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Philippians 4:13

English Standard Version

“We Are Not Comic Book Heroes”

This is the 12th sermon in the series on Biblical interpretation entitled

The Most Misused and Misunderstood Verses of the Bible!

Philippians 4:13

“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

Introduction: A Somewhat Embarrassing Secret

Believe it or not I did not always want to be the mild-mannered music teacher you see before you today. In fact, had someone asked me at the ripe old age of four or five what I wanted to be the terms “music teacher” would have had as much relevance to my views of my future life as the terms “Husband” or “Father” or, weirdest of all, “Elder Candidate.” Instead, had anyone asked me what I wanted to be I would have said... “oceanographer.” No really—that is what I would have—indeed-- what I did tell people that I wanted to be. You see, at five years of age there are not too many professions you could mention that earn as much respect and attention from the adults around you as a saying you wanted to be an “oceanographer.” Most people would stop, tell you what a smart and lofty sense of career choice you had made and then move on to try to figure out what an “oceanographer” was and what someone working in that capacity would do each day. I must say it was a great time in my life. To the eyes of my peers and the world at large I had it all together. I had both an extensive vocabulary for a five-year-old and a solid 20-year plan. My playmates hadn’t yet really even learned to tie their shoes or button their own pants. To be honest I hadn’t either. Sometimes I still struggle with those things.

It is sad to say that the truth of my five-year-old life was much darker. The whole oceanographer thing—it was a front. A ruse of high magnitude designed with the sole purpose

of disguising my real lifelong desire. I have never revealed this secret before. Not to anyone. Not to my wife or my children. Maybe it is due to where I am standing today—right now, this moment. I see the expectant eyes of all of you wanting me to show you who I am. To reveal myself and to open up to you. I just hope that after revealing this I am not disqualified from a place on the Session of this Church. As nice as the life of an oceanographer might have proven to be I would have thrown that dream out like a dead fish in order to achieve my real goal. My real career choice. I wanted-- to be SUPERMAN.

Blue tights and red cape—bring it on! X-ray vision and the ability to pick up a car—that was what I was talking about. I wanted it so bad! But how to achieve it? The *wanting* of a thing and the *acquiring* of a thing are two totally different things altogether. Obviously I wasn't from the planet Krypton—at least not that my parents had told me. I had trouble opening up my milk carton at kindergarten without the lunch lady's assistance so the whole super-strength thing seemed unlikely. How to lay claim to what surely was my birthright and unleash my powers? And then the answer came to me. It was so simple. **Ask God to Make Me Superman!**

Now before I continue with my confession and end the suspense of whether or not God did indeed make me Superman I need you to know that I did not come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ until I was twenty years old. My idea of God at age five was a collection of images, a tableau of impressions roughly equating to a mixture of Santa Claus, my Grandpa, and Luke Skywalker. God was this cosmic giver of gifts with the power of the force (*lightsaber sold separately.*) Also, in my mind when you asked God for something you had to bargain with him. It was always an “if—then” proposition.

My idea was to ask God to make me Superman. To do this I employed a prayer formula I had used on many occasions to try to get what I wanted ranging from the “help me to find a misplaced toy that I had to find” scenario to the “clandestinely acquire a cookie from the jar without my mom hearing me do it” scenario. My mom by the way really did have super human powers. She could hear a cookie jar open upwards of a mile away. So, this time the formula went “God—if you turn me into Superman then I will love you forever!” No joke—that was my bargain with God.

I was a selfish little monster. I actually thought I was doing God a favor by promising him that I would love Him forever. Like God was then going to say “Oh—you'll love me forever--well in that case sure!” Instead of turning me into Superman God probably should have turned me into Lex Luther. He did not turn me into Lex Luther, and convinced of my own powers of persuasion I decided to put my newly voiced request to be Superman to the test. Trying to fly seemed unreasonable. Blowing trees down with my tornado like breath—to easily explained by natural phenomena—like freak tornados. Bursting through walls though—now that had style. At this point, maybe you can see the painful direction this is heading. Confident that I had persuaded God with my limited time offer of eternal love and fealty I ran fast and furious headlong into my bedroom wall. **BAAMM!**

Unfortunately, things did not turn out as you might have expected. Instead of a pile of smoking rubble where my bedroom wall once was—instead of shouts of amazement that my powers had finally been revealed to my family and a ticker tape parade with me flying at the front-- I think I achieved the first of many concussions I would receive throughout my growing up years. I also received the sure knowledge that I was not a comic book hero and, you know what? None of us are-- and God is not some cosmic candy machine dispenser of super human powers or the granter

of our every wish. This brings us to our verse today, Philippians 4:13. Before we read it however we need to pray:

**Our Father in Heaven, you tell us in Your word “Be still, and know I am God.” How hard it is in this world which clamors with ceaseless noise and never-ending distraction to actually be still and to contemplate who you are. This world, perfect in its initial creation has like us fallen under sin and now seeks to tell us that you are not God and that instead of being still we should seek to be all that we can be and to achieve all that we can achieve. How often we voice our ambitions, sugar coated with your words to make their utterance more pleasant to hear and to ease our conscience. I pray that this morning your word will speak to us anew. Please Father forgive how despite my best intentions I might this day make your word less than it should be.
Bless the hearing of and aid me in the speaking of your word.**

Allow us to simply be still and to know you are God. I pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen

Philippians 4:13 “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

I. The Verse Confused.

Philippians 4:13 is arguably one of the most popular verses in the English Bible—and with good reason. When we read verse thirteen we read that we can do all things through him, that is Christ, who strengthens us. Now, who in their right mind doesn’t like that? We are being told by none other than the Apostle Paul himself that the limitations that constantly seem to beset us are really no limitations at all when we have the strength of Christ to empower us. If only I had known about this verse when I was five years old. Instead of my very self-serving prayer promising to grant God a portion of my love in exchange for giving me super powers I could have just claimed the promise of this verse and had those super powers at my disposal. I really could have had a comic book life. Is it really that hard to believe? Was it not God who gave Moses the power to turn his staff into snakes? Did he not grant Moses the power to turn the Nile into blood? I think when Moses parted the waters of the Red Sea even Superman might have stopped in his tracks in respectful silence. God granted Elijah the power to call down the fire of heaven to incinerate not just a pile of wet logs but all the priests and pagan worshipers standing around. That is power worthy of any ink Marvel comics could put to paper. It seems that these two mighty figures in the pages of the Old Testament knew the wondrous things that could be accomplished when they were plugged into God’s strength. There are other examples that could be mentioned as well. The Apostle Philip, after baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch, was able to teleport 20 miles away in the blink of an eye through the power of the Holy Spirit. In Acts chapters 9 and 20 we read that the Apostles Peter and Paul respectively were both able to harness the power of God and raise people from the dead. These men obviously realized that they were plugged into the power of God and could utilize that power to do mighty works.

Now— before the elders rush up here, tackle me and carry me out of the building to administer some bare-knuckle counseling and a lesson on contextual interpretation let me ask you: is that what verse 13 is really saying? Can we really do **all things** through Christ who gives us strength? I had a New Testament professor at Liberty University who, in talking about 1 Timothy chapter 2 verse 6 where Paul says that Jesus gave himself as a ransom for all liked to say that “All means all and that is all **all** means.” He was of course trying to promote the very un-Calvinistic idea of

“Unlimited Atonement” but if he was correct about the word “all” and all really does mean all without exception then according to verse 13 we should be able to do **“All things.”** Can we?

There are a lot of people in the world, a good many of whom are professing Christians who, based on this verse would tell you “yes.” Now, maybe they aren’t talking about acts of super human ability. Maybe they are talking about more worldly matters like getting the job they are interviewing for or winning the gymnastics competition they are entered in. The very famous July, 2009 cover of Sports Illustrated featured a photo of the then Florida Gators quarterback Tim Tebow—who I respect greatly and who I have no doubt is a believer in Jesus Christ, sporting not just a determined look to his face but prominently written in the black grease under his eyes was “Phil 4:13.” Mr. Tebow was declaring to the world that his victories were a result of the strength that Christ had given him--and apparently strength not given to the other teams and quarterbacks. A casual look at websites such as Pinterest and Amazon.com will show you an endless supply of craft ideas and merchandise centered around this verse all aimed at promoting the idea that with God’s strength we can achieve almost limitless goals. Coffee mugs, posters, casual wear, formal attire such as neck ties, scarves, jewelry, an endless assortment of sports equipment with the Philippians 4:13 “verse of power” printed on them, notebooks, pencils—anything you can imagine. Apparently, and sadly this is not a joke-- there is even a market for “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” printed on men and women’s intimate apparel. Guys—nothing will guarantee you a ticket on the “love boat” like candlelight, soft music, and Philippians 4:13 underskivies. I actually brought in one of these items to show you as an example...not the underwear—but rather a little red bracelet very similar to some of the ones you have seen people wear for causes such as cancer awareness months or the “What Would Jesus Do” bracelets. This one is called the “I Can” Strength Bracelet which features the words “Strength to Conquer Anything” and then two medallion like holograms that say “I can” and Philippians 4:13. The back of the box says that “This bracelet is a constant reminder of the power and strength we have through faith in Christ” and goes on to say that the “I Can logo symbolizes all that we can accomplish by tapping into God’s strength.”

