

Contentment and Generosity

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] I'm going to start with a story today. There once was a wealthy employer who walked past his employees in the office one day and overheard one of them saying, if only I had \$100,000, I would be perfectly content.

Now on hearing this, the employer walked up to him, took out his checkbook and said, I've always wanted to meet someone who is perfectly content. So here, here's a check for \$100,000. But as he walked away, the employer that is, he could hear the employee say, I've done it, I knew I should have said \$200,000. Have you ever felt like doing something similar? Maybe it's not \$100,000, probably something less. But perhaps you've got exactly what you wanted, only to then immediately want some more.

Just like two kids having ice cream, the one gets the ice cream and then she looks around to the next and goes, how come she's got more? And then once we start comparing, become unhappy with what others have got because they've got more than us.

[1 : 14] Being content isn't easy, is it? But I have to say, being discontented isn't enjoyable either, is it? Since it robs us of happiness and joy and peace in our life.

Well, we're at the pointy end of Philippians and this is our last week in the letter. And in these last verses, Paul focuses on the two related topics of contentment and generosity.

That's the title of our sermon tonight. It seems an odd way to finish this letter, but we soon discover why as we read this passage. The Philippians have done something significant for Paul and Paul wants to acknowledge it.

They had heard that Paul was in need and we read in verse 10 that despite not being able to help initially, their gift eventually finds its way to Paul. This is a real encouragement to Paul, so much so that he says, I rejoiced greatly in the Lord.

Elsewhere in the letter he just talks about rejoicing in the Lord, this time is rejoicing greatly in the Lord. Paul will return to their generosity shortly, but first he needs to say something about his own situation.

[2 : 23] You see, Paul wants them to realize that this response of his is not born out of desperation. Great as this gift was, Paul's joy doesn't arise from the personal benefit that he's getting from it.

He wasn't, as it were, hanging out for someone to come to his aid. Rather, he says his joy is in the Lord. That is, it mirrors the same joy that the Lord has in them.

As for Paul, he says he's not really in need. Yes, he's facing poverty and perhaps hardship as well, but his attitude is that whether he soon finds relief or not, it's not something that greatly concerns him.

You see, Paul has learned true contentment, and he's able to be satisfied with his life whatever the circumstance. That's what he says in verse 11.

I've learned to be content whatever the circumstances. And then what he does is he proceeds to list the extremes of what he's experienced. So whether he's physically lacking in need or has plenty, whether he's well fed or hungry, he's learned to be content in each of those situations.

[3 : 33] But notice how even for Paul, contentment didn't come naturally. Rather, he says that he had to learn it, which he does by facing both the highs and the lows in life.

And if you think about it, contentment is pretty hard to learn, isn't it, if all your life things have been smooth sailing. Just look, for example, at some of those people who are amazingly rich all their lives, or people who have natural talent that they've never had to work for.

Do we see them learning contentment? Or more likely, does it actually breed a sense of entitlement, that is, they think they deserve these things in life all the time. Probably the latter, isn't it?

Yet on the other hand, it must be said that hardship in and of itself doesn't cultivate contentment either. More often than not, I think it breeds resentment.

Those who aren't well off look at those who are, even if it's just ice cream, and ask, why them and not me? So either way, contentment doesn't come naturally.

[4 : 39] Rather, it's an attitude that needs to be learned. And often through both the ups and the downs of life. And so, as Paul goes through times of poverty, he learns to say, I'm not in need.

I can actually go on like this. And then as he goes through times of plenty, he learns to say, Well, whatever I've got now, I don't really need it.

It's good that it's there, but I don't really need it. He's learned, therefore, to hold on to things lightly. Not assuming that he must have them all the time, and not being afraid to let go if the need arises. Now, in verse 12, Paul then reveals that he's been able to learn all this because he's also learned the secret to contentment. It's a bit surprising, isn't it?

You mean there's a secret to being content? Well, yes, according to Paul. So what is this secret then? Well, I think verse 13 gives us a clue. He says, I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

[5 : 40] Now, I have to say this verse is often misquoted, and you might have heard it done like that. But it's often taken out of context. Read in isolation, it seems to say that the Christian is all-powerful, like a superhero, just like this boy on the slide.

It's got the same verse to deal with it as well. So the attitude then is like, just name it and claim it, right?

You've heard people pray those kind of things. Whatever you want to do, and that includes getting out of difficulty in life, just claim it, claim this verse, and God will give you the strength for it.

But actually, if you read the verse in context, Paul actually means the opposite, doesn't he? He's not asking to get out of his difficulties. Instead, the all this that Paul speaks of, he's actually asking for the ability to be content in and every situation.

