

## Contentment as an Effective Antidote to Materialism in the Church: An Examination of Philippians 4:10-20

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### Abstract

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The 21<sup>st</sup>-century church, like the world around it, is caught up in the allure of uncontrolled spending and conspicuous consumption. In the process, many Christians live in perpetual debt and also suffer from the various psycho-social maladies that unbridled materialism breeds. Paul's attitude towards material things and the happiness they purport to bring is one of contentment. This exegetical paper examines the theme of contentment as exemplified by Paul in Philippians 4:10-20. As a result of adopting the attitude of ἀταρκεία, "contentment," he could confidently face the varying vicissitudes of providence with equanimity as he pursued his calling of preaching the gospel to the gentiles, many of whom opposed him violently, oftentimes placing him in very precarious physical circumstances. Based on textual analysis of the passage, the study found that Paul presents contentment as a Christ-centered sufficiency grounded in divine enablement, expressed in the statement, ἔμαθον ἐν οἷς εἰμι ἀτάρκης εἶναι, "I have learned to be content in whatever state I am." This attitude of contentment offers the church a theological framework for resisting consumerism and its ethical and spiritual consequences.

**Keywords:** Contentment, Materialism, Consumerism, Greed

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### Introduction

Just as in the rest of the world, many struggle with consumerism. Paul intimates as much when he exhorts the Philippian Christians, "Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you" (Phil 3:17, NIV). As Osiek observes, "Paul uses here as elsewhere the imitation theme for formation to Christian life. He proposes himself and others like him as examples of how to conduct oneself. . . . It is a vivid reminder that discipleship is learned through observation, imitation, and interaction, and therefore that community has everything to do with gospel living."<sup>1</sup> Thus, the laity observe how the clergy and others in leadership live, and consider this normative for all believers. It is

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<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 31.



therefore likely that when leaders display extravagant lifestyles, the laity follows suit. In the process, not only do Christians end up spending disproportionate amounts of their resources on themselves, leaving very little for benevolent purposes, but like the rest of the world, they suffer the negative effects of materialism on their well-being. The desire and craving for more things, clearly evident in the contemporary church, can be checked by cultivating a spirit of contentment. If church members emulated Paul and learned the secret of being content whether in abundance or in want, they are likely to spend less on themselves and adopt simpler lifestyles, which would, in effect, free more resources to propagate the gospel and to meet the needs of the poor within the community.

In Philippians 4:10–20, Paul uses the Greek term ἀυτάρκης, “to be content,” which many commentators agree was mostly used by the Stoics. As Fee observes, “On the surface, his (Paul’s) explanation looks like a meteor has fallen from the Stoic sky into his epistle.”<sup>2</sup> The study interrogates the meaning of these verses in revealing Paul’s disposition and view of material things as a Christian leader. Studies show that materialism negatively affects human well-being and happiness. As Kasser observes, “people who strongly value the pursuit of wealth and possessions report lower psychological well-being than those who are less concerned with such aims.”<sup>3</sup> This being the case, an antidote for materialism is needed, especially in the church.

The term μεμύημαι, “I have learned,” or “I am instructed” in verse 12, indicates not just learning but initiation into a secret society. Osiek observes that, “Imagery of citizenship is introduced in 1:27 and 3:20, so that Christians are depicted as residents in an alien land. Their own heavenly citizenship requires of them certain distinctive behavior, just as would be expected for members of a minority cultural group who want to preserve their own heritage.”<sup>4</sup> The way Christians spend their God-given resources should therefore be radically different from the spending habits of their non-believing friends and neighbors. This study seeks to determine the meaning of the text and explores how Christians, as heavenly citizens, use their God-given resources; issues of discipleship and spiritual formation; Christ-centered sufficiency and identity; confidence in adversity; generosity and stewardship; and partnership in ministry, among other themes. The paper adopted a grammatical, historical, and syntactical exegesis of the text.

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<sup>2</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), 431.

<sup>3</sup> Tim Kasser, *High Price of Materialism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon*, 31.



