

A shared contentment

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- [0 : 00] Philippians chapter 4, beginning to read at verse 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. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.
- 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.
- I can do all things through him who strengthens me. Yet, it was kind of you to share my trouble.
- 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 only you.
- [1 : 19] Even in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs, once and again. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.
- I have received full payment and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, of fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.
- And my God will supply every need of yours, according to his riches, in glory, in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.
- Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.
- The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Judith, thanks so much indeed for reading for us. Once again, just to say a very warm welcome to Grace Church.
- [2 : 32] Lovely to have lots of people with us this morning. For those who don't know, Grace Church is a Church of England church. And if you'd like to know more about us, then do pick up a copy of our program card.
- There are details there. As well, of course, come to one of our carol services as well that we were hearing about earlier. Why don't I pray for us as we look at the Bible together.
- Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. We pray to you, Heavenly Father, that Jesus is risen and that he is Lord and that he is returning at the end of history.
- Thank you for the great privilege we have of having open Bibles. And we pray, therefore, please would your word indeed dwell in us richly. And we ask it in Jesus' name.
- Amen. Amen. Well, you may have spotted that the publishers of the Collins English Dictionary have just named their word of the year for 2022.
- [3 : 40] There was stiff competition, words such as Kieve, Partygate, Sportswashing, Carolian, and Vibe Shift. Someone needs to explain what that is to me.
- Do it later. Anyway, the winner was none of those things. The winner was Permacrisis. Because as they explained, it sums up how truly awful 2022 has been for so many people.

As certainly as a nation, we seem to have lurked from one crisis to another. Well, for those who have been following this sermon series in the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, and it's the last sermon in the series today, then you will know that the word of the letter is partnership.

It's there again. If you look at it in today's passage, if you close your Bibles, we're on page 1182. The word partnership is there in verse 14. Yet it was good of you to share, literally to partner in my trouble.

And it's there in verse 15. No church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving except you only. We've seen that partnership is a business word.

[4 : 54] It speaks of actively striving together for a shared concern. It's the kind of word that you might use of a medical practice or a law firm or countless business enterprises.

In other words, you see, what is Grace Church Dulwich? Is it just the staff team? Or is it the staff team plus members of the church council?

Or is it staff team plus members of the church council plus a few others who are particularly committed? Or is it a fully committed partnership?

A partnership together in a shared enterprise. And of course, once we've grasped that, it will completely transform the way in which we think about church.

It will move us from thinking of Grace Church, for those of us who aren't regulars, simply as the church we go to or the church we support or even perhaps as the church we are a member of, to instead being a partner.

[5 : 59] And the point about a partner is that a partner is fully invested. As such, of course, it's a wonderfully exciting and dynamic picture of the local church, full of potential for serving the Lord Jesus together.

So completely the opposite of the way in which the church is so often portrayed in the media and in our culture and so on. And we've seen throughout this letter to the church in Philippi that partnership in the gospel is multifaceted.

It is believing the same gospel, the same message about Jesus. It is proclaiming and defending that gospel. It's being willing to suffer for that gospel.

It's praying together for the advance of the gospel. It's what we long for Cassia and Emma and for Nicholas and for Elspeth together as they go forward with the rest of their lives.

Well, today in this final section of the letter, we see that partnership is also about contentment and about money. Now, I'm conscious that there will be a whole range of us here this morning, and therefore my prayer really as I've been thinking about this and preparing through the week has been that whether we're looking in on the Christian faith, so to speak, or whether we've just begun to follow Jesus, or whether we've been following the Lord Jesus for many, many years, my prayer is that we'll be excited and thrilled at the enormous potential there is in this room to serve the Lord Jesus with the resources that he's given us.

[7 : 41] So, you'll see there are two headings for the talk on the back of the service sheets, or as they appear in due course on the outline on the screen. Firstly, let's think about the contented gospel partner, the contented gospel partner, verses 10 to 13.

Because in these verses, we see that contentment is integral to the mindset of the gospel partner. Have a look at verse 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. Not that I'm speaking of being in need, for I've learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound.

In any and every situation, I've learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. Notice, will you, that contentment is something that has to be learnt?

But I wonder as well if you notice the surprise. Look again at verse 12. As Paul says, I've learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.

[8 : 56] It reflects, of course, the fact that contentment isn't simply an issue for those who have less. Yes, of course, it's possible to be consumed by the fact that we do have less, if we have less.

