



An Open Letter to Youth Ministers – Allen Hilton

Rev. Dr. Allen Hilton, founder and executive director of House United, a nonprofit initiative that helps groups collaborate across theological and political differences, writes an open letter to Youth Ministers.



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DEAR AMAZING YOUTH LEADER:

Thank you for all you are doing to form young lives in Christ! I hope my little letter will be useful as you continue your ministry. I’m asking, “Where does flourish lie?” and to search out an answer, I begin with a story.

A high school girl I knew had just gotten that prized invitation to the “in” girls’ table for lunch. Our sophomore friend (shall we call her Lydia?) couldn’t believe her good fortune, but nerves were nibbling at her as the bell ended fourth period and noon arrived. She collected her food and waited at a distance to remain inconspicuous, ‘til three others had taken their seats; then, awkwardly (it seemed to her), she stumbled in fashionably late as the fourth. When all six had sat, she found herself gawking. These were THE girls in her school. Their aura glittered above the dull light of the cafeteria.

Lydia mostly listened quietly, commenting only when the conversation ranged to her strong suits. All was going well, surprisingly, until the alpha of the bunch opened the game of the hour, nearly shouting: “Olivia, what are YOU worth today?!” Our Lydia didn’t know what to make of it, as Olivia proudly itemized her clothing for that day, blurting out the posh brand name and price of each piece she wore: the blouse, the tailored jeans, the shoes, the jacket, the earrings. The dollar total constituted her value – what she was “worth today.” Each of the other girls then followed suit, tallying her own “worth” – each amassing a tidy sum in this affluent bedroom community for New York bankers. The internal arithmetic proceeded quickly, and ‘round the table they flew, as one after another gleefully relished her superior significance or sullenly suffered her perceived poverty. For Lydia, this was a nightmare. It wasn’t how she’d pictured her first day at “the table”. Her family wasn’t made of money, and her church youth group had certainly never played this game. She began to sweat, sure that “in” girls don’t sweat. All her wishing could not stave off the inevitable: her turn. Would she follow their lead and insure her hold on that coveted chair at the table, on being one of the “in”?

SELF-SUFFICIENCY

The Apostle Paul could talk to our latter-day Lydia, couldn’t he? “I have learned to be content with whatever I have,” he wrote to the Philippians. “I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.” (Philippians 4.11-12 – NRSV) Paul is on point for our little “What are you worth today?” game.

The passage sounds Stoic. I don’t mean “stoic” like your staid uncle with the tiny range of emotional expression. I mean the kind of Stoicism for which moral philosophers of Paul’s time trained: a self-mastery and discipline that wouldn’t let circumstances dictate their well-being.

They called this sort of invulnerable contentment “autarkeia” – self-sufficiency – and that’s the basis for the adjective Paul uses here, which most English translations render as “content”.

Not long after Paul’s death, a Roman Stoic called Epictetus spoke these words to his students:

“With regard to whatever objects give you delight, are useful, or are deeply loved, remember to tell yourself of what general nature they are, beginning from the most insignificant things. If, for example, you are fond of a specific ceramic cup, remind yourself that it is only ceramic cups in general of which you are fond. Then, if it breaks, you will not be disturbed. If you kiss your child, or your wife, say that you only kiss things which are human, and thus you will not be disturbed if either of them dies.” (Enchiridion 3)

Epictetus’ students and other Stoics trained to steel themselves against the upset that changed circumstances can inflict. In Paul’s words, they wanted “to be content (autarkes) with whatever [they] have.” (4.11) Money or no, favorite ceramic cup or no, friends and family or no, the class or job or car I want or no, Paul and the Stoic both hope to know this invulnerable, unassailable sense of well-being.

The claim fits within the flow of Paul’s whole letter to the Philippians. As Paul writes, both he and his friends in Philippi face adversity:

- Paul writes from prison (1.12-14) – a literal hell-hole in which suicides happened around him and may have prompted him to contemplate his own (1.22 – For a graphic description, drawing on ancient sources, see C. Wansink, *Chained in Christ: The Experience and Rhetoric of Paul’s Imprisonments*.)
- His Philippian addressees face threats from outside (“intimidation” by “opponents” in 1.28, “suffering” in 1.29, and “struggle” in 1.30) and strife inside their fledgling living-room-sized community. (Division must lie behind Paul’s frequent calls to “stand firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind” (1.27, 2.2-3), his concern about their “murmuring and arguing” (2.14), and (most vividly) his exhortation to Euodia and Syntyche, two prominent women leaders of the flock, to “be of one mind” (4.2).
- Life ain’t easy for Paul and his pen pals in Philippi!