## Exegetical Analysis of Phil 4:10–20

### Greek Text<sup>5</sup>

Philippians 4:10–20 Ἐχάρην δὲ ἐν κυρίῳ μεγάλως ὅτι ἤδη ποτὲ ἀνεθάλετε τὸ ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ φρονεῖν, ἐφ’ ᾧ καὶ ἐφρονεῖτε ἠκαιρεῖσθε δέ. 11 οὐχ ὅτι καθ’ ὑστέρησιν λέγω, ἐγὼ γὰρ ἔμαθον ἐν οἷς εἰμι αὐτάρκης εἶναι. 12 οἶδα καὶ ταπεινοῦσθαι, οἶδα καὶ περισσεύειν· ἐν παντὶ καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν μεμύημαι καὶ χορτάζεσθαι καὶ πεινᾶν, καὶ περισσεύειν καὶ ὑστερεῖσθαι. 13 πάντα ἰσχύω ἐν τῷ ἐνδυναμοῦντί με. 14 πλὴν καλῶς ἐποιήσατε συγκοινωνήσαντές μου τῇ θλίψει. 15 Οἴδατε δὲ καὶ ὑμεῖς, Φιλιππηῖοι, ὅτι ἐν ἀρχῇ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου, ὅτε ἐξῆλθον ἀπὸ Μακεδονίας, οὐδεμία μοι ἐκκλησία ἐκοινωνήσεν εἰς λόγον δόσεως καὶ λήμψεως εἰ μὴ ὑμεῖς μόνοι· 16 ὅτι καὶ ἐν Θεσσαλονίκη καὶ ἅπαξ καὶ δις εἰς τὴν χρείαν μοι ἐπέμψατε. 17 οὐχ ὅτι ἐπιζητῶ τὸ δόμα, ἀλλὰ ἐπιζητῶ τὸν καρπὸν τὸν πλεονάζοντα εἰς λόγον ὑμῶν. 18 ἀπέχω δὲ πάντα καὶ περισσεύω· πεπλήρωμαι δεξάμενος παρὰ Ἐπαφροδίτου τὰ παρ’ ὑμῶν, ὁσμὴν εὐωδίας, θυσίαν δεκτὴν, εὐάρεστον τῷ θεῷ. 19 ὁ δὲ θεὸς μου πληρώσει πᾶσαν χρείαν ὑμῶν κατὰ τὸ πλοῦτος αὐτοῦ ἐν δόξῃ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. 20 τῷ δὲ θεῷ καὶ πατρὶ ἡμῶν ἡ δόξα εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων· ἀμήν.

### Translation

10 But I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your care for me; indeed, you were caring, but you were lacking opportunity. 11 Not that I speak out of want, for I have learned to be content in whatever state I am. 12 I know to be abased, I know also to have abundance: in all this and in all things I have learned the secret of being well fed and being hungry, and to have plenty and to lack. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me. 14 Nevertheless, you did well to share in my hardship. 15 Now you Philippians also know, that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, not even one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you alone, 16 for even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my need once and again. 17 Not that I am seeking a gift, but I am seeking fruit that abounds to your account. 18 But I have received everything and abound: I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a sweet-smelling fragrance, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. 19 And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. 20 Now to God and our Father *be* all the glory forever and ever, amen.

### Rejoicing in the Lord (Phil 4:10)

Paul begins this corpus with an expression of joy, a consistent theme of the letter. The noun ἐν κυρίῳ, “in the Lord,” takes the dative of sphere in this context. Although he received the gift from the Philippians, the ultimate giver was the Lord. According to Hansen, this focus on God as

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Aland et al., eds., *The Greek New Testament, 5th rev. ed.* Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2014



the ultimate giver “transforms the transaction of giving and receiving among Christians from a human, horizontal exchange to a divine-human triangular interaction. God initiates giving, empowers givers, supplies gifts and meets needs.”<sup>6</sup> The act of giving and receiving if not addressed carefully could also create a superior-inferior, or beneficiary-benefactor relationship between the giver and the receiver. As Fowl observes, “by phrasing the issue this way at the outset, Paul makes it clear to the Philippians that they and they are partners in God’s work,” in which case “giving and receiving does not profoundly alter their status in relation to each other. They are slaves of Christ Jesus.”<sup>7</sup>

Paul rejoiced in the Lord, yet the basis of this rejoicing was that the Philippians had revived their care for him. The verb ἀνεθάλατε was used in a botanical sense to mean “a plant blooming again after a period of dormancy.”<sup>8</sup> This implies that the Philippian church had been supporting him before but had somehow lapsed. The reason for their lapsing is not given, but his focus was on the fact that they had renewed their support, which was evidence of their constant care and concern for him. According to Hawthorne et al, this care is an act of worship, an “act of ‘liturgy,’ a worshipful response to God’s mission through his servant.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, rather than seeing the material goods, needful as they were, Paul focused on the fruit of discipleship evidenced in their act of generosity.