He wants God's strength to do that, not to get out of difficulty. So where does this strength to be content come from? Well, the easy answer, of course, is that it's from God. But what is the means by which God gives us this strength?

[6 : 47] Well, God gives it to Paul and to us by assuring us of his sovereignty, that he's in control of life. Or to use Paul's own words in his letter, God strengthens us when we learn, and I've got the verse up there from earlier in the letter, verse 6 of chapter 1, that he who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion.

Or when we know, in verse 12 of chapter 2, that it is God who works in us to will and to act according to his good purpose. In other words, the secret to contentment is to realize that God is sovereignly at work in our lives all the time.

Whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, God is using it to complete his good work in us. So when things don't go to plan, it doesn't mean we're getting second best from God.

Nor has God abandoned us. Nor God is still using that sovereignly to work in us. And he will give us the strength to persevere, to be content where we're at.

Contentment comes when we realize this all the time, whether times are good or times are bad.

Now some of you may ask, does this mean then we don't change anything, that we're just fatalistic, you know, just sit back and let God do whatever?

[8 : 03] Well, probably not. Because you see Paul, even in chapter 3, saying that he's still striving, he's pressing on to win the prize which God has called him for.

So having plans and having goals aren't bad in themselves, I don't think. Nor is trying to improve our situation. The key, however, is to be content as we do that.

That is, to submit our plans to God. That if things don't turn out as we had hoped, whatever they may be, that we'll be willing to just set them aside. And recognize that God has put us where we are for a reason.

And to look to God for strength to help us to go through it. See, I think being content is actually very important as a Christian. It's not something that some strong and committed Christians have and others don't.

It's actually key to being a Christian. Why? Because being content shows that we acknowledge God's sovereignty. It shows that we trust God. And we submit to the work that he's completing in us.

[9 : 05] Whatever the circumstances. It's a bit hard to follow Jesus, I think, unless we learn contentment. Now, I also think contentment is important because it enables us to be generous.

That's our second point. Both contentment and generosity are related because when we're content, we stop focusing on ourselves, on our needs, being selfish. Instead, we start looking out for others. It frees us, does it not, when we're content to be generous. And so this is where Paul now turns in verses 14 to 19. So now that we've understood Paul's contentment, I think we're better able then to understand the Philippians' generosity.

Now, first, I want you to notice how Paul describes their generosity. So yes, their giving shows that they love Paul. It shows that they have a big heart. But Paul actually says that what they've done is to show their partnership in the gospel.

So in verses 14, he says, Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Now, if you were with me at the very start in chapter 1, you'd notice, you'd remember that I used, I'd said that the word share was related to the idea of partnership.

[10 : 17] Both words come from that same Greek word, koinonia, which I've got on the screen, which has this idea of being in a business venture. Well, Paul uses this same word again here, twice in fact.

In verse 14, when they share in Paul's troubles, and then in verse 15, when they've shared with him in the matter of giving and receiving. And so by giving to Paul, what the Philippians have done is express their partnership with Paul in the gospel in a concrete and tangible way.

This wasn't just one group of Christians giving and another Christian receiving while in need. That's why I think Paul is at pains to say actually he's not in need. He doesn't want to characterize it as a relationship between someone who's needy and someone who's giving.

No, instead, this is a joint venture. Everyone's working together for a return. And it also explains why I think the Philippians kept giving, not just as a one-off, but again and again, because they saw this as a partnership, an ongoing venture that they had with Paul.

Just to backtrack a bit, incidentally, Paul also used the same word koinonia in the last chapter, in verse 10 of chapter 3. There, Paul says that he desires to share that same word, partner, in Christ's suffering.

[11 : 37] And so, can you see the parallel that he's setting up here that even as Paul partners with Christ in his suffering in chapter 3, now the Philippians are partnering with Paul in his, his troubles, his suffering.

But all of them are working together, aren't they, for the common cause of proclaiming and preaching the gospel. So this is a partnership. They're working together. Now the second thing to note is that not only is that generosity an act of gospel partnership, it was also an offering pleasing to God.

That is, in addition to the horizontal aspect of that partnership between Paul and the Philippians, what we also have is a vertical aspect between the Philippians and God. So once more, Paul says in verse 17 that he's not looking for a gift, he keeps saying it, doesn't he?

I don't want this, I don't want this. He says in fact that I've received it, having received it, I've been paid in full and more. And so I think what Paul is saying is that if the partnership was the only thing that was being considered, then actually he wouldn't accept this gift, he would actually receive it. And yet Paul says that he accepts the gift, why? Because he says in verse 17 that he's looking for what may be credited to their account. he's accepting the gift so that the Philippians can actually be rewarded.

[12 : 55] And the reward, of course, is coming from God. Paul now says in verse 19 that this gift to Paul is actually an offering to God as well. See the vertical aspect? It's a sacrifice pleasing to God.