But it's also an issue for the wealthy. And that is many of us. We can be consumed by our wealth. And yet, whether rich or poor, Paul knows how to live appropriately, to be content with little, not always wishing that he had more, and to be content as well with his abundance.

I guess for most of us, that's probably the battle, isn't it? Being content in abundance, to be content with what we have, rather than forever wanting more and more and more.

But I want us to see that Paul doesn't simply say this because contentment in itself is a good thing. Because remember, he's writing this letter so that the church in Philippi is not diverted away from the most important task of standing firm together, side by side, seeking to make Jesus known.

Back to our key verse, one final time, chapter 1, verse 27. As the Apostle Paul writes, And of course, what's the secret, he says, and of course, it doesn't take much, does it, to realize that it's a lack of contentment that can so quickly and so easily divert us from that.

[10 : 51] So what's the secret, he says, that he's learnt in verse 12? Well, surely it is, what we've seen is at the very heart of this letter.

It's being able to say, with the Apostle Paul, back in chapter 1, that to live is Christ, and to die is gain. It's why, speaking of his prison cell, Paul doesn't talk about how discontent he is with his circumstances.

Rather, he says, chapter 1, verse 18, only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

In other words, the secret of being content, for those of us who are followers of Jesus Christ, is to live with a firm conviction that to live is to live for him, and to serve him.

And wasn't it wonderful to hear these four, just a few minutes ago, saying precisely that. And to serve him, and to do so with a firm grasp fixed on the future that is ours, if we belong to Jesus.

[12 : 07] And therefore, to be more concerned with the progress of the gospel, with the message of Jesus, than our own comfort. It's what Paul's been talking about, isn't it, in this letter.

Do you remember how back in chapter 3, verse 8, he says, I count everything as loss compared with the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ, my Lord.

Perhaps you're someone you haven't really thought very much about the Lord Jesus Christ. Or perhaps you only do so at Christmas, or Easter, or special occasions. How amazing it must be for someone to say, I count everything as loss, with the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ.

And if you're perhaps just beginning to think to yourself, I'd love to know more, then do come and chat to me at the end. But the point is, it's this kind of heavenly mindset which will then lead to a peaceful contentment with the present.

In other words, if the present is what I live for, then of course all my energies are going to be invested in now. If the future is what I'm living for, then my mindset will be on that future day when we go to be with the Lord Jesus and we'll be content in the present.

[13 : 26] Now, of course, I am so conscious that this is completely counter-cultural and therefore isn't verse 13 a verse we need to look at as well. As Paul says, I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

We need, obviously, to seek the Lord's help as we do this. It's not naturally the way any of us think, least of all me. We need to seek his help as we do so.

Having said that, imagine what television would be like if it encouraged us to be content rather than always striving after the next thing. I think one of the programs I would most look forward to would be watching one of those home renovation programs, you know, sort of DIY SOS or grand designs or whatever it is.

And, you know, each week, what would happen? Why? We'd be taken, if we were being encouraged to be content, we'd be taken to an ordinary family home and we'd be shown round and you can imagine how the commentary might run, something like this.

As you can see, the Smiths family home has loads of potential. There's lots we could do. We could put an extension on the back. We could rip out all the bathrooms. We could give it a complete style makeover.

[14 : 37] But actually, you know what? It does the job pretty well. It's warm. It's dry. It's comfortable. There are no obvious structural defects.

We're going to encourage the Smiths to be content and leave it as it is. It's very timely, isn't it, as Black Friday and Christmas approach and the retail industry goes into overdrive trying to persuade us of all the must-have items that we really need to buy.

You and I may say we're content and yet how often does our lack of contentment reveal itself as we chase after endless stuff, clothes, things for the house, gadgets, holidays, a car with a swanky badge on the bonnet, a job where we're more highly valued or better paid, all of which absorbs endless, endless time and energy and resources which diverts us from serving the Lord Jesus.

So let me ask, if you follow Jesus this morning, have you ever said to yourself, as the Apostle Paul has said to himself, all that matters is the progress of the gospel, all that matters is the progress of the gospel.

Have you ever said that to yourself as you kind of look at life and what's going on in your life? And I wonder what action you might then need to take. Someone said to me a while back that as she thought about this whole issue of contentment, she had decided to stop buying a particular homes and gardens magazine for the simple reason that as she looked at pictures of beautiful houses and beautiful colour schemes and all the rest of it, it made her discontent.