### **Secret of Contentment (Phil 4:11-13)**

Verse 11 begins with the negative οὐχ ὅτι, “not that,” to make it clear that Paul is not in any way highlighting his need or want. When he says οὐχ ὅτι καθ’ ὑστέρησιν λέγω, “not that I speak out of want,” he was not in any way denying that he was in need, but rather that the need didn’t bother him to the extent that he could make it a subject of discussion with the Philippians. In his condition as a prisoner, Paul was clearly in need. That notwithstanding, he was quick to point out to the Philippians that he had no intention of addressing that fact, giving the impression that, though he was in dire straits, it didn’t bother him at all. Clearly, material things were not the center of their relationship. The reason for this reluctance, he states, is that he had learned to be content in any circumstance. The verb ἔμαθον, though aorist, is in the resultative shade, which implies that he had learned contentment and that the virtue had become part and parcel of his life. To describe his state of contentment, Paul used the adjective ἀυτάρκης, a term mostly used

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<sup>6</sup> G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich., Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans: Apolllos, 2009), 306.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen E. Fowl, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 192.

<sup>8</sup> Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, 306.

<sup>9</sup> Gerald F. Hawthorne et al., *Word Biblical Commentary. Volume 43* (2018), 261.



by the Stoics and which meant “self-sufficient,” and described a condition in which one was totally free from care, whether internal or external.

Contentment has been cited as the greatest point of departure between Paul and the Stoics. According to many NT scholars, Paul’s source of contentment comes from Christ, while that of the Stoics comes from “his or her own innate resources.”<sup>10</sup> The verb μεμύημαι, “I have learned,” was “a technical term referring to those initiatory rites required of any person who wished to enter into the secrets and privileges of the mystery religions.”<sup>11</sup> Paul used it here to indicate that the process of learning to cope with anything that life exposed him to was like an initiatory rite into the mysteries of life. In essence, he was saying, “God has taught me through good times and bad how to cope not only with hunger and privation, but with plenty to eat and an abundance of wealth.”<sup>12</sup>

In 4:13, Paul gives the power behind his capabilities to cope with the various situations he found himself in. He says, πάντα ἰσχύω ἐν τῷ ἐνδυναμοῦντί με, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” While the adjective πάντα means “all things,” in this context it refers to all the vicissitudes of providence that he had mentioned earlier (Phil 4:12), that is, need, plenty, hunger, and abundance. Hawthorne et al observe that, “those translations that give the impression that Paul meant he could do anything and that nothing was beyond his powers are misleading to the point of being false.”<sup>13</sup> The nuance is endurance rather than achievement. He could endure all the circumstances mentioned above through the power Christ gave him.

### ***Sharing in Giving and Receiving (Phil 4:14–16)***

Paul reminds the Philippians of their unique partnership with him in the gospel using the verb ἐκοινωνήσεν, “shared with me,” or “became a partner.” According to Hansen, this highlights “the financial dimension of the partnership with the Philippians and also the deeper experience of reciprocity in his friendship with them.”<sup>14</sup> Giving and receiving in Hellenistic terminology could refer either to financial transactions involving debt settlement or to the exchange of gifts between mutual friends.<sup>15</sup> The reference here points to the latter usage, since, as Osiek observes, “the language in this section is not only business-like, but there is affection as well.”<sup>16</sup> The gifts from the Philippians were sent εἰς τὴν χρείαν μοι, “for my need.” The noun χρείαν is an

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<sup>10</sup> Bradley Arnold, “Αὐτάρκης in Stoicism and Phil 4:11: Challenging Individualist Readings of Stoicism,” *Novum Testamentum* 59 (2017): 16.

<sup>11</sup> Hawthorne et al., *Word Biblical Commentary. Volume 43*, 265.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>14</sup> Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, 318.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

<sup>16</sup> Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon*, 121.



accusative of purpose. It expresses the gift's purpose. The same noun is used in Acts 28:10 where it is said the inhabitants of Malta furnished Paul and his fellow travelers with goods, πρὸς τὴν χρείαν, "for need" or "for necessity." According to Strong's Greek Lexicon, the term as used here refers to "what is absolutely necessary for life."<sup>17</sup> The purpose of the Philippian gift was therefore not meant to meet Paul's luxuries but basic necessities.

### ***Amplly Supplied (Phil 4:17-18)***

In Phil 4:18, Paul writes, ἀπέχω δὲ πάντα καὶ περισσεύω· πεπλήρωμαι δεξάμενος παρὰ Ἐπαφροδίτου τὰ παρ' ὑμῶν, ὀσμὴν εὐωδίας, θυσίαν δεκτὴν, εὐάρεστον τῷ θεῷ (But I have received everything and abound: I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a sweet-smelling fragrance, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God). The verb ἀπέχω means "to have wholly or in full," "to have received what one had a right to expect or demand." This rendering agrees with O'Brien's observation that the term was "frequently used in the papyri as a technical term for receiving a sum of money in full and giving a receipt ('paid in full')."<sup>18</sup> Paul, therefore, uses a commercial metaphor to convey to the Philippians that their gift had been well received. Not only were his needs met, but περισσεύω, he had excess. Another term he uses to clarify his state regarding his material provision is πεπλήρωμαι, "I have been filled." The verb πεπλήρωμαι can also be rendered as "to fill to the brim." It takes the intensive perfect, focusing on the state in which Paul was after receiving the gift, while the passive voice implies that the gift filled him up. His material needs were fully met. This is very telling, especially in a world where, as in our day, the struggle to acquire material possessions was akin to trying to fill a bottomless pit.