This is the same language which is used in the Old Testament in relation to real sacrifices being made to God. We've heard that read tonight in Leviticus in our first reading.

You might have been sort of distracted by all the gory details of animals being sort of plucked, but put that to one side. The important point is to realize in verse 9, for example, that what they're doing is a burnt offering, a food offering, but it is an aroma that's pleasing to God.

And in fact, if you read through Leviticus, this phrase is repeated again and again in relation to the sacrifices. In fact, in that particular reading in chapter 1, it was repeated three times.

Now Paul is talking about their giving as though it was an act of worship. It is an act of worship. He's not saying that this is a sacrifice they do in order to give, in order to be forgiven of their sins.

[14 : 05] That's not what this act is all about. Only Jesus can do that act. But nonetheless, Paul is equating their giving to that of an act of worship. It's something that they did because they wanted to please God.

It was in response to God's grace to them. And by saying that he looks for an increase to their account, he's saying that God will respond favorably to their act of generosity.

Now all these verses is all couched in financial language here. But I don't think the reward is monetary. The words are being used metaphorically. What exactly this reward is, Paul doesn't specify.

In one sense, you could say just pleasing God is reward enough. It's a bit like when I cook dinner for the family. I'm not looking for a specific reward.

Although if the girls cleaned up afterwards that would be good. Instead, my true reward comes from seeing them really enjoy their meal. They're so pleased with the food that they lick the plates clean, that sort of thing.

[15 : 07] That would be reward enough for me. And I think there's a sense in which that's true for the Philippians as well. Just pleasing God is reward. But I suspect that Paul has more than that in mind here when he talks about increase to their account.

After all, what they've just done is a reflection of God's own character, isn't it? They've been generous because God too is generous by giving his very own son. And so it would be odd to think of a generous God rewarding the Philippians just with his pleasure.

And I think we get a sense of God's generosity in verse 19 because Paul says, And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

That's a beautiful verse, isn't it? Now, Paul doesn't go into specifics here, but I think he does that purposely because in doing so, neither does he limit what God can do.

For whatever their needs, whether it's spiritual or physical, God will provide according to his glorious riches in Christ. Paul himself knows how generous God has been to him.

[16 : 18] He's experienced first-hand God's glorious riches in Christ. And so even though Paul himself cannot repay the Philippians in kind, he knows that he has a God who can.

And he knows that God will. And so I think implicit also in Paul's assurance in this verse is an encouragement to be content. Since the Philippians know that God will meet all their needs, then they too can be content whatever their circumstance.

Now again, I think it's important not to misapply this promise. It says here that God will meet all our needs, not our wants, not even our wants disguised as needs.

but I think that given that Paul has spoken at length about being content, it's likely that what's primarily on Paul's mind aren't physical needs but rather the things that we've seen in this letter, the glorious riches that are in Christ Jesus.

So things like love and joy and peace, God will give us those things. Knowledge, insight, and purity until the day of Christ, growing in faith, being strong to stand firm in the gospel.

[17 : 34] I'm sure God will still meet our physical needs of course but those are trivial aren't they compared to these other things which God can only provide in Christ Jesus. Things that will stand us in good stead for eternity rather than just for this life.

And so again, I think generosity is an essential part of the Christian life and in particular being a generous partner in the gospel is. It is, after all, part and parcel of our worship to God and an acceptable sacrifice which is pleasing to Him.

Now, it would be quite easy for me to just finish here because I've come to the end of the text, sort of. But I feel like particularly with this topic on generosity that I need to just push on a bit further and be more specific.

Go to the nuts and bolts as it were of being generous because I think we can all agree to be generous in principle. I think the hard part comes when we actually have to put it into practice. So I know that some of you have been very generous givers for a long time now just practicing this very passage. But others may be totally new at this. So it's to the latter group that I'm talking to specifically here.

[18 : 48] So the rest, those who are in the former group, just bear with us. And there's a lot I could say but I just want to cover two things, right? And that is when we're thinking about being a generous gospel partner, two things, who do we give to firstly and secondly how much?

Now I have to say firstly that what I'm about to say actually only applies to people who are committed to the gospel, right? So if you're here today and you're not a Christian, then the first step is actually to put your trust in Jesus, okay?

The rest, what I'm about to say, then follows afterwards, not before. So firstly, who should we give to? Well, the first thing is to see, I think, where the needs are. Think first of people and organizations which you already have a connection with, perhaps.

So giving to this church is an obvious one. If you belong to this church, then you're a gospel partner here. You might not see it that way, but you are. Don't see your giving each week as a fee for service or a payment for performance.