[16 : 36] Now, if you're not into that kind of thing, you may think, well, that's pretty silly. But the point is, for her, it's a very significant step. I guess the question is, what would be a very significant step for us?

Contentment, then. It's vitally important if, as a church, we are to stand together side by side for the faith of the gospel. I wonder, therefore, whether we can see the enormous potential that there is if each one of us is content.

It will guard us from being distracted. It will guard us from wasting time and resources on what doesn't matter. I guess it will make us willing to do a whole range of things which are unthinkable in our materialistic culture.

It will downsize our job, to move house, to go live in a different part of the country or in a different country altogether, all to advance the message of Jesus.

Can we see how very liberating it is when we are content with what we have rather than endlessly putting our resources and energies into more?

[17 : 54] So firstly, the contented gospel partner. Secondly, the generous gospel partner and we're going to think firstly under this of the partnership of giving. Have a look at verses 14 to 16.

Yes, it was kind of you to share my trouble 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.

Even in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs once and again. Now, I know it's not very British to talk about money, but the New Testament wonderfully refreshingly has no such inhibitions because money is an integral part of being partners together in the gospel.

And we learn elsewhere in the New Testament that the Philippians were generous givers not only when they had much to give, but also when they had less to give. I put there some verses from 2 Corinthians on the outline where we're told, out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity, for I testify that they gave as much as they were able and even beyond their ability.

Because you see, money is a vital component of genuine partnership in the gospel. It's important in our life as a local church together.

[19 : 25] So different, I guess, isn't it, from the way which we might think about giving to a charity where we sort of think, oh, well, I've got a bit of leftover change, I'll kind of throw that in. It's often given spontaneously, you know, as people come to the door or there's someone at a station or something like that collecting, and we certainly don't expect to hear from them again.

But this is about partnership, financial partnership, literally being invested. It implies planning, being in it for the long term, with the aim, of course, collectively, as Grace Church Dulwich, to grow ministry.

And just as Paul tells them that he rejoices in their giving, so they can rejoice in what their giving has achieved.

Now, just looking back, it seems to me one of the things we can be immensely grateful for is actually that each year at Grace Church we have received the money that we need. We don't have any historic resources or anything like that.

we don't have any grants from external organizations. All our costs have to be met from the church family. And that's something I think we can be very thankful for.

[20 : 45] What's more, we can also rejoice that through the Lord's kindness, our giving has advanced the message of Jesus beyond Dulwich in the two churches that we've planted over the last ten years or so, in both Broccoli and Sydenham, both now wonderfully self-sufficient.

What's more, our giving, our financial partnership has enabled us to partner with those who are seeking to plant a church in Naples, now established, to grow a ministry in Ireland, for a church to be strengthened in Streatham, for pastors and Bible teachers and children's workers to be trained in Zambia, and for a fledgling church plant to grow in Johannesburg in South Africa, in Soweto.

Isn't that wonderfully exciting? What a great use of money. In other words, you see, our motivation for giving is not out of guilt, it's not out of a kind of sense of duty, rather it's a sense of joy and delight in being able to serve and advance the gospel together.

It's saying what actually a brilliant investment it is. Now, of course, it does therefore follow that our giving needs to be discerning, because partnership is partnership in the gospel.

Therefore, of course, it's right that as a church we give to organizations which are seeking to proclaim the same gospel. Several years ago I was part of a church where every year we gave money to a number of Christian mission agencies.

[22 : 23] The number had grown over the years, and yet no one had really stopped to ask whether they were still seeking to proclaim the same gospel that they had started proclaiming.

And so we carried out an exercise, we went about doing that. Sadly, we discovered one or two no longer were, and of course, as a result realized, well, if they're proclaiming a different message, then the gospel partnership is no longer there.

And so, of course, it was appropriate that we stop giving to those organizations. The partnership of giving, it implies, of course, therefore, we need to be discerning.

So let me ask, not asking those of you who are guests here this morning, but let me ask those who are members of the church family, is your bank account engaged in gospel partnership?

It's often said, isn't it, that the last part of someone to be converted is their wallet. Now, of course, there will be some who can't afford to give much and the Lord Jesus encourages us to see the great value of small amounts if that is the position we are in.

[23 : 35] But there are plenty of others who can give more and give much and give not just for our own needs here at Grace Church but beyond. It is true that occasionally people ask me for suggestions as to organizations to give to, which I think I am generally reluctant to do but occasionally I find myself recommending the Gospel Partners Trust which is there on the outline which seeks to train pastors, fund church plants and to fund new ministry initiatives.