The second clause borrows heavily from the Old Testament sacrificial cult. The gift was, ὀσμὴν εὐωδίας, θυσίαν δεκτὴν, εὐάρεστον τῷ θεῷ (a sweet-smelling fragrance, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God). We find the same language used in Exodus 2:18, where the burnt offering was said to be "a sweet aroma, an offering made by fire to the Lord," and also in Leviticus 1:9, where it is described as a "burnt sacrifice, an offering made by fire, a sweet aroma to the LORD." This raises the standard of the gift from the Philippians to the level of acceptability not just by Paul but by God Himself. It had sacred value. Paul received the gift, which met his material needs, but it was a sweet-smelling sacrifice, an acceptable sacrifice to God. Doing good and sharing is also described as a sacrifice that pleases God in Hebrews 13:16,

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<sup>17</sup> "G5532 - Chreia - Strong's Greek Lexicon (Kjv)," Blue Letter Bible, accessed October 30, 2025, [https://www.blueletterbible.org/kjv/gen/1/1/s\\_1001](https://www.blueletterbible.org/kjv/gen/1/1/s_1001).

<sup>18</sup> Peter Thomas O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 540.



“But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.” Sacrifices in the Old Testament sacrificial system were presided over by the priests (Exod 28-29; Lev 1-7; Num 3). In 1 Pet 2:9, believers are called a royal priesthood, while in 1 Pet 2:5 they are “a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Thus, by meeting Paul’s material needs while he was in prison for preaching the gospel, the Philippians were acting in line with their calling as royal priests, and their gift became a sweet-smelling sacrifice acceptable to God. O’Brien notes that the gifts were not given to God, rather, since “the financial support was provided to meet the apostle’s needs in relation to his preaching the gospel, so it is likened to an acceptable sacrifice that brings pleasure to God.”<sup>19</sup> While this is true within the context, from the wider biblical context, any help given to those in need is a gift acceptable to God. Proverbs 19:17 says, “The one who shows mercy to the poor lends to the Lord and according to his gift He will repay him.” The Philippian gift, therefore, became a sweet-smelling sacrifice offered to God since it was given to Paul as a needy prisoner, and more so, a prisoner on account of the gospel.

### ***The Riches of God’s Glory (Phil 4:19)***

#### *i) All Their Needs Will Be Supplied*

Verse 19 reads, ὁ δὲ θεός μου πληρώσει πᾶσαν χρείαν ὑμῶν κατὰ τὸ πλοῦτος αὐτοῦ ἐν δόξῃ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. (And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus). The conjunction δὲ is connective, and it links what follows with what was said in the preceding verse. As a result of what they had done, namely meeting his need, Paul told them that his God would meet all their needs. The verb πληρώσει, “will supply”, is in the future active indicative with a predictive shade. He was speaking with certainty. He was confident that God would meet their needs. πᾶσαν χρείαν ὑμῶν, “all your needs” within the context are the same material needs captured in Phil 4:16. As Hawthorne et al observe, these needs are “present material needs that can only be met right now by material resources.”<sup>20</sup>

Thus, when Paul said ὁ δὲ θεός μου πληρώσει πᾶσαν χρείαν ὑμῶν, “And my God will supply all your needs”, he was stating a fact that God would actually supply all their material needs. This presents some challenges to some commentators. What if He doesn’t meet these material needs, as happened, for example, in 1 Corinthians 4:11, where Paul confessed that he went hungry, thirsty, in rags, and was homeless? To address this, various scholars offer different suggestions. On the one hand, Silva suggests expanding the meaning of χρείαν to include both material and spiritual needs, arguing that Paul’s “main concern is to help the Philippians find

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 542.

