

Contentment, generosity and blessing

Philippians 4:10-20

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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.

Here we see that Paul was rejoicing for the concern that had been shown him by the church in Philippi. It was the sweetness of loving and being loved. These believers in Philippi held a special place in Paul's heart, and by their actions they were showing that he held a special place in their hearts as well. Verses 14-16 then tell us more about their relationship:

¹⁴ Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again.

This letter was written around A.D. 61. The apostle Paul was in prison in Rome. The church in Philippi had sent one of their own, Epaphroditus, who had traveled over 1,200 km to bring their financial gift to Paul and to update Paul on the condition of the church in Philippi.

If you were in a Roman prison, your needs were not met by the prison system. You were dependent on friends or family to meet your most basic needs. Paul was a Roman citizen, so his house arrest was likely better than a dungeon where a slave might have been, but nonetheless he still was dependent on others to meet his daily needs such as food and essential care.

The church in Philippi had heard of Paul's needs and had responded by gathering their money and sending it to Paul. Their sacrificial gift touched Paul's heart deeply, but it was not the first time they had come to his aid. Paul never asked for money from the churches that he started. Scripture even tells how at times Paul worked as a tentmaker to provide for himself, but his relationship with the church in Philippi was different. We see in scripture how they also supported Paul when he moved on to Thessalonica (Philippians 4:16) and when he arrived in Corinth (2 Corinthians 11:9). They loved

Paul and he loved them. He was their spiritual father and their gift was a sign of their appreciation of all that Paul was and all that Paul had done for them.

Paul was once again rejoicing as he had throughout the book of Philippians, but not just in the gift he had received. He was rejoicing in the Lord. He was not rejoicing in his freedom, because he was not free. He was not rejoicing in his riches, because he had nothing. He was not rejoicing in his conflict free life, because others were coming against him. He was not rejoicing in a secure life, because he had no idea what was awaiting him at the end of his time in prison. He rejoiced in the Lord, the only eternally secure and blessed thing in his life. In this mindset, Paul continued to rejoice in the Lord while rejoicing in the Philippians' gift to him. That is similar to us being thankful to God for something that a person does for us.

He rejoiced in the Lord in the midst of their gift because it was God who had stirred their hearts to give. It was God who had blessed them so that they could be a blessing to Paul. It was God who had provided the means for them to be generous to Paul. In reality, the Philippians were merely the conduit of God's grace and provision. Paul was so familiar with God's way of providing that when receiving the gift from the Philippians he turned his attention and gratitude and joy to God.

It would be similar to a wife receiving a very nice Christmas gift that said on the package it was from "her young children". In the midst of her big hug and "thank you" to her children, she turns her gaze towards her husband and gives a grateful nod knowing him to be the true source of the gift.

The Philippians loved Paul, and God had prepared their hearts to be ready to give. They now expressed it through their financial gift once the need had become known to them.

In verses 11-13, we then read some of Paul's clearest teaching on contentment:

¹¹ Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am 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.

Is it really possible to be content? How could Paul say that he had learned in whatever situation he was to be content? He was a man who was educated, came from a good family, and who had had power and prestige. He had spoken before kings and the greatest thinkers of his day in Athens. From the world's perspective, he was a young man who had so much, until he decided to leave it all behind for the sake of Jesus Christ. For sharing the love of Christ he was whipped, beaten, and almost stoned to death. He was imprisoned unjustly numerous times and shipwrecked more than once. There were days without sleep, shelter or food for the sake of Christ, but yet from this Roman prison cell Paul was able to write, ***"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances"*** (Philippians 4:11).

To answer the question about where Paul found his contentment, we first have to understand what contentment is and is not. The opposite of contentment is envy or covetousness. It is grudgingly wanting something that someone else has. It is often a feeling that life is not fair. That God has not treated you justly. That you deserve more. It is always accompanied with a focus on self, believing that happiness will come if you can have what you want. God speaks of this attitude multiple times in scripture.

Paul was satisfied in what he had. He had the essentials. He had grown accustomed to living and being content and thankful for the bare minimum. Realizing that he deserved nothing, every moment of life was a gift. He was content even as he sat chained in a Rome prison.

The money from the Philippians was helpful, but Paul's deepest longings and needs had already been met in Christ long before Epaphroditus ever arrived. Paul already had what most of us are still seeking. In Christ he was rich. In the Spirit he held the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control that he had written about in Galatians 5:22-23. In Christ, Paul had these priceless gifts that most of us spend our entire lives pursuing, and not even Caesar could take them away.

