

## Sermon – 02/05/2010 am

### Contentment

Study Text: Philippians 4:10-13

A major cause of anxiety is money. The poor worry about getting it and the rich worry about losing it. A man called Agur once said *give me neither riches nor poverty, but give me only my daily bread; otherwise I might have too much and disown you and say 'who is the Lord'? Or I might become poor and steal and so dishonour the name of my God* (Proverbs 30:8-9). Agur was a wise man and these are wise words. But we might also observe that most people consider themselves poor. We are never satisfied. Contentment is elusive. That is because contentment is never found in money or possessions. Contentment is an attitude of the heart. The peace of God that surpasses all understanding is what gives us contentment (4:7, 10).

The verses we are looking at today are personal in nature. Paul is writing to thank the Philippian church for sending him a gift while he was in prison in Rome. Epaphroditus carried this gift from Philippi to Rome. Paul was genuinely grateful, but was also careful about the way he expressed his thanks. In this seemingly simple matter of saying 'thank you' he takes the opportunity to teach spiritual truths.

### Concern

Paul continues to rejoice in the Lord. *I rejoiced greatly in the Lord* he said (4:10). What was Paul rejoicing about now? He was rejoicing that the believers at Philippi had remembered him and sent him a gift. Their care for him had at last revived or flourished again (4:10).

Paul began this letter rejoicing and continues doing so till the end. He was rejoicing even though the Romans had him in chains, the Jews were pressing charges against him, and the Christians were deserting him. He rejoiced in the Lord who promised never to leave him or forsake him. The contentment he speaks of in these verses is related to this joy in the Lord.

The church at Philippi was dear to the heart of the apostle. It was the first fruit of his ministry in Europe. From the very beginning the people there opened their hearts and their houses to Paul and his fellow missionaries. Lydia invited them to stay at her place and the jailer did the same – and also washed their wounds (Acts 16:15, 33). These were probably well-off people with decent houses. We are reminded of the saying 'it is not the size of your house that matters but the size of your front door'.

Even after Paul left Philippi the church there remembered him in prayer and in their giving. On that second missionary journey he went from Philippi to Thessalonica. They sent gifts to him while he was there – not once but twice (4:16). They sent further help to him while he was in Corinth (I Corinthians 11:9). The gifts sent to him in Rome were the latest in a long and consistent pattern of generosity.

Why the *now at last* and the *you lacked opportunity* (4:10). It was not that that the Philippians had forgotten about Paul. It may have been, as some scholars suggest, that they took some time to organise a collection or to find a suitable person to take the gift to Rome. But it may simply have been that they had lost contact with Paul for a while. He was always on the move during his ministry. His recent movements were as a prisoner of the Romans. Whatever the reason, as soon as they were able they sent help to their beloved brother.

Their concern for Paul was revived. It had flourished again. This word refers to the flush of growth that comes on a tree after the winter. It is still alive during the winter. Their concern for Paul never died. It remained alive to be expressed in this gift sent to him in Rome. The word translated 'care' or 'concern' is actually the same word translated 'thinking' or 'mind' in other places (2:5, 3:19).

We might also recall what Paul wrote back in chapter two verse four – *let each of you look out not only for his own interests but also the interests of others*. They were thinking of Paul. They were praying for him and taking practical steps to help him in his present need. They were not guilty of simply saying 'go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed' but doing nothing to help their brother in need (James 2:16).

## Content

*Not that I speak with regard to need* (4:11). Why did Paul qualify what he just wrote? Was he pouring cold water on their generous gift? Was it a case of 'thanks but no thanks – I was okay without your help'? Was Paul being too proud to express an unqualified thank you? He would not be the first person to be too proud to receive a gift with thanks. 'Paul also avoids the kind of spiritual arrogance that is often associated with poverty, as well as the usual arrogance associated with wealth'. We must be generous and cheerful givers but also humble and thankful receivers.

On one occasion while visiting a tribal village in India I was asked to distribute gifts to the poor people there. In a small gathering I was giving blankets to women who needed them to keep warm in the winter. Before taking her blanket one old lady put a garland around my neck. The garland was made of biscuits strung together. It was a deeply humbling experience. The Philippians shared with Paul in giving and receiving (4:15).