<sup>20</sup> Hawthorne et al., *Word Biblical Commentary. Volume 43*, 273.



their true contentment in the peace and power of God.”<sup>21</sup> Hawthorne et al., on the other hand, favor the aorist optative rendering, πληρώσαι, which expresses a wish, thereby making the statement a prayer to God to meet their needs. They observe that although the more strongly attested rendering is the future indicative πληρώσει, some manuscripts<sup>22</sup> read πληρώσαι, “may [God] meet” (aorist optative).<sup>23</sup> On the aorist optative rendering, they observe,

(a) does not have Paul saying what God will or will not do, (b) allows God the freedom to be God, to fulfil needs or not as he sees best, even the needs of the Philippians, (c) wards off disappointment or disillusionment when material, physical needs are not met, and (d) keeps one from having to make excuses for God, from drawing fine lines of distinction between needs and wants, and from pushing off the fulfilment of needs until the eschatological day to avoid any embarrassment.<sup>24</sup>

O’Brien views πληρώσει, the future indicative, as the better rendering of the verse on the following grounds. First, there is enough manuscript support for it. Second, although Philippians 4:19 resembles many other Pauline wish prayers, many of these are also promises, and this verse is part of a series in which Paul assures the Philippians that God, who had met his own needs, will also meet theirs. Third, πᾶσαν χρείαν ὑμῶν, “all your needs,” should not be limited to the Philippians’ material needs, and an eschatological reference should not be excluded from the verse, “even if ἐν δόξῃ is difficult to interpret.”<sup>25</sup>

However, why should πᾶσαν χρείαν ὑμῶν not be limited to material needs, as Hawthorne et al rightly relate it to 4:16 indicate? First, Paul’s concerns for the Philippians were mainly spiritual: they should be a shining light, emulate the humility of Christ, press on towards the goal, and engage in many other such exhortations with spiritual connotations. Second, the apostle indicates that, much as he was grateful for their material gifts, he was not overly concerned about his own material provisions, since he had learned to be content in every situation. With this attitude, one would not expect him to conclude his letter by praying only for their material provisions. Third, “the structural argument about Phil 1:3-11 and Phil 4:10-20 bracketing the body of the letter, with the first paragraph anticipating the concerns and exhortations to follow and the second completing them and looking forward to the incalculable blessings that lie ahead, is against πᾶσαν χρείαν ὑμῶν referring only to financial or material needs.”<sup>26</sup> He therefore concludes that the phrase encompasses both material and spiritual needs. The writer agrees with O’Brien’s view because it better upholds the literal interpretation of

<sup>21</sup> Moisés Silva, *Philippians* (Baker Academic, 2005), 208.

<sup>22</sup> , These include, “ D\* F G 6 33 81 104 326 365

<sup>23</sup> Hawthorne et al., *Word Biblical Commentary. Volume 43*, 258.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

<sup>25</sup> O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 546.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 547.



scripture. Second, his way of refuting the claim that *πάσαν χρείαν ὑμῶν* focuses only on material needs is convincing. In contrast, Silva's conclusion is even more comprehensive: "whether a prayer or a statement of fact, the words are intended to encourage the community with assurance that God can and does provide all that believers need to enjoy true contentment."<sup>27</sup>

*ii) Needs Supplied According to His Riches in Glory*

The Philippian's needs were going to be met *κατὰ τὸ πλοῦτος αὐτοῦ ἐν δόξῃ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ*, "according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." The word *πλοῦτος*, "riches," means "abundance of external possessions" and "fullness." It can also mean "money," "possessions," or "wealth." The term *δόξη*, "glory" on the other hand means "splendor," "brightness," "magnificence" or "excellence," which therefore implies *πλοῦτος αὐτοῦ ἐν δόξῃ*, should be taken to mean God's riches are abundant and glorious, excellent and full of splendor. As Fee notes, God's riches are "His 'in glory' in the sense that His 'riches' exist in the sphere of God's glory, where God dwells in infinite splendor and majesty, the glory that is His as God alone." He also observes that *ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ*, "(n Christ Jesus) indicates "both where and how the riches that belong to God's own ineffable glory are made available to His people."<sup>28</sup> Hawthorne et al note that the phrase *ἐν δόξῃ* "should not be given any futuristic meaning but should be curtailed and limited here to a description of God's wealth: it is magnificent, eye-catching, splendid, renowned."<sup>29</sup>

While the first part of Hawthorne et al.'s explanation is true, the adjectives they use to describe God's wealth in the here and now raise some questions. When they say they are "eye-catching," for example, how do we deal with Isaiah's Messianic prophecy, "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him, nothing in His appearance that we should desire Him?" (Isa 53:2). Could He give His followers "eye-catching" wealth yet He Himself "had no beauty to attract us to Him?" How could He who had no glory give glorious riches? When we look at Paul's and other disciples' lives as depicted in the biblical record, do they display wealth that fits Hawthorne et al.'s descriptions?

To answer these questions and further clarify the meaning of *δόξη* ("glory") as used in Philippians 4:19, we need to examine its usage in other contexts. In John 1:14, we read, "The word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." Christ reveals His glory to His disciples through the miracles He performs and through His death and resurrection. While the

<sup>27</sup> Silva, *Philippians*, 208.

