state. Their situation may be out of their control, but they do not have to lose their self-control. Like Paul we can learn to be content in whatever situation we find ourselves in, we can learn the secret to self-control.

Paul was a human, not superhuman, he was flesh and blood and thoughts and feelings and emotions, just like you and me or anybody else. God was empowering him but he was given more than he could handle. And yet he handled it well. Was it because God won't actually give us more than we can handle? The answer is no, because He will.

1 Corinthians 10:13 – People misuse this verse a lot, when they say that “God will never give you more than you can handle”. They might mean well, but they aren't really right. This text says “tempted” not “burdened”. God does allow burdens that are more than we can bear. God doesn't allow temptations that are more than you can handle, but He does allow situations that are more than you can handle, so that you will rely on Him, as Paul did. God does allow us to be burdened beyond what we can bear, in the sense that it draws us to Him. Yet no burden means that we must give in to the temptation to sin. Yes we will be tempted, but none of this is an excuse for sin. There are no types of sin or specific sins that are so strong you must give in to them. God is faithful to see you through by providing a way out and an ability to endure the possible hardship. We don't escape all temptation, or escape the pressure to yield, but we escape to a place where we can endure it. *Everyone* is vulnerable (1 Corinthians 10:12), but *anyone* can be victorious (1 Corinthians 10:13). The place of victory is the place of submission to God.

Paul was given more than he could handle, more than any man could handle, and yet he said he could do all things, because of something he had learned, something he was living. His life was given over to God, and God gave him the strength to keep himself in check when things didn't go his way, or when things went even better than he had hoped. He didn't descend into sinful behavior because of bad circumstances, and he didn't fall into selfish behavior because of good circumstances either. The prosperity of undisciplined men leads to their ruin. But the things of the world were not the things Paul was living for. He could handle success, or frustration.

The things that people feel the need to chase after, for their satisfaction, security, and significance, these were not the things that Paul needed. Paul found his significance, security, and satisfaction through the Savior. He was a picture of mature self-control because he had learned that the secret of contentment was never in circumstances, whether good or bad, whether in times of need or abundance, or whether he was praised by people or persecuted by them.

Too often people subconsciously think that God exists to make us happy, as if the pursuit of happiness is the chief end of life, and God's primary job is to help us achieve everything we've always wanted. But when our comfort is our greatest goal in life, we refuse anything that might cause us pain or hardship, even at the expense of godliness. It is a life that settles for self-satisfaction, and refuses to sacrifice for the glory of God. Too many so-called Christians act this

way all too often in their lives. It isn't as if we will live in perfect self-denial, but some don't seem to even understand that this is a requirement for being a disciple of Christ.

Repentance involves self-denial, not self-promotion. Repentance says that what matters is God's glory, not my comfort. Repentance doesn't give us worldly goods, worldly achievements, and worldly satisfactions, it strips them from us. It won't always look so bad, but if we aren't willing to suffer for Him, then we aren't repentant towards Him.

People act as if Jesus didn't mean what He said when He said that we must deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him. That is the way that He calls us to worship Him. Those are His terms. If it's about Him then it's about following Him. When you pursue worship on your own terms, you make yourself the object of worship.

You can't just go to the Bible like a toolbox to fix that sin problem you've got and then just go right back into the same old pattern again. That's not self-control, that's selfish control. The secret wasn't something Paul did in a certain moment, it was something he learned and lived. He didn't just give his situations to God, he gave himself to God.

Some people are only able to exercise selfish control because they have never actually yielded control of their lives to God in the first place. They want the benefits of being a Christian but they don't want the pain of stepping down from the throne of their own lives. This isn't about managing symptoms, and it is not just "getting right", trying to live better, and hoping that you'll be able to stay that way, it is "surrendering to Jesus" and living your life for Him. He wants all of you, not some of you. Those are His terms, and they are not negotiable.

Many times our most intense feelings of pressure are self-caused, because we are yearning to control our situation, and so we are just adding pressure and increasing the chances of acting in unhealthy and sinful ways. You have to give up control of your life, that is how you receive Christ as Savior, and that is also how you are strengthened by Him as you go through the ups and downs of life. To get saved you give Him control of your life. To get strength, to gain self-control, you keep yielding control to Him when your feelings want to do otherwise.

I am not trying to simply reform myself; that can be done on my terms and with my goals in mind. No, I am not reforming myself, I am realigning myself to Christ, giving my life to Him, following what He is telling me to do, living my life for His pleasure, not my own, because I am not my own, I have been bought with a price, or do you think you are worth more than that, more than eternity in paradise, more than Jesus? How can the price of your submission be more precious than Jesus' blood? You sell yourself out for far less than that when you seek your own satisfaction in things that are of far less worth than Jesus and the strength of self-control.