All right? I'm not up here performing for you. No, it's an investment in gospel partnership. Think of it in those terms. In fact, over the last couple of weeks, there's been a notice about the shortfall in weekly givings.

[20 : 08] Consider that need. And then connected with Holy Trinity are various missionaries and mission organizations, all of whom are in the business of gospel ministry. Many of them, for example, people at CU and all that or overseas missionaries, they actually have to raise their own financial support to do gospel work.

There isn't a funding pool there which just automatically pays them. So let me encourage you. Make an effort to find out their needs and support them individually. As a church, we support them, yes, but this is your chance to be directly involved in gospel partnership with them, to get their prayer letters directly, to go along to their supporters' night, to invest directly in their work.

Now, one-off, ad hoc donations, those are good, but let me ask you and encourage you to think, better yet, to enter into a long-term strategic partnership with them. Treat it like gospel work that you yourself are doing, because that's what it is.

You are doing gospel work with them. And it really helps, you know, for the person who you are supporting to know that they can rely on your support and that only happens when you have a regular long-term relationship with them.

Many of you would know Jimmy Pattinson, who has gone back to New Zealand now, but he was able to study here at Ridley for four years because he could count on the supporters back home in Christchurch.

[21 : 33] They backed him for four years to study full-time at Ridley. He wouldn't have been able to do that otherwise. So please, commit it to prayer.

Pray about who you might be a partner to and then stick with it for the long haul. It's amazing how much mutual encouragement comes from doing that, not just for the people you support, but also for yourself.

All right, the second question, for how much? Well, there's really no hard and fast rule. We are under grace, not law, but perhaps if I could suggest in line with tonight's passage that you think about this.

Try to give so that you're able to learn contentment. In other words, give sacrificially. Not just what you can afford, what's safe, but give a little more so that it actually requires you to trust God rather than trust the income or the wealth that you have.

If it helps, put in mechanisms that keep stretching your giving. So for example, when I got my first job, I gave away the first month's income each year and lived off the other 11 months.

[22 : 41] Now, this is actually not as challenging as you think it is because that's still less than 10%. But it got me into the habit of just increasing my giving every time my pay went up.

So those of you on your first jobs, you all know, first job, lousy pay. But that will change, wouldn't it? As you move up, as you become more senior. If you have something locked in like that, then as your pay increases, you continue to give more.

You can be as creative as you like. Here's another example. Consider giving as much as you spend on luxury items. So like overseas holidays or eating out or concert tickets or whatever.

Whatever you think is luxury. These are necessities, are they? But I find it quite insightful sometimes with my own spending to compare the amount of money I spend on luxuries with how much I give to God.

A bit shameful sometimes. You see, if we say we're truly committed to the gospel, then I think the question we should be asking isn't really how much should I give, but rather how much more can I give?

[23 : 55] You want to give as much as you can because it is actually credited to your account. Now here is a word for students among us.

You may think that you're poor, you've got nothing to offer, but please don't think like that. Many of you I'm sure have watched the TV, you've watched the ads about super. The one with that song, particularly that one that says from little things big things grow.

I wouldn't sing it for you. Well that's the secret to investing in super, isn't it? Start young even if you have to start small. Well, the same goes for gospel partnerships.

Start now even if you have to start small. So it may be \$5 a week or maybe \$5 a month, but start today because it's never too soon. It's never too soon to learn and practice gospel generosity.

If you can't be generous with a small amount, you wouldn't be generous when you've got a six-figure salary. You see, at the end of the day, I'm not saying these things because God needs your money.

[24 : 59] He doesn't. You know that already. And yes, I love to see gospel ministries well-funded, but you know what? I trust that God will supply their need too. Now the main reason why I'm saying all these things is the same reason that Paul does, to see more being credited to your account.

It's for your benefit actually. The more generous you are for the gospel, the richer your experience of God's work in you. So be generous, even as God has been generous to you.

Now I know many of you are already doing this, so this is probably old stuff and boring stuff, but you know exactly what I'm talking about. You know what the great blessing of giving is. Well, can I encourage you to urge others to do the same as well?

But for the rest of us, here's my challenge for you. Go home, take your calculators up, or if you can do mental sums, do it. Do the sums, and put your generosity plan into action.

Not next week, not next month, but this week. Do it this week. Let's pray. Father, we want to confess that often it's easy to praise you with our lips.

[26 : 13] It's even easy to serve others and tell others about the gospel and how great it is. but when it comes to taking out our wallets, somehow that seems to be hard.

So forgive us, Lord, if we have not been generous. Help us to realize how generous you have been to us in Christ and you continue to be generous to us.

Help us to live contently, knowing that you will give us the strength, whatever the circumstances, to be joyful, to be satisfied with where you've put us.

Help us to see what great gain there is in being generous. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.