What about the partnership of giving? What about the paradox of giving? Verse 17. Not that I seek the gift but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.

We belong to the Lord Jesus is evidence of spiritual health. Now we see throughout this letter Paul's concern for the spiritual health of the Philippians.

We see it again here. Notice he speaks of his joy therefore not so much in the gift they've sent but rather he speaks which can seem a little bit odd but he speaks of the gift that can be credited to their account.

Paul of course is not saying that we can earn a place in heaven by our generous giving but he is saying that our heavenly treasures do increase as we give our money for the advance of the gospel.

[25 : 13] I guess the picture is of a kind of heavenly bank account so to speak and it's as if every time a church gives money to support the work of the gospel as the Philippians have here with Paul with the result that the gospel is then proclaimed so their heavenly bank account grows.

I wonder for those who were here a few weeks ago when we started this series back in chapter 1 verse 11 if you remember the prayer that the apostle Paul prayed in 111.

The Philippians would be filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ. And here you see is some of the fruit in chapter 4.

It means of course that our attitude to money whether it's our attitude together as a church or whether our attitude individually to money is an excellent litmus test of the spiritual health of our lives and the spiritual fruits in our lives.

It's also evidence of course of our long term partnership in the gospel and that our relationships and our partnership is if you like in good order. And so yes Paul's joy well it's partly in the money that the Philippians have sent to him to sustain him in ministry but his joy is also in what the gift represents.

[26 : 49] And then I think it's why in verse 18 he recognizes that actually the ultimate recipient of the money is the Lord God himself. Verse 18 I've received full payments I'm more than well supplied having received from Paphroditus the gifts you sent a fragrant offering a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.

Here is the verse perhaps for those who might think that talk about money and giving is rather sort of unseemly and rather unspiritual. Notice how Paul is using spiritual language it's been lifted straight from the Old Testament from the Old Testament in its language of sacrifice and worship and so on and yet it's referring to money a fragrant offering the sacrifice acceptable to God it's a wonderful picture.

Now I wonder if you and I are persuaded of this. Many of us I guess are from a culture where we don't particularly show off our wealth.

We don't most of us wear expensive designer clothes we don't particularly parade flashy jewelry we don't change our car every three years when the new registration comes out and all that kind of stuff we're not necessarily spending it but I guess what are we doing with it?

Are we being generous with our money or are we simply saving it? Yes of course we have a responsibility to provide for ourselves in old age and yet it's all too easy to accumulate wealth and treasure in our earthly bank accounts here and now rather than in our heavenly bank accounts.

[28 : 38] Well we thought about the contented gospel partner we thought about the generous gospel partner I guess the link between the two of us won't be lost on us it's when we're content that we can be generous and it's when we're generous that we are content as well.

So let's finish our series in Philippians by looking at verse 19 and my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

Here is a wonderful promise to end with. It's a letter isn't it in which God calls us to stand together to contend for the gospel and to keep doing so to keep making Jesus known regardless of the flack and yes there will be flack of course there will be those who come to rejoice as these four have this morning.

to hear about Jesus and put their trust in him but there will be others who give us flack as we do say. And yet here is the promise in the midst of that that God will richly supply everything we need to persevere and all to his glory verse 20 to our God and Father be glory forever and ever amen.

And isn't verse 22 just a wonderful place for this letter to finish. In the Roman Empire Caesar was Lord and yet in verse 22 there are even those within Caesar's household who know and proclaim another Lord, the Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[30 : 16] Isn't that wonderful? Because the gospel advances, it reminds us doesn't it, even in the most hostile of circumstances. Indeed, sometimes in the most hostile of circumstances.

So what is God's word for us as a church as we've been looking at Philippians throughout the autumn? Well, back to our key verse, 127.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents.

Let me lead us in prayer. Let's pray together. Not that I'm speaking of being in need, for I've learnt in whatever situation I am to be content.

Heavenly Father, we praise you very much that you are the one who directs the course of our lives and the circumstances that you find ourselves in. And we pray, therefore, we long for this contentment, and we pray, too, for our own hearts, that we would be not only content as gospel partners, those of us who are members here at Grace Church, but we'd be generous with our eyes firmly fixed, not on this world, but on the heavenly kingdom that is to come.

[31 : 51] And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.