

8.28.2016 Trinity 14 (Philippians 4:4-13)

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

Philippians 4:13 is one of the most popular verses in the Bible. The words of this verse are printed on millions of bumper stickers, coffee mugs, key chains, and t-shirts. If you're searching for that perfect, inspirational gift for your Christian friend who is looking to take hold of that which is just beyond their reach – check eBay. There you will find over 4,000 different products waiting to say to someone who wants that job promotion or to find their soul mate, “No problem. You can do all things through Christ.” Do you want to score a touchdown, hit a home run, climb a mountain, run a marathon, or win the big game with a finger pointed to the sky? You can... through Christ who gives you strength.

Philippians 4:13 is one of the most popular verses in the Bible, and clearly it is also one of the most misunderstood, misused, and misinterpreted. Here's an example from a commentary on this verse written by the pastor of the largest mega-church in America. He wrote:

“Most people tend to magnify their limitations. They focus on their shortcomings. But scripture makes it plain: all things are possible to those who believe. That's right! It is possible to see your dreams fulfilled. It is possible to overcome that obstacle. It is possible to climb to new heights. It is possible to embrace your destiny. You may not know how it will all take place. You may not have a plan, but all you have to know is that if God said you can...you can!”

This is an example of the way many Christians today understand and interpret this verse. For them, the “all things” that Christ empowers us to accomplish is found in climbing to new heights by fulfilling their dreams and embracing their destinies. Unfortunately, this way of interpreting and applying these inspired words written by St. Paul is far from their actual meaning. To understand what Paul truly meant as he wrote this letter to the Philippians we have to read the verse in context. A large part of that context is found in a first century prison cell.

Philippians is one of the epistles that Paul wrote while he was in prison. While it is certain none of us would want to be locked up in one of our twenty-first century prisons, there is little doubt that prison today would be preferable to what Paul endured. The popular interpretation of climbing to new heights and fulfilling our dreams just doesn't line up very well with an image of St. Paul writing this letter locked in a first century prison cell. While the “all things” of this verse certainly includes our successes and the positive things in life, the real substance of this verse is found in life's hardest things: like humiliation, hunger, sickness, need, and loss. Philippians 4:13 clearly means more than pointing a finger to heaven when everything is going well. This verse is mainly

about where to go to find strength – where to turn when we're struggling, lonely, devastated, and hurting.

This is a truth that we can only recognize when we consider the prison setting and the words of this epistle in their entirety. As we read these words we must remember that Paul didn't sit down and write Philippians chapter four, verse thirteen. He was inspired to write an entire letter to the Philippians. The chapters and verses were added over a thousand years later as a means to easily refer to specific passages. The chapter and verse system is very helpful, but it can lead us to study, memorize, and interpret Scripture in bits and pieces – which is not what God intended. Philippians 4:13 is a great example of why we need to do our best to ignore chapter and verse divisions as we read the Bible, for there is not a verse that was intended to stand alone.

So, let's back up just two sentences and consider the effect context has on the modern interpretation. As we read these words remember that Paul did not take off his helmet and sit down to write these inspired words from the locker room after winning the big game. He did not scale Mt. Everest and post a picture of himself with these words as the caption. The image we need to keep in our mind is one of St. Paul locked in a first century prison. Paul writes from prison (4:11-13), "I have learned in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: everywhere and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Clearly, Paul isn't telling Christians that they should dream bigger dreams; he is reminding them that they can endure the crushing feeling of defeat if those dreams aren't realized. He's not encouraging Christians to go out and conquer the world; he's reminding them that they can press on when the world conquers them – that they can be "content... everywhere and in all things." How does he say we find such contentment, such peace? "Through Christ who strengthens me." Christ is the key to finding peace in every circumstance.

Let's continue to use Scripture to interpret Scripture and consider the way this interpretation of the "all things" we can do through Christ is backed up by what is written in the epistle to the Romans. There we read (8:35-37), "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us." Once again Paul says that we can do "all these things... through Him that loved us... through Christ who strengthens me" and once again the "all things" that Christ empowers us to accomplish is not found in fulfilling our dreams or embracing our destinies. Instead, these verses speak once more about the most difficult and tragic things in life.

When we make the mistake of applying this verse only to the positive things in life we completely miss the really good news found in these words: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." You see, it's easy to recognize God at work in our lives when life is good, but too often life is full of disappointment, heartache, and even death. If we misuse this verse by turning it into a catchy slogan for the good things in life, these words won't come to mind when we need to hear them most – in times of tragedy and failure. If we remember that St. Paul was inspired to write these words of contentment and strength through Christ from a first century prison cell, we too can find contentment and strength in our darkest moments.

There is man we remember tomorrow that like St. Paul is an example of one who found strength through Christ in his darkest hour. Tomorrow we commemorate the beheading of St. John the Baptist. Jesus said this about John, "Among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist" (Matthew 11:11). He was the greatest man ever born and he ended up in a dark, rat infested prison because he wasn't afraid to speak the truth. When John wondered why he would end up this way, when his faith was tested, he looked to Christ. He sent his disciples to ask if Jesus truly was the Messiah. Remember, it was John that proclaimed Him to be the Messiah (John 1:29), but now as he waited to die he needed to be reminded of the truth of his own words. The answer Jesus gave would not provide a way for John to climb to new heights or fulfill his dreams, but Jesus' assurance that He was the Messiah would allow John to "do all things through Christ who strengthens me." For John that meant losing his head.

St. Paul and St. John the Baptist lived on this earth 2,000 years ago, but we pray daily for Christian martyrs and captives because more people are dying for Christ than ever before. One such Christian is Kayla Mueller. A young humanitarian aid worker who was taken hostage, assaulted, tortured, and killed by terrorists. Those who met her while she was being held captive described her sense of humor and her unwavering faith. They testified that she defended her commitment to Christ to the most infamous ISIL executioner and inspired all of them with her courage. At one point they said she refused a chance to escape so that some teenage girls that were with her would have a better chance at freedom. After being captured, imprisoned, tortured, and assaulted, twenty-six year old Kayla Mueller was killed in February 2015.

Philippians 4:13 is one of the most popular verses in the Bible. It states, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." I wonder how Kayla Mueller interprets that verse.