

Being Thankful

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[0 : 00] I wonder if you would take the Bible out in the pew in front of you and open it to page 187, 187 near the back, Philippians chapter 4. We don't talk much about money here at St. John's, much to the chagrin of the treasurer.

But as Sunday by Sunday we move through passages of the Bible, it keeps coming up. And as we come to this last section in Philippians, I hope you noticed as it was read, the Apostle Paul gives an inordinate amount of attention to this issue of money.

Now you probably know that God does not share our squeamishness in talking about this issue. In fact, God is unashamed to describe in financial terms the very heart of the faith when he says that Christ in his death has paid the debt for our sins and bought us with the price of his own blood.

And it's easy for us as we move through this book of Philippians because there's so much wonderful treasure in the book to almost completely miss the fact that the whole reason that the letter was written was because of money.

The Philippians, the church at Philippi, had sent a generous financial gift to the Apostle as he was imprisoned between two guards in Rome.

[1 : 25] And in chapter 1 he mentions the gift and now as he comes to the end of the book he wants to express his deep gratitude but he wants to do far more. The last 12 verses in the book are dedicated to this issue of financial and material needs.

Did you notice that the whole gospel was covered by a mere five verses in chapter 2? And now the Apostle gives this lengthy section to the issue of money and while it originates of course in his desire to say thanks what he is doing is he is taking us deeper into the nature of Christian experience.

He wants us to see that the way we relate to our own needs and to the needs of others demonstrates whether we know Christ and whether we understand his sufficiency and grace.

So the Apostle directs us primarily to two issues and the first is in verse 10 to 13 and it is contentment in Christ.

He rejoices in their financial gift. Verse 10 he says, I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at length you revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me but you didn't have any opportunity.

[2 : 41] Not that I complain of want. For I have learned, he says, in whatever state I am to be content. Now in Australia that's the way we speak about cows.

You look at a cow and you say, Bessie is a contented cow. And you may not want to be content or described as content but the word doesn't really mean content.

The word literally means I am independent of my surroundings. I am independent of my circumstances. And the key is in verse 13 where he says, I can do all things in him who strengthens me.

Again and again and again through this letter and through the New Testament the Apostle speaks about the Christian life as life in Christ.

The heart of the Christian experience is to live in Christ. You and I are in Christ Jesus. When you place your faith in Jesus, when God enters your life as it were, you are in Christ.

[3 : 53] He is the sphere in which we live. The teaching of the New Testament is that something massive happens to a person when they move to be in Christ Jesus, when they go from being outside Christ Jesus to living inside Christ Jesus.

It means a tremendous spiritual reorientation where now we relate in communion and union with the person of Jesus Christ.

It means now I am no longer the centre and pivot of my decisions. And for our purposes here, it means this, it creates a different connection between me and my circumstances.

outwardly I may look very similar. But inwardly there is a different relation between who I am and everything that I experience, both good and bad.

Don't get me wrong. Being in Christ doesn't mean we become indifferent to circumstances. We are not kind of wrapped in a spiritual cotton wool shielded from pain and suffering.

[4 : 57] No, no. It means we enter our circumstances far more deeply and we are able to enter them far more deeply for one reason and that is that we are not controlled or mastered by our experiences and by our circumstances.

If I am in Christ, my circumstances cannot control who I am. It is controlled by Jesus Christ. And that is why Christians face suffering in a way that's inexplicable to the world.

Do you remember when Paul and Silas first came to the town of Philippi and they preached the gospel there and some became Christian? And then they were arrested illegally and beaten brutally and then imprisoned and had their feet placed and bound in stocks.

Do you remember what they did? Yeah, they say. They serenaded the prison through the night with the praise of God until an earthquake broke them free. And again, the Apostle Paul is writing from a prison bound two arms to two guards facing likely agonizing martyrdom and he says this, my life is just not controlled by these circumstances.

I am in Christ. And you see how this works in terms of contentment in verse 12. He says, I know how to be abased. I know how to abound.

[6 : 20] In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. Yes, the Apostle knew what it was to do without.

To do without money and to do without friendship and to do without security and to do without protection. And he knew what it was to have much.

He knew what it was to have more than he could ever use. And I'm not sure which is more difficult, frankly. I don't know whether it is more difficult to be content in God when we are financially needy or when we have financial plenty.

But in both cases, the Apostle says, I am content. And the reason is that Christian contentment has nothing whatsoever to do with how much money I have or how little money I have.

It comes from being in Christ. And that is why you'll be pleased to know it doesn't come naturally to anyone. It did not come naturally for the Apostle.

[7 : 25] He was a proud and sensitive and highly educated person, raised as a free Roman citizen, living amongst the top intellectuals of his day.

And in verse 11 and in verse 12, twice he says, I have had to learn this. And in the Greek, I am learning it ongoingly. And what is it that he's learned?

Verse 13, I can do all things in him who strengthens me. I've made a discovery. This is one of the most outrageously misused verses in the New Testament.

Do you know there are a number of Christian organisations in a country not far from here which call this text the spiritual can-do text. And I quote, I can do all things.

It's a kind of Christian equivalent of Disneyland where you can make your dreams come true. And if, you know, Jesus becomes a sort of spiritual Tony Robbins.

[8 : 27] And I've done a bit of research on this and there's a church in Atlanta that you can go to along with 20,000 others and the pastor's name is Creflo Dollar.

D-O-L-L-A-R. That is his name. His wife's name is Taffy. And I don't know why you're laughing at that.

There is a, when you join the church, you sign the prophetic financial transfer declaration based on this verse. And I quote to you, in the name of Jesus, I'm out of debt, my needs are met and I have plenty more to put in store.

It's good, isn't it? I walk in the prosperity and health even as my soul prospers. It is the will of God for me to prosper. I declare right now this prophetic financial transference will be deposited into my life.

We should have something like that here at St. John. I need to tell you, that is not what the apostle is saying. If you look at verse 13, it literally reads, I am being made strong for all things in the one who constantly infuses me with strength.

[9 : 45] Let me say it again. I am being made strong for all things in the one who constantly infuses me with strength. He is not saying that I can do certain things, but he is saying that all the things that I can do, I am enabled to do in the one who imparts his strength to me.

Here is the ultimate explanation for contentment. It is this, he has learned where his strength comes from.

He has learned to depend on Jesus Christ. He has learned to cling to Jesus Christ. It all comes down to the person of Christ. It is Christ who explains the Apostle's joy.

It is because Christ is sufficient that the Apostle can look at any circumstance, any eventuality and say, I am content. And you hear this from this pulpit again and again and again that the Christian life is not a philosophy, it's not just a set of beliefs, it's not a point