<sup>28</sup> Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 453.

<sup>29</sup> Hawthorne et al., *Word Biblical Commentary. Volume 43*, 274.



glory referred to in Isaiah 53:2 is the kind that captivates the human eye and elicits human awe and admiration, the glory described in John 1:14 has a spiritual and supernatural dimension. Likewise, *πλοῦτος αὐτοῦ ἐν δόξῃ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ* (“his riches in glory in Christ Jesus”) in Philippians 4:19 falls into this category. These riches may not necessarily captivate the human eye, but to those in Christ, their glory is apparent.

In the Old Testament, we find *δόξη* used in Daniel 4:29-30, where we read, “At the end of twelve months as he walked in the palace of the kingdom of Babylon, the king answered and said: ‘Isn’t this Babylon the great which I built for a house of kingdom, by the might of my power and for the honour of my glory?’” The LXX uses the term *δόξης*, “glory,” which can mean “splendour, brightness like that of the moon, sun or stars.” It also carries the idea of “magnificence, excellence, pre-eminence, dignity and grace.” Clearly Nebuchadnezzar’s idea of glory as depicted here was the type that could only be perceived by the human eye. It could be described as “eye-catching” glory.

In 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, we read, “But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, might not shine (on them).” Unbelievers can’t perceive “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” because they have been blinded. Likewise, many times they also can’t perceive the glorious riches in Christ promised in Philippians 4:19. After all, they are only discernible to those “in Christ Jesus.” These glorious riches are both temporal and eternal. In their material temporal dimension, they come with contentment regardless of quantity or appearance. As O’Brien observes, “As one who knows the secret of being content through Christ’s overflowing sufficiency, Paul assures his dear friends that his God will share with them His limitless resources, both now in their times of trial (cf. 1:28-29) and in the future consummation.”<sup>30</sup>

In summary, Paul rejoiced when he received the gift from the Philippians, but the main reason for this rejoicing was that they had revived their care for him, which, to him, was a fruit of their discipleship. He wasn’t very keen on highlighting the fact of his need as a prisoner because he had learned the secret of contentment. He could cope with the various vicissitudes of providence through Christ, who gave him strength. When he received the gift from the Philippians, he informed them he had been amply supplied, which is evidence of his attitude of contentment. Paul assures his readers that, as God had supplied all his needs, He would also supply all their needs according to His riches in glory.

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<sup>30</sup> O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 549.



## Application

Randy Alcorn notes that materialism is founded on beliefs, not just on doctrinal statements, but “the philosophy of life by which we actually live.”<sup>31</sup> Materialism, he observes, is learned from our homes, schools, and even churches. It can never be cured by institutional courses or by moralists’ campaign rallies, but only by a radical transformation in our perspective on God, transmitted through careful study and belief in God’s word. Only the scriptures can “give us the context to understand ourselves and the proper place of money and possessions.”<sup>32</sup> The scriptures can help us expose and overcome the materialistic lie that defines happiness in terms of owning things.

Contentment is one of the products of a life of simplicity. A contented person becomes totally indifferent to worldly status and material possessions. One is freed from the desire to be ahead of the pack. Noting that material things never produce contentment, he observes, “to live in contentment means we can opt out of the status race and the maddening pace that is its necessary partner. We can shout ‘no!’ to the insanity that chants, ‘more, more, more!’ We can rest contented in the gracious provision of God.”<sup>33</sup> He observes that one can decide on a given standard of living and stick to it without having to add more things, even if their income rises considerably.

Materialistic approaches to life have been known to produce anxiety, stress, and eventually depression. As Rahman observes, anxiety-producing materialism is “a modern age syndrome when aspirational buying may lead to unattainable lifestyles and, as a result, may propel a person towards low self-esteem and finally depression. Even if the luxurious lifestyle is attained, the stress to maintain the same is also there, again putting mental well-being at risk.”<sup>34</sup>

Gonzalez reviews the thoughts and teachings of Christians concerning wealth creation and use during the first four centuries of the church’s existence. He observes that, in some themes, there was consistency throughout that period, while in others, there was wide-ranging variation. One of the themes on which they differed was on the proper use of wealth. Some held that owners of wealth should use only what is sufficient to meet their basic needs and give the rest to those in need. Others, like Clement of Alexandria, taught that Christians should use their wealth only for what is useful, never for ostentatious value,

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<sup>31</sup> Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity* (Tyndale House, 2011), 32.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>33</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity. Finding Harmony in a Complex World* (United States: HarperCollins, 2010), 110.

<sup>34</sup> Nudrat Rahman, “Consumerism and Mental Health,” in *Understanding Psychopathology: Multidisciplinary Approaches in Abnormal Psychology* (2026; British Columbia, Canada: Luminus International, 2026), 281.