The stoics of Paul's day sought contentment as well, but they believed it could be accomplished by learning to desire nothing; by ceasing to feel or care for the welfare of self or others. One was to lower his or her expectations and learn to be governed by apathy. That is the opposite of what we see in scripture.

God calls us to desire fully. Our mistake is that we are often too easily satisfied. We grow content with the counterfeit pleasures of this world, instead of persevering whole-heartedly until we take hold of the priceless riches that Paul had taken hold of. As Pastor John Piper has said, *"God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him."*

It is when we turn away from a love for the world and finally find our greatest desires met in Christ that contentment can be ours. Any other manner of fulfilling our longings in the world will always prove vain, futile and temporary.

Jeremiah 2:13 describes this same idea in a different way. *"For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water."*

This verse is the picture of one who, instead of drinking from a pure, unending spring of water, has decided to build a receptacle that catches runoff rainwater from the street. They have turned from the pure spring water and, instead, trusted in their own faulty strategies to drink stagnant, poisonous water that leads to death.

Our desire of the world's version of contentment will result the same way. It will bring brokenness and regret. This is what Jesus is talking about in John 10:10, *"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."* This is a description of the battle for our hearts and our minds. Satan has come to destroy life, and Christ has come to save it. The prince of this world is wooing our hearts with all of the messages of the world, but Jesus has come to expose the lie, to set the captives free, and to offer an abundant life to all who will believe.

We often dream of the future when life will be better, believing that "the grass is always greener on the other side." We believe that once we are richer, more popular, more loved, more comfortable, more pain-free, or more entertained, we will find contentment, but that is not true. In the Christian life the true riches are at our fingertips every day. They are right in front of us. The truly priceless, precious things of life are always within reach because Christ is in reach.

The world breeds discontentment in us. We naturally long for deep things like love, joy and peace, but the problem comes when we try to take hold of them through money, materialism, popularity, pleasure, and ease of life. God's Word already promises these blessed things of life are found in Christ. We don't have to bow to the world's methods to find contentment.

We were not created for this world. We were created for eternity in heaven. Our longings give testimony that we were created for something more. On earth, if we choose to live life surrendered to Christ, we can get a small taste of what it will be like in heaven with Christ. Our home is in heaven, and only there will our deepest longings be fully realized. This is how the apostle Paul can say . . . ***"I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him"*** (Philippians 3:8). With this mindset, even death itself was a welcomed friend: ***"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain"*** (Philippians 1:21).

We are not like the stoics and other religions who have taught their followers that the only way to contentment was to move towards apathy and to desire less. God calls us to desire more, but to let those longings turn us to Him, the only One who can fulfill our deepest longings. We must turn to Him as a child turns to a father. It is in that relationship with our heavenly Father that we will find every need met. In this we will be free from covetousness and find true contentment.

¹⁷ Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. ¹⁸ I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. ¹⁹ And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁰ To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

God had given the Philippians hearts of generosity. As they had matured in their faith and understood the abundance that they had in Christ, they were compelled to give. As they heard of Paul's need, they had responded as an act of gratitude, concern and faith. They knew that Christ was their provider. Their confidence was that the same God who led them to give would also meet their every need in the midst of their giving.

Paul now rejoiced in the gift, not because of what he got out of it, but because of the blessing that he knew the Philippians would now receive because they gave. As we read in Acts 20:35, ***"It is more blessed to give than to receive."***

In 2 Corinthians 9:6, Paul added this, ***"Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously."*** This is the principle of God giving generously to everyone who gives generously. Or as Solomon stated it in the Old Testament, ***"Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing"*** (Proverbs 3:9-10). Even Christ Himself testified to this principle of reciprocal generosity, ***"Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap"*** (Luke 6:38).

This pattern is clear. So much so that it provided the occasion where Israel was told to test God to experience His faithfulness.

In Malachi 3:10, God said this about giving, ***“Test me in this, . . . and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.”***

Now we have to be careful how we interpret these verses. Some, listening with a selfish heart, will take these verses and give money to God thinking that it is similar to investing in the stock market. Their hope is that if they give money to God, then He will give more money back to them. The problem with this way of thinking is that God knows the hearts of man. God will not be mocked. He cannot be manipulated. God can recognize a gift that is not pleasing to Him. A gift that is pleasing to God is one that is led by the Spirit, given by faith, selflessly given from a cheerful heart, seeking no recognition, and confident that God will provide for their every need. The gift is to give God glory while expressing love for the one in need.