Here’s the shocker, though: in this epistle of angst, this letter from one sufferer to others, Paul sprinkles the terms for “Joy” and “Rejoice!” all over the place. They appear 16 times in four chapters = 1 “Joy” injection per 6.5 verses – more by far than in any of his other letters. Amid his own and their hardships, Paul envisions for everyone a sturdy and steady form of flourish, an invulnerable abundance that he calls joy.

If Paul has looked like a Stoic thus far, though, he distinguishes himself from Epictetus and his other philosophical neighbors in 4.13, when he names the source of his own profound contentment. “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” While Stoics labored in

classrooms to build into themselves and their students the wherewithal not to flinch when family died, Paul found his own sturdiness in another source. His self-sufficiency had been infused by the One who had called him. So how did God get this into Paul's life?

Application #1: The God-given and faithfully practiced joy Paul describes, which doesn't rise and fall with emotions or circumstances, is pure gold to adolescents.

MUTUAL RELIANCE

All of this joy sounds splendid, and it is. Paul's experience of an implicit call to self-sufficiency and contentment, his *autarkeia*, can stand up against all kinds of ills. Because of this, we may emerge from our passage ready to shout it out to our youth groups the first chance we get. But in the 21st-century west, forming young people to be self-sufficient drives us into a risky region. If a feeble, circumstance-dependent quest for happiness is the frying pan that Paul's *autarkeia* helps us escape, the fire of solitary self-reliance in some parts of adolescent culture may be even more dangerous. My adult-Bible-student friend Steven will help us understand why.

Long years ago, while writing my dissertation, I kept up a side-hustle teaching weekly Bible study down the road in an affluent hamlet. One Wednesday morning the faithful gathered around the text at 6:30 in the church parlor, as was our custom, and opened the Book together (Romans, I think). Fifteen minutes in, though, out the corner of my eye, I noticed through the window a black car idling by the curb outside.

You'll need a bit of background. My classmates and I fit the stereotype of the poor grad student. We moved each other from one apartment to another, with pizza and beer as an end-of-the-day reward (we couldn't afford to hire the pros). We drove each other to the airport for a fare of one used book from the flier's personal library (we didn't have coin for a shuttle). Out of necessity, we helped one another.

This necessity-induced reliance on mates had left me quite naïve about the ways of the wealthy. Hearing the motor purring outside, I instinctively asked my class if one of them had accidentally left her or his car running, or if anyone recognized the late-arriving driver, so we could invite her or him not to feel bashful about joining us. The class glanced knowingly around the circle at one another, until Steven finally, sheepishly, raised his hand. "That's my limo to the airport." Without thinking I blurted out: "Don't you have any friends?" After the embarrassing silence that followed, I shared with my fellow readers that some of the best conversations of my life happened on the way to airports with buddies, whether as driver or passenger. I did not share that I couldn't even fathom why Steven or anyone would want to give up that sort of intimate community – would even pay money to give it up. I felt sorry for Steven – for them all, really.

Westerners often strive for a self-reliance that we hope will set us free, but this is a different sort of self-sufficiency than Paul's *autarkeia* – a community-gouging sort that prides itself on

having enough stuff not to need help. We hire out tasks that neighbors could do for one another and so insulate ourselves from the vulnerability of needing other people. Or we wall ourselves off with self-encasing devices that leave us needing no one, each of us riveted to a screen alone. Self-sufficiency, a misguided quest to need no one, is on the rise in our land, and it's driving a loneliness epidemic that pervades our culture and can lead to suicides, drug abuse, and a whole lot of other weak substitutes for friendship.

Paul's self-sufficiency happens precisely in the mutually-reliant context of community. If Paul's words in 4.10-13 usher us toward a sturdy self-sufficiency in Christ (*autarkeia*), significant other parts of the letter call the Philippians toward one another. He exhorts them to strive together (1.16-20), to come together (2.1-3), and, by "having... the mind of Christ Jesus", to esteem others as even more important than themselves (2.4). They are to work out their communal salvation with fear and trembling (2.12). In these passages, we could never imagine Paul's Christian *autarkeia* as a solo act. Paul envisions a thriving community that is mutually self-sacrificing and interdependent and so offers us an antidote to the overdeveloped self-sufficiency and individualism of the modern west. In fact, a New Testament scholar called Bradley Arnold has suggested that we tend to see Stoic and Pauline use of *autarkeia* through the lens of modernism and western individualism, to our own detriment. He reminds us that the Stoics' and Paul's second-nature assumption that community is primary would have kept the self-sufficient soul from lapsing into isolation. (see "Autarkes in Stoicism and Philippians 4.11: Challenging Individualist Readings of Stoicism," *Novum Testamentum* 59 (1): 1-19, 2017) This letter as a whole calls us to keep self-reliance in a constructive tandem with communal mutuality.