All would agree that it would be silly to make a pickax of silver or a sickle out of gold; and yet when it comes to household goods, many do not show the same wisdom as they do when making agricultural tools. A table knife does not cut better because it has an ivory handle, and a lamp does not give more light because it comes from the goldsmith's shop rather than the potter's. Yet the folly of luxury is such that some even have gold chamberpots, as if they could not set aside their pride even when they relieve themselves!"<sup>35</sup>

Ronald Sider notes that many Americans and Western Europeans live in despair as they seek happiness where it cannot be found—in ever-increasing material acquisition. He observes that “the idolatrous materialism of the economic rat race creates alcoholics, ruined marriages, and heart attacks.”<sup>36</sup> Even rich Christians are not spared, since they largely ignore Jesus' prescribed pathway to joy and fulfillment through giving: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). He posits that we can never attain happiness by seeking it directly. Happiness comes as a by-product of giving ourselves to others. He therefore recommends spending less on ourselves so that we can “transform the lives of neighbors who will die unless we care. . . . Rich, generous Christians could in the next twenty years dramatically reduce poverty in our world if we could become partners with God's poor.”<sup>37</sup> This can happen if Christians overcome the despair and cynicism that tell us nothing we do can make a difference, especially given the daunting scale of global poverty.

Witherington remarks that people in modern society, especially Americans, are living beyond their means, thanks to readily available credit cards. As a result, the spending habits of many have gotten out of control, a phenomenon he considers unwarranted and un-Christian. The prosperity gospel preachers have exacerbated the problem by convincing Christians that they are entitled to a luxurious lifestyle as long as they have faith in God. He posits that, “in the process, we have muted our consciences when it comes to moral responsibility for what we buy, when we buy it, and how much. And we (people in modern society) have learned to spend freely without thinking about our obligations to those less fortunate than ourselves.”<sup>38</sup>

He notes that modern culture glorifies the latest models and fashions of everything. As a result, “Christians get caught up in the fads, trends, and trajectories of frivolous fashion, foolish financial deals, and, in general, indulgence beyond anything healthy, helpful, or holy.”<sup>39</sup> Rather than getting guidance from the Bible on how to spend their money, Christians find themselves

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<sup>35</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (Wipf and Stock, 2002), 115.

<sup>36</sup> Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity* (Thomas Nelson, 2005), xvi.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

<sup>38</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Jesus & Money* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 8.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.



enslaved and consequently unthinkingly following the dominant materialistic cultural trends of the societies in which they live and beyond. Social media has basically turned the world into a global village, and as such, many find themselves influenced by cultural trends from far and wide. As Oyeniyi notes, “The prominence of social media influencers and celebrities, especially on platforms like Instagram, has glamorized wealth and material goods. This has led to pressure to conform to ideals of affluence, sometimes sacrificing long-term stability or ethical values.”<sup>40</sup>

Studies on materialism and over-consumption show that simple lifestyle habits promote individuals’ well-being. As Sharma and others note,

The link between minimalism and WB (well-being) is being recognised as significant. Minimalism, the deliberate practice of simplifying one’s life by decreasing goods and distractions, encourages a lifestyle centred on essential necessities and meaningful experiences. This adjustment can improve WB by lowering stress, increasing clarity, and instilling a sense of control and fulfilment. Individuals who eliminate excess and focus on what actually matters frequently report better mental clarity and emotional equilibrium. A minimalist lifestyle can boost financial WB by reducing wasteful spending and fostering attentive consumption.<sup>41</sup>

Lephoko argues for adopting Ubuntu, the African philosophy of sharing, to curb the excesses of both prosperity preachers and Western capitalism. He states that dismissing and condemning the prosperity doctrine wholesale is misguided because Jesus not only preached the kingdom of God, but also healed the sick and met their material needs when He commanded His disciples to feed the hungry followers (Mark 6:44). He therefore posits, “There can be no possible split between a social and spiritual gospel. They belong together, and without both elements, the good news of Jesus will not get across.”<sup>42</sup> To check the exploitative habits of the prosperity preachers who live luxurious lifestyles at the expense of their ignorant, vulnerable followers, he advocates for the adoption of Ubuntu, the African philosophy of sharing practiced by most African communities before colonialism, and specifically the Xhosa-speaking people of South Africa. African theological scholarship, therefore, demonstrates that the issue is not wealth itself, but the transformation of prosperity into acquisitive individualism detached from communal responsibility, a practice alien to African culture.

Issock and others note that materialistic individuals typically experience a temporary boost in subjective well-being after acquiring luxury items. Accordingly, luxury consumption

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<sup>40</sup> David Oyeniyi, “An Exegetical Analysis of Contentment and Detachment in 1Tim 6:6-10,” *Biblical Studies Journal* 7, no. 2 (2025): 20.