Self-control doesn't mean you give up and don't try or remain passive. No it is active, but it is active trust, and not a trust that it will all work out the way you want, but that God will get you to where He wants. Self-control means a death to self-interest. You don't have to descend into a sinful mentality. This isn't about turning over a new leaf, and it isn't just turning over your situation so that He can handle it. You turn over yourself so that He can do with you what He wants with you and with the situation, on His terms. That is when you will be strengthened.

Paul wasn't saying that he lived like a stoic, with no emotions. No, we can clearly see in the Scriptures that Paul was anything but an emotionless robot of a man.

**“Who’s in Control?” charts** – The choice: “Sanctify” or “Satisfy”. People are either looking to set themselves apart for God’s purposes, or looking to set themselves up with their own purposes. For each individual and in each situation it is a matter of self-denial or self-indulgence. You have a choice to make, and you either look to satisfy yourself, or you deny yourself. Having to bear the pain of not indulging yourself (suffering the death of your flesh) requires discipline, but that is what makes you a disciple, because you are feeling the pain of taking up your cross.

However, people think that it isn't really like this, and they try and find a middle way, aiming to please God while pleasing themselves too. They ride the roller-coaster of feelings and disappointments, and they lack any growth in holiness. They may travel from one thing to the next, searching for their satisfaction in things other than God and godliness. This is because they don't understand how to be satisfied in God (with God and godliness). They fail to realize the depth of their sin, and they fail to realize that submission to God is what brings satisfaction in God. It is a process that requires “denying ourselves”, instead of satisfying ourselves, and “taking up our cross” instead of laying it down.

Satisfaction in God is what brings us to the point of not having such hard decisions to make, because we've already made them. Then it is just a matter of taking each circumstance and asking ourselves which is the “sanctify” choice and which is the “satisfy” choice. But satisfaction through submission isn't automatic; it must be learned because it involves control issues. Control is a root issue for everyone who is not saved, and even for those who are, control issues are the root issues of much of our disjunction and dysfunction. Paul had learned how to have a lot and it didn't spoil him, and how to have a little and it didn't harm his holiness. He was in jail, and he had no control over his situations, but was content anyway.

It plays out this way: when we feel frustration, or helpless and hopeless, we look to some thing to regain a sense of control, and often it is not a healthy option. It may be something our old man used to do as a way to avoid or ignore the process and pain. Medicating in whatever way is our measure of control, but it is a distorted concept, a twisted method of taking control over our situation by losing control of ourselves. Ironically we think that we are taking control because we “are only hurting ourselves”. Even mature Christians can be tempted in this way, because pain takes many forms and fears, and learning to process things can be difficult sometimes. But Paul learned the secret of self-control. The secret is that God gives you the power when you're willing to suffer the loss of your precious control and yield yourself and your situations to Him.

We need to keep praying because it takes the Spirit of God to transform our desires. We can't do it ourselves. Paul was able to have self-control because Christ was strengthening him. Christ doesn't give you the power to control your situations; He gives you the power to control yourself. It is not the power to like it. It is not the power to control it. It is the power for it not to control you. It's not simply relying on your own strength it is the strength which He supplies, but there is a secret to knowing that power in your personal experience. You have to keep giving up your right to control. You have to lose that controlling mindset. That's the secret. Over time and in faith you can say that “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”. Amen.

## WHO'S IN CONTROL?

When you are encountering frustration, you have a path to choose

Submission  
(seeking sanctification)

\*  
\*

Self-denial (!)  
(taking up cross – pain)

\*  
\*

Contentment  
(harvesting humility)

\*  
\*

Self-control  
(getting strength from Christ)

Rebellion  
(seeking satisfaction)

\*  
\*

Self-indulgence  
(laying down cross – pleasure)

\*  
\*

Discontentment  
(harboring pride)

\*  
\*

Selfish control  
(giving strength to sin)

\*  
\*

(!) there is a wrong, “controlling” way (Col. 2:20-23)

Anger ----- and/or ----- Despair  
(acting out) (acting in)

## WHO'S IN CONTROL?

When you are encountering success, you have a path to choose

Submission  
(seeking sanctification)

\*  
\*

Self-denial (!)  
(taking up cross – pain)

\*  
\*

Contentment  
(harvesting humility)

\*  
\*

Self-control  
(getting strength from Christ)

Rebellion  
(seeking satisfaction)

\*  
\*

Self-indulgence  
(laying down cross – pleasure)

\*  
\*

Complacency  
(harboring pride)

\*  
\*

Selfish control  
(giving strength to sin)

\*  
\*

(!) there is a wrong, “controlling” way (Col. 2:20-23)

Self-absorbed -- Self-righteous  
(acting out) (acting in)