In the Old Testament, God talked of the tithe, giving 10%, which was necessary to support the temple ministry and the sacrificial system. In the New Testament, God changed from 10% to 100%. We have been bought with a price. We now belong to Christ and everything that we have is His. God is now looking for those who by faith will give generously, as the Spirit leads. As we become faithful stewards of God’s resources God will continue to bless us so that we can be a blessing to others.

Paul’s words also benefit those who are slow to give because of their fear that they will not have enough for themselves. There is nothing wrong with being responsible for one’s own needs. Whether it be thinking about saving money, insurance, retirement or other types of financial planning, but as Christians we no longer have to live in fear. 2 Corinthians 9:11 puts our fears to rest, ***“You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God.”*** For those who seek to be generous to others, God will make a way for them to do so.

At times, God will give back to the giver financially. At other times, God will grow our faith as we give. In other times, God will grant us joy as we help another in need. At times, in the midst of our giving to others we will sense God drawing near to us. As the psalmist wrote in Psalm 112:5, ***“Good will come to him who is generous.”***

God’s response to our giving may be material or spiritual blessing. As we find in the words of Solomon, ***“One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed”*** (Proverbs 11:24–25).

Our confidence is in the fact that those who give as God leads will be blessed by God in one way or another. That is what Paul was rejoicing in. Because the Philippians had given to Him in his time of need, God would bless them.

“Blessed is the one who considers the poor! In the day of trouble the LORD delivers him.” (Psalm 41:1)

“Whoever has a bountiful eye will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor.” (Proverbs 22:9)

“God loves a cheerful giver.” (2 Corinthians 9:7)

We are imitating Christ. We give to others as He gave to us. It characterizes a people who live in an abundance mindset. God is generous to us. We should be generous to others. Like Paul, this abundant mindset applies even when we don't have much. It is much like the story of the widow in Mark 12:41-44:

⁴¹ And he (Jesus) sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. ⁴³ And he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. ⁴⁴ For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

Others were giving out of their wealth, while she gave out of her poverty. Jesus said that the widow had given more not because of the amount of money, but because of the amount of sacrifice. Hers was truly an act of faith, pleasing to God.

We see a similar truth in the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath, found in 1 Kings 17:8-16:

⁸ Then the word of the Lord came to him, ⁹"Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you." ¹⁰ So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink." ¹¹ And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." ¹² And she said, "As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die." ¹³ And Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. ¹⁴ For thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth.'" ¹⁵ And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. ¹⁶ The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

This story is a clear picture of God's provision for those who by faith give to others in need. The Philippian's gift to Paul was much the same. It had been given with such purity and sacrifice that it was pleasing and acceptable to God. Because of this, in the midst of their generosity they had nothing to fear. God led them to give. They then responded by giving out of faith and obedience. God would then supply their every need **"according to His riches and glory in Christ Jesus"**.

Paul here lays down a principle for giving. Where God calls, He provides. We cannot outgive God. For those who give as they are led by the Spirit, God will meet their every need. We ought not fear being generous. Our main responsibility is to walk intimately with God so that we sense His leading to give. Then we can be confident of His provision. Without intimacy with God, we either refuse to give because of fear, or we give with an impure motive or in ways that God did not lead.

As we nurture our relationship with Christ we will grow to look at the world and the needs of others as God does. God will shape our faith, our priorities and our understanding of need and provision. God will hone our sensitivity to the Spirit's leading. When we seek first the kingdom of God, we will be confident that God will meet our needs (Matthew 6:33). As we begin to see contentment, giving and His provision from a biblical perspective, we will be made ready to be a channel of blessing as he blesses us so that we can be a blessing to others.

In 1 Timothy 6:17-19, the Apostle Paul instructs Timothy to teach the people to not *“put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment . . . do good, be rich in good deeds, and be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.”*

May we be people and a church who will mature in our faith and be characterized by contentment, generosity and the blessing of God for many years to come.

Discussion questions:

1. What in this sermon did you find interesting?
2. In your opinion, what do most people trust in to find contentment?
3. Why do you think people find it difficult to be more generous?
4. How does the promise of God to “supply all our needs” help a Christian be willing to give to others who are in need?
5. What do you think you need to remember from this sermon?
6. What do you think God wants you to do about it?
7. How can we help you accomplish this?