Paul was not ungrateful, but as Carson wrote 'he very shrewdly grasps how exuberant thanks could be misunderstood. Some people voice their thanks in such a way that it is hard to avoid the inference that they are hoping for another gift'. We are familiar with aid organisations and the like that send glowing letters of thanks for your gift and at the end ask for you to give even more. Manipulation by flattery, or by stirring up guilt feelings, is not uncommon. Paul was careful never to be manipulated by money matters. He refused to accept gifts if there was a danger of misunderstanding.

The Philippians were mature believers. He accepted their gift with heartfelt thanks and with rejoicing in the Lord. But he also wanted them to know that he had learned to be content in whatever situation he was in (4:11). He was not depending on them or anyone else. He was not depending on his own sources or resources. He was depending on the Lord.

Since becoming a Christian the apostle Paul had experienced up and downs in life, the likes of which few other men have known. He had gone without food for extended periods. In prison he suffered for lack of warm cloths (II Corinthians 11:27, II Timothy 4:13). On other occasions he had more than sufficient by way of the necessities of life. He may have remembered his comfortable life as a respected Pharisee, but more likely the times when he was taken in by people like Lydia and the jailer at Philippi. Even now, after receiving the gift from the Philippians, he could say *I have all and abound. I am full* (4:18). The Lord promises to supply all our needs, not our greeds (4:19).

I received a letter from a man who was a respected member of the Muslim community before he became a Christian. He fled his home and had no place to stay until a Christian took him in. In this letter he told how his old community continued to persecute him, and the majority community in

India still looked down on him as a Muslim. He receives help from his new community – the Christians.

*I have learned to be content in whatever situation I am in* wrote Paul (4:11). He had no need or want because, as Calvin writes, ‘want here refers to disposition. For that man can never be poor in mind who is satisfied with the lot which has been assigned to him by God’. Many are slow to learn this great secret of the Christian life. *Godliness with contentment is great gain* said Paul at an even later stage in his life (I Timothy 6:6). He was warning Timothy and all believers about the danger of money – or rather the love of money. Many are led astray by the desire for money and the things that money can buy. Riches keep many from the door to heaven and the joy of the Lord.

*We brought nothing into the world and we will take nothing out* said Paul (I Timothy 6:7). Paul may have learned something of the secret of patience and contentment from Job who said *naked I came from my mothers womb and naked I shall return; the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord* (Job 1:21).

## Christ

What is the secret of contentment? Where and how did Paul find this secret? It was not found in an ethics class. It was not learned from the philosophers of this world. Paul was not being a Stoic, bracing himself against the world like a statue. Paul found in Jesus Christ the source of peace and contentment. He found the source of strength not just to stand with gritted teeth in the face of adversity but to actually rejoice in the Lord. In the same strength he resisted the temptation to depend on his own resources when he had them.

*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me* (4:13). The secret to contentment in the Christian life is Jesus Christ. Even as he thanked the Philippians for their gift, Paul was giving thanks to the Lord. Their gift was not only supplying his need, but was overflowing in expressions of thanks to God (II Corinthians 9:12).

Paul was once a man who did everything in his own strength. He was marching off to destroy more Christians when Jesus appeared and spoke to him. Even after this he tended to trust in his own strength. He had to learn to depend upon the Lord. He had to learn that the grace of God is sufficient for all situations in life. He learnt that *when I am weak then I am strong* (II Corinthians 12:10). He learnt that *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me*.

This verse must not be taken out of context. Too many Christians take *I can all things* to mean the opposite of what Paul meant. They think it is a promise that they will be able to perform miracles, or at least achieve great things in their life. They mix this promise with carnal motives and with worldly thinking that says we are in control of our own destiny. They see Jesus as helping them achieve their own worldly desires, whereas Christ gave Paul the strength to resist worldly desires and to be content even when in chains.

The gift from the Philippians was a reminder that the Lord had not forgotten him. Paul was not forsaken. But even if no one gave him help he would still keep on in the Lord, content and rejoicing because the Lord gave him the strength to do so. Have you learned the secret of being content in your life? For better for worse, for rich or for poor, in sickness and in health, will you cling to the Lord? Can you say ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me’ in the same way as the apostle Paul?

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