This intimate community of which we speak even shows up in our *autarkeia* passage, through themes that originate with the ancient ethics of friendship. Paul's initial thanks to the Philippians is surprisingly underwhelming. In fact, one scholarly article on these verses calls it a "thankless thanks". Although Paul is glad for their kindness, because it demonstrates their concern for him, he essentially says (in 4:11), "Thanks for the gift, but I didn't really need it." Remember, Paul writes this from a wretched Roman prison, which, to understate the poor conditions, has no cafeteria. In fact, this gift may have saved Paul's life, and it has surely made his circumstances much better, but in response he barely ekes out a grateful word.

Another Stoic, Seneca, can help us understand Paul's weak thanks. In his ninth letter to his protégé, Lucilius, on choosing friends, Seneca pictures "the so-called 'fair-weather' friendships." In these, "one who is chosen for the sake of utility will be satisfactory only so long as he is useful." Seneca cautions Lucilius not to fall for that sort, because, "one who begins to be your friend because it pays will also cease because it pays." For Seneca, true friends haven't become friends for the benefits. Their devotion runs deeper than that.

Paul seems to have the same truth about friendship in mind when he offers his own "thankless thanks." Many commentators identify Philippians as a "friendship letter", or at

least see elements of that genre in it. (See Abraham Malherbe, *Ancient Epistolary Theorists*, 1988, and those who build on it.) Indeed, from the letter's first words, Paul has treated the Philippians as his friends. His weak thanks is probably his way of assuring the Philippians that his friendship with them is not contingent on their benefactions – that he would be their friend, even if they could not or had not given him a thing. (See Gordon Fee, *The NIV Commentary on Philippians*. For an alternative interpretation, see David Briones, "Paul's Intentional 'Thankless Thanks' in Philippians 4.10-20," *JSNT* 34 (1) 2011, 47-69)

Application #2: The close community that a youth group offers is a second kind of gold for adolescents, whose self-sufficiency-run-amok could lead to loneliness and depression.

FINISHING THE STORY

Let's check back in on our little high school lunchroom drama. The game is "What are YOU worth today?!" and it's Lydia's turn. Here's good news: without knowing it, our young friend has spent years preparing for this moment. At church, she has shown up every time her youth leaders open the church doors;

- practiced spiritual exercises and read scripture in community;
- wept with understanding youth group friends through the hardest parts of their adolescent lives; and
- swung hammers and carried roofing on enough mission trips with impoverished peoples to see what worth really means.

In all these ways, Lydia learned that her value runs deeper than her clothes and that her church community would love her whether she had stuff or not. She caught enough of what is right to know that something was wrong at that table.

So, in the inspired moment of our drama, Lydia estimated her worth aloud: "I am infinitely valuable, you guys, because the God of the universe made me and loves me."

This sounds too convenient, too made-for-TV, too tailored to our topic, doesn't it? I wouldn't believe it myself, except I heard the story directly from Lydia's grateful mother, who couldn't tell the it without weeping. I wondered, as she spoke, what the other five girls felt, as their tally suddenly seemed paltry and their reliance on fleeting baubles had been exposed as pale. I wanted them to go to Lydia's youth group.

We started with a simple question: where lies flourish? Paul's letter to the Philippians has offered us two killer clues:

- First, the flourish that God intends does not hinge on fortuitous circumstances, whether financial or otherwise. It is a sturdy, God-given gift of sensed well-being – what Paul in Philippians calls joy. Training our students to that sort of joy banks that gift in them for life.



- Second, while that gift of flourishing life involves a kind of self-sufficiency, God designed it to be both cultivated and enjoyed and developed within and through the strong bonds of mutually-reliant Christian community. Supplying that sort of community banks a second gift in adolescent lives.

Youth ministries like yours can implant the holy habit of self-sufficiency lived in mutually-reliant Christian community. That X marks the spot where Paul has found treasure, and he'll do his best to lead us all there, if we'll let him. May God bless your ministry and form you and your students in this flourish, joy, and...

Peace,
Allen Hilton