

## Contentment and Generosity

**Psalm 16:5-11**

**Philippians 4:10-20**

Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl made an observation, while incarcerated in a concentration camp: he observed that those who survived the Holocaust (who had the opportunity to) were not necessarily the strongest, physically, the healthiest, or the ones who were genetically disposed to survive. The ones who survived were those who exercised hope in the midst of the atrocities they were experiencing. Who found a way, day by day, in small and big ways, to have hope and think about their future, in the worst of circumstances. For Frankl, it was planning a research project that would eventually become a book that kept him going.

Here is what Victor Frankl said: (from *Man's Search for Meaning*)

“Everything can be taken from a man (person) but one thing: The last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. And there were always choices to make (in the concentration camp). Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom;

which determined whether or not you become the plaything to circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity...”

That’s remarkable.

Our final text from Philippians as we wrap up this series is a very good example of Paul choosing his attitude in his circumstances. This morning we learn that he chooses contentment. And gratitude.

As part of his closing remarks at the end of this little letter, Paul thanks the Philippians for their financial contribution to him and his ministry. And as he always does, he uses it as an opportunity to reflect on the deeper and greater significance of this stewardship on the part of the people from this church.

*I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Christ who strengthens me.*

*Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts*

*you sent.* (Note: Epaphroditus was a messenger, like a mailman, taking letters and other items to and from Paul and the churches as they corresponded with each other) *They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

This is the word of the Lord...

In 2007-8, during the downturn in the economy, one man lost just about everything—his investments went down the drain. A friend asked him, “How are you doing?” He said “Fine. I’m sleeping like a baby: I wake up every two or three hours and cry.”

Paul says, “I have learned to be content whatever I have, whatever the situation.” I wonder how many people can say that. I have to admit, sometimes I hear Paul say, “I’ve learned the secret of being content” and I want to say, “Well, congratulations, Paul. I haven’t quite learned that one yet.” And, I want to ask, what about victims of a hurricane, or wildfires (like we see almost every summer)? Should they say, “Well, I’ve learned to be content whatever the circumstances? I lost my house, everything I had...” How about homeless folks? Is that what Paul means here? I’m not so sure. Perhaps some people in those circumstances can learn to say that eventually, but I believe those are extraordinary circumstances that require us to go to other parts of Scripture in seeking understanding and grace. Here in our text from Philippians, Paul is

describing what we might call the “ordinary” ups and downs of life, over the span of many years. Even then I wonder how many can say “I’ve learned to be content in any and every situation” with the ease with which Paul seems to say it.

Wouldn’t it be great to say that we’re content? To be able to say, that no matter what’s happening in my life at the moment, and no matter how much or how little I have, that I am content?

Many of you I’m sure are able to say that. You’ve learned the secret of being content. For many others of us, I suspect, our contentment is based on “if...” or “when.” “I’ll be content when... my circumstances improve, or *when* I have more income, or *when* I feel better, *if* the Huskies beat the Cougars next week (or vice versa!)... Basically, when my circumstances change, *then* I’ll be content. That has often been true for me. And perhaps for some of you too.

Augustine: “O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” True contentment comes from Christ, is given by Christ and is in Christ, as Paul seems to tell us. Without God we are restless creatures, always looking for something else, something more to settle the restlessness. Sometimes *even with Christ* we are still restless creatures. And the invitation, then, is to learn to trust him more.

Finding contentment is a challenge. We live in a restless society, an age of *discontent*, with advertisements constantly trying to convince us that we don't have enough, that we need more, should want more. Our cell phone company used to tell us, "get more." Nobody encourages us to ask ourselves, do we really *need* more? Discontent leads us to buy more and be a better consumer of goods. To keep the economy stimulated, in part, the population needs to be generally discontent with what they have so they'll buy more stuff, new stuff, better stuff.

We need to learn the secret of being content. First, because God wants relationship with us. God loves us, and wants to know us, and us to know him. And discontentment blinds us to God's goodness and generosity toward us, and distracts us from that relationship.

We also need to learn the secret of being content, because, as I've said, I believe that one of the gifts that the people of God can give to our world—one of our secret weapons if you will—is our peace of mind and heart, and our witness of a calm and reasonable response to life. To be people who live simply and gratefully.

In an age of "get more" I believe the Christian witness can be, "got enough." Because I think people are getting worn out from consumerism and the

hamster wheel of trying to get more. In August, some stores had their Christmas merchandise out already. It wasn't even the end of summer yet! There must be some diagnostic word or phrase for the early onset of Christmas...

What is contentment, from a Biblical perspective? I'd like to offer a couple thoughts—based on our text from Philippians and a couple other Biblical texts that speak to this.

**First**, contentment is learning to want what I already have (repeat). This is actually a good way to rephrase the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment in a positive way. Instead of “you shall not covet,” the commandment—at heart—says, “You shall want what you already have.” It's the ability to say thank you for the goods and the people in our lives.

To be content is to be able to say, with David in Psalm 16:6, “the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.” Even if the boundary lines haven't fallen for you or for me exactly where you or I *want*, or *expect*. Contentment is the ability to look around myself and see that God has provided for my needs.

Classic line from Paul in 1Timothy 6:6-9: *“There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so we take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing we will be content with these.”*

Paul goes with the bare minimum here (food and clothing is enough)—that’s pretty austere. But it’s a good reminder, when discontentment rears its head, it’s a good reminder that death shrouds have no pockets. I brought nothing with me into this world; I will take nothing with me when it’s time to go.