<sup>41</sup> Preeti Sharma et al., “From Consumerism to Contentment! The Role of Minimalism in Promoting Well-Being: A Moderated Mediation Approach,” *International Journal of Sustainable Agricultural Management and Informatics* 1, no. 1 (2025): 75.

<sup>42</sup> Daniel S. Lephoko, “Prosperity Theology versus Theology of Sharing Approach,” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 80, no. 1 (March 2024): 2.



increases life satisfaction, particularly among those with materialistic tendencies, since ownership of certain goods or brands fosters a sense of belonging to specific social groups, thereby enhancing social well-being and connectedness. In these contexts, therefore, material goods can function as social symbols, contributing to interpersonal relationships and collective identity. Despite this seemingly positive impact of materialism on well-being, they also observe that “their pursuit of short-term gratification often characterizes those displaying materialistic tendencies through acquiring material goods.”<sup>43</sup> In essence, therefore, the positive impact of materialism on well-being is at best transient.

There are many examples of Christians in church history who chose to live radically simple lifestyles to spare resources for meeting the needs of the needy and for ministry. These can serve as luminaries and role models for the increasingly materialistic 21st-century church. One such example among the many was John Wesley. It is said of Wesley that,

He had just finished buying some pictures for his room when one of the chambermaids came to his door. It was a winter day, and he noticed that she had only a thin linen gown to wear for protection against the cold. He reached into his pocket to give her some money for a coat and found he had spent his money. It struck him that the Lord was not pleased with how he had spent his money. He asked himself, “Will thy Master say, ‘Well done, good and faithful steward?’ Thou hast adorned thy walls with the money that might have screened this poor creature from the cold! O justice! O mercy! Are not these pictures the blood of this poor maid?”<sup>44</sup>

As a result of the conviction wrought by this incident, Wesley decided to limit his expenditure on personal items, despite his increasing income, so he could give more, noting, “With increasing income, the Christian’s standard of giving should increase, not his standard of living.”<sup>45</sup>

As discussed, materialism frequently leads to dissatisfaction, anxiety, unnecessary indebtedness, and self-centered living, while contentment fosters well-being, generosity, and freedom from excessive attachment to possessions. Christian and other scholars emphasize that lasting contentment cannot be achieved through acquisition but through transformed values and responsible stewardship. African perspectives further highlight the importance of Ubuntu, expressed in acts of communal responsibility and sharing. These observations support the findings of this study that Paul’s teaching in Philippians 4:10–20 presents contentment as a Christ-centered virtue that enables believers to resist materialism and its negative ramifications

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<sup>43</sup> Paul Issock, Asphat Muposhi, and Sipiwe Dlamini, “Navigating the Paradox: Materialism, Sustainable Practices and Well-Being in Emerging Markets,” *The Journal of Environment & Development* 34 (December 2024): 8.

<sup>44</sup> Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity*, 299.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.



effectively, and to cultivate a spirit of generosity, simplicity, and trust in God’s provision regardless of circumstances.

## Conclusion

This study examined Philippians 4:10–20 to understand how Paul addresses the theme of contentment among Christians and how this understanding can help the church confront materialism among its members. Exegesis of the text demonstrated that Paul’s contentment was neither founded on Stoic self-sufficiency nor on favorable circumstances, but on Christ, who strengthened him. His ability to avoid the pitfalls associated with abundance and the anxieties that lack could produce was rooted in Christ-centered sufficiency, cultivated through experience and spiritual formation. The study further showed that the Philippians’ financial support was viewed not merely as material assistance meant to meet a need, but as participation in the gospel, thus making it a sweet fragrance, a sacrifice pleasing to God.

The study also revealed that Christian contentment is inseparable from discipleship, stewardship, partnership in ministry, trust in divine provision, and the believer’s identity in Christ. Paul’s assurance that God would supply every need according to His riches in glory highlights both present and future dimensions of God’s care for His people.

The literature reviewed and the study’s findings indicate that contentment provides an effective biblical antidote to materialism and its pitfalls. It liberates believers from excessive attachment to possessions, frees them from unnecessary indebtedness, promotes simplicity, enables generosity, and promotes greater participation in God’s mission of spreading the gospel and caring for the needy. Church leaders, in particular, are called upon to follow Paul’s example and model the virtue of contentment through lives marked by simplicity, moderation, and faithful stewardship of God-given resources. Philippians 4:10–20 therefore presents contentment not merely as a personal virtue but as a transformative Christian disposition that shapes discipleship, community life, stewardship of resources, and participation in the mission of God.

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