So there you have it folks. With faith we can tap into the unlimited power supply of God. That job you want—it can be yours through Christ who strengthens you. That Mega Millions jackpot—you can pick the winning numbers because you can do “all things.”

When I was a teenager my mom gave my dad a birthday present of skydiving lessons. I remember going with him that day and, after he went through a full day of on the ground training on what to do, they took him up in the air to actually jump out of the plane. I can remember watching him jump from that plane and feeling tremendous excitement for him and lots of relief when his parachute opened and relief again when he landed safely back on the ground. Since then, occasionally, I have toyed with the idea of going skydiving. Imagine if I did that though and, after jumping out of the plane and a few brief moments of awe and wonder at God’s creation spread out before me I suddenly realized that my parachute hadn’t opened. Now, my understanding is that there is always a backup chute but imagine if I pulled the cord for that one and it too didn’t open. I am very certain that I could flap my arms like some sort of hyperspastic bird all the while reciting Philippians 4:13 and that I would discover much too quickly that I really could not do “all things”, no matter how much strength I thought I had in Christ. In fact, the only thing in that situation with strength enough to survive the impact with the ground would be this silly red rubber bracelet. People like this verse because, out of

context, it is very motivational---but for all the wrong reasons. Out of context it gives us a sort of false sense of ability for achieving all the things we want without any regard to whether God want's those things for us. Out of context it puts the emphasis upon ourselves—the “**I can do all things**” becomes the focus and God is relegated to some sort of portable power charger for our ambitions and desires. The verse becomes all about us. The job **we** want. The problem **we** are currently having. We hijack this promise with the expectation that by claiming it as our own we can achieve our desires or solve our problems. Out of context we take an awesome verse with truly great promise and turn it into a mere fortune cookie platitude. And who really likes fortune cookies?

II. The Verse Understood

If this verse, out of context, promises personal accomplishment through a servile God then we should consider what this verse says to us in context-- which is of course always the approach we should take when trying to understand what the Word of God is telling us. What is the context of Philippians 4:13? Well, the simple answer for the context of Philippians is a tiny cell in Rome in which Paul is incarcerated and waiting for sentencing from a Roman court. The Apostle Paul was writing the church of Philippi for several reasons but here in Chapter 4 we learn that one of those reasons is to thank them for their past and present provision for him during his work as an Apostle and during this current time of imprisonment. The conversation in the latter half of chapter 4 is primarily concerned with financial matters. To understand Philippians 4:13 we need to look at Philippians as a whole but specifically 4:10-13, which says:

¹⁰ I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. ¹¹ Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am in to be content. ¹² I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

To further add to our context of this verse let's take a brief moment to do a little review of the Philippian church. This church, located in what was then part of Macedonia, was the first church that Paul planted in Europe near the beginning of his second missionary journey. Paul had originally not intended to travel into Europe but we are told in Acts chapter 16 that the Spirit forbid Paul twice from going anywhere else. He had a dream of a Macedonian man begging him to come to Macedonia to help him, and, believing it was a message from God traveled with Silas and Timothy into Macedonia into the prosperous city of Philippi. Though only in Philippi for a few days, Paul and Silas managed to bring a woman named Lydia who sold purple merchandise to faith in Jesus Christ, cast out a divining spirit from a slave girl, and incurred the wrath of the slave girl's owners-- thus earning a beating and a jail sentence. While in jail they survived an earthquake which opened the doors to the prison cells as well as opening the restraints that were upon their wrists and ankles, they refused an opportunity for a prison break, and by such faithfulness and character were able to witness to the jailer and his family and bring them to salvation in Jesus Christ. Upon being asked to leave the city by city leaders who were disturbed by their disrupting presence they again visited with Lydia, met with and encouraged the brothers in Christ they had helped briefly disciple, and went on their way. In a very short span of time Paul was able to witness to and disciple the Philippian believers and

from that time on the newly planted Philippian church made it a point when they could to support Paul in his travels and ministry. Paul tells them in chapter one of this letter that he thanks God for them because of their **“partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now.”** Later on here in chapter 4 verses 15 and 16 Paul gives more specific examples of their past provision for him when he says **“And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again.”** Now with Paul imprisoned in a Roman cell, not sure if he would live or die, he writes to them that he **“rejoiced in the Lord that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity.”** Paul does not go into specifics about why the Philippian believers wouldn’t have had the opportunity to aid him before now, though we do read in 2 Corinthians that the Macedonia churches, of which Philippi was the first, had at one point earlier been suffering from “extreme poverty.” Perhaps this is why they had been stopped in their support for a time. In any case, we read in verse 10 that now the Philippian church has revived their concern for Paul and he is rejoicing greatly. The Philippian church has renewed their financial partnering with the Apostle Paul and his ministry. Now, is Paul having a Jerry Maguire “show me the money” kind of moment here? Is he saying to himself “these cheapskate Philippians are finally sending in their dues?” Certainly not! Rather, Paul explains in verse 11 **“not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.”** Paul is being very careful here to clarify that his joy is not from the financial gain he might receive from the Philippian church or the comforts he might be able to procure from such a gift in his current situation. Paul’s joy was not about the gain he received but rather his joy was in that the Philippian Church was once again in a position to express their generosity and support. He spells this out specifically in verse 17 when he says **“Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.”**

One thing we sometimes forget about Paul is that he was a man who had experienced life from many different perspectives, and not all of them pleasant ones. He knew what it was like to face suffering and persecution for his faith, but he also knew what it was like to be the one causing the suffering and the persecution. I don’t know if anyone has seen this but there is a television show out these days about the underhanded escapades of a less than saintly lawyer. It’s called “Just Call Frank” (look at Frank P.)no, I’m just kidding Frank. It’s called “Just Call Saul.” In the early days after Pentecost if you were a Christian believer “just calling Saul” was without a doubt the last thing you would think about doing. Saul was a very zealous persecutor of the early church. The Pharisee Saul was a witness to the stoning death of Stephen— something which, in the reading in Acts chapter 6 sounds so matter of fact but which in reality was an extremely gruesome act. Later on, the Apostle Paul would be on the receiving end of those stones for his own proclamation of the Gospel. The Pharisee Saul was the one literally hunting believers down to arrest them and imprison them for their faith in Jesus and then later, as the Apostle Paul he was the one being hunted and imprisoned for his faith. He had seen both what it meant to pursue and to be pursued, to be at ease and to suffer, to be physically free and to be imprisoned. In verse 12 Paul attests to the ups and downs of his life when he says **“I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.”** Paul is telling us that no matter what the situation he faces, whether it is sitting in a room discipling the Philippian believers or sitting alone in a cold, dark prison cell, whether it is having

the financial provision in his ministry from fellow believers or not having any monetary support at all, that he had learned the secret of contentment. And the answer to that secret is made clear in verse 13. He could do all things, meaning all the plentiful times as well as all the lean times **“through Christ who strengthens me.”** The secret that Paul knew and which he was trying to communicate to the Philippians was the sufficiency of Jesus Christ. This was in stark contrast to the Stoicism so common in that time period. The idea of the Stoic philosophers was that one was to find contentment in oneself. In fact, the word Paul uses in verse 11 when he talks about how in all things he has learned to be content was a word for contentment that was in common use by the Stoic Philosophers to mean self-contentment.¹ You can almost imagine the Philippian believers hearing that part of the letter for the first time and being momentarily taken aback that their very devout Apostle Paul would say such a thing. And then, a few lines later he lets them off the hook by revealing his secret. Unlike the Stoics who tried to find contentment in themselves Paul knew that the only true contentment comes from that found in Jesus.

When taken out of context Philippians 4:13 is used to try and harness the power of God in order to achieve the things that the world has to offer. When taken out of context Philippians 4:13 is used to try and manipulate the world into not taking the things from us that we value most. The emphasis becomes about us and what we want or need. On the other hand, when taken in context the verse reveals that it is not so much about us but rather upon Christ and His strength being sufficient for our needs. Unlike my college professor’s assertion that “all means all” it is clear that when Paul says we can do all things he does not mean that God is going to make all things that we want to happen come to be but rather that in all things God will be our strength. This verse would be better translated with the dependent clause first: **“Through Christ who strengthens me I can do all things.”** This verse is not the magic verse of red rubber bracelets or the motivational logo found on Christian themed sports jerseys. This verse is not about achieving the impossible but rather about relying upon the sufficiency of Jesus.

III. The Verse Applied

It is because of this secret now revealed in verse 13-- that Christ is sufficient and nothing else--- that we can understand how Paul can say earlier in Philippians chapter 3 that ***“I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus the Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him.”***

Several years ago, at one of our men’s retreats I remember getting into a conversation with Rick Behrens. I remember it now as one of the last in depth conversations I would have with Rick. This was right at the time when ISIS had first started broadcasting the beheadings of Christians who had refused to renounce their faith and embrace Islam. I must admit that contemplating that sort of death was very disturbing to me-- as I imagine it is to everyone here. I remember talking to Rick and telling him that I was in awe of how those people, knowing the consequences for not giving in, remained true to our Lord and would not deny him—even though it meant a gruesome death. I expressed my hope that, if ever I found myself in that situation I would be brave enough to do the same thing. We would all like to think that I

¹ Philippians: The NIV Application Commentary, by Frank Thielman, page 235

suppose—that we would be brave enough, loyal enough, in love enough with our Savior to embrace death for Him rather than to deny him. Consider though that even Peter, the Rock who had held the very hands of Jesus, denied him three times, practically right to his face because he was scared of the consequences of saying he knew Him.

I ask you, when we consider our lives what is it that we hold onto and consider dear? Our jobs? Our families? As Paul said in chapter 3 he knew what it was like to suffer the loss of all things. Even though we know that nothing happens in this world that is not under God's control it often times seems that there is nothing in this world that we have that the world cannot also take away. Our homes, our jobs, the respect we get from others. The love we get from our families. Our families themselves. There are those among us that have lost jobs or are worried that they will soon lose them. They don't know how the multitude of frayed ends will ever meet. There are those among us, especially younger folks, that are struggling to find even a single path for their lives to call their own and feel as if they are wandering in circles when all those around them seem to have found their way in this life. There are those that ceaselessly pray for the relief of heavy burdens and have not found that relief and are questioning what the point of it all is—tired to despair of the worry they feel all the time. There are those who are suffering from debilitating health issues and are growing weary of the pain and stress and are not sure they want to continue the fight any longer. There are some who are watching their loved ones go through terrible illnesses and feel helpless and frustrated; without any power to help them. There are many who have lost loved ones and are trying to come to grips with a world suddenly without that person in their lives. The world can take the lives of those we hold dear. The world can take our children, our parents, our spouses. There is every possibility, especially in this world that seems to be growing more antagonistic towards those who name Christ as their Savior, that our own lives might be demanded of us. The secret that Paul found and the secret that the world on its own can never know is that the one thing that remains with us even when all else has been stripped away is the faith and surety we have in Christ Jesus and our salvation in Him. Everything else is fleeting and can be taken from us. The redeeming love of Jesus for us on the cross—that can never be taken away. The secret that Paul discovered is that in all things Christ is our strength--our true and lasting strength. Paul had learned that the ability to find contentment in any situation, whether in plenty or in want, was in the strength that comes from knowing Jesus. Hebrews 9:27-28 tells us these glorious words:

“And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, ²⁸so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.” That is our hope! That is our strength!

When I was a child I wanted nothing more than to have powers and abilities like Superman. I wanted my world to be a comic book of my own making. I mistakenly thought that if I could sweet talk God enough He would give me the powers of my dreams. Like my childish dreams there are many people today who invoke this incredibly wonderful verse—*“I can do all things through him who strengthens me”*-- as a means to lend possibility to their desire to be able to achieve all they want or hope for. Though they wouldn't put it in these words they believe that this verse is telling them that, like some genie in a bottle God will grant them their wishes. They want this verse to allow them to harness the power that can move mountains rather than realizing it is all about the sufficiency of the one who had the strength to make the mountains in the first place. This verse is not about our being able to **do** all things but rather about the

strength of Christ on our behalf when we find ourselves able to do absolutely nothing. Christ is sufficient. It might not make for a good comic book but it does make for a truly blessed life. Let us pray.

Father, you are our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.

Help us to remember Father that despite what the world tells us you are sufficient for all our needs and for all our concerns. Like the Apostle Paul I pray that we would count all things as rubbish in comparison to the hope that we have in Your Son Jesus. When we start to concern ourselves with what we do or do not have, when we strive to accomplish things and succeed or even if we fail, help us to remember that it is Christ's sufficiency that matters. Help us to remember that your Grace is sufficient and that your power is made perfect in our weakness. Let us not trust in our own strength but rather trust in yours. Let us be content with that. Be with us as we leave here today Father and help us to cling to you each moment thereafter.

In Jesus name I pray, Amen.