So I try to remind myself that all I have is a gift and blessing. I have everything I really need: I *do* have food, clothing, a roof over my head; I have a great family and an abundance of good friends and acquaintances, and a caring & wonderful church community to serve alongside. Wealth isn’t just about money and possessions; it’s also about relationships and community. Heidi and I have said to each other over the years that we enjoy a wealth of relationships—in our respective families, and the friends we’ve made over the years. So we can look at what we already have and say it’s good; the boundary lines have fallen for us in pleasant places.

First part of contentment: not having everything you want, but wanting what you already have. To look around and say, “the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.”

1965: Mick Jagger & the Rolling Stones sang “I can’t get no...” A few years later in 1969 he was singing “You can’t always get what you want... but if you try

sometimes, you just might find you get what you need.” That’s a true statement. I’m sure he wasn’t singing about Jesus, but maybe even Mick Jagger learned at least a little bit about contentment.

The **second** part of Paul’s contentment is that he *learned and grew* throughout life’s ebbs and flows (repeat). He chose the path of growth, rather than let life’s circumstances dictate his attitude. The incredible thing about Paul is that he can say “I have learned to be content,” even though he’s in prison, he is materially poor, his health was deteriorating, and some of his friends had deserted him (we read in 1Timothy). Yet in spite of these circumstances he says, “I have learned to be content no matter what.” I think it’s safe to say that Paul was probably in pretty bad shape when he wrote this letter.

But he says that he also had times of plenty. Paul’s life is an ebb and flow of abundance, then scarcity; healthy then ill, strong again, then weak. His circumstances changed over the years. And I’m guessing that many of us can relate to that. That’s life—it never goes in a straight line, from point a to point b.

So what Paul is saying here, is that one of the things we must do in order to learn contentment is to adjust to change. *Our happiness in life most likely will depend on how well we can adjust to change.* I love the saying: Change is

inevitable, growth is optional. Jesuit priest Anthony DeMello: "*the one who would be constant in happiness must frequently change.*" (adapt to change) He's talking about our attitude, as Victor Frankl was.

So, Paul says "I have **learned**...to be content." He says it twice. This is the clue that contentment didn't come naturally or easily for him—as it doesn't come naturally or easily for me, and perhaps for some of you. He had to *learn* it; he had to adjust to change; he had to choose a path of growth.

And how is that possible? It is possible because... "I can do everything through Christ who strengthens me."

What a great promise: Christ provides the strength for us, for all of life. Strength to learn and grow and somehow thank God in the middle of your circumstances. Because your circumstances will change. Scripture says, "It came to pass." Not "it came to stay." Nothing remains forever. Except God and his love. We find our strength and sufficiency in Jesus.

Again, listen to what David says in Psalm 16: "*The Lord is my portion; apart from him I have no good thing. Because God is with me, my heart is glad, my soul rejoices and my body rests secure.*" Isn't that wonderful?! Heart, soul, and body

are at peace. David's contentment was in having the *Lord*, and in knowing the Lord was with him.

Hebrews 13:5: "Be content with what you have, because God has said, 'never will I leave you or forsake you.'" Contentment is based on the assurance of God's holding on to you and taking care of you. And how can that not provide strength for us?!

Brief post-script: Paul concludes his letter with these words: "God will meet all your needs, according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus."

We've just heard Paul's story of contentment. But there is also the story of the *Philippians'* contentment, if you will; *their* generosity and *their* stewardship. Here is this little church, with meager resources, which is supporting the apostle Paul—even though he's in prison and isn't getting out. In some ways their taking up a collection and sending him a financial gift doesn't make sense. They could have funded other things that made more practical sense and had immediate impact. But they did it because of their love for the Lord, and their love for Paul. It was more of a symbol than anything.

And again, Paul has a great attitude here, and he doesn't complain about the other 19 churches that could have supported him but didn't ("those Corinthians... they're loaded and they didn't give a penny!").

No, he simply thanks *them* for *their* gift and *their* generosity, and says he didn't really need it, **BUT**: it was important for them to give it for their own sakes: "I don't seek the gift," Paul says, "but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account." In other words, your giving was for *your* benefit, not mine.

So here is an important stewardship principle: we give, not so much because of need—though that's obviously important—but because it grows *us*, it benefits *us*, and it mysteriously generates God's blessing in our life. Our giving is as much for our spiritual growth and personal maturity as it is for the benefit of others and for the church.

Peter Marshall, Scottish preacher and chaplain to the U.S. senate in the mid 1940's said, "We give, not to prove to *God* how much we love him, but to prove to *ourselves* how much we love him."

Paul says, the gift was great—gee, thanks—but what was better was what the gift represented: your heart, your love, your spiritual growth.

Jesus tells the story about the poor widow who put a couple copper coins into the offering (the widow's mite as it's called). She was certainly not funding ministry in a substantial way. She *was*, however, humbly asking for God's mercy and blessing, and proving her devotion to God. And Jesus says, that was a beautiful act of worship. Which is also what Paul says about the Philippians' gift.

Paul describes the Philippians' gift as "a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God."

When we give of ourselves and our resources—whether to the church or anywhere, we're giving praise to God for who God is and what God has done in our lives. We're exercising gratitude. We're worshiping. In addition to growing our spiritual lives.

As a way of tying this all together we can say this: When we're content, we're generous. That's the Philippians' story, that's Paul's story, and may it be our story as well. We can do all things through Christ who gives us strength.

God, Whose Giving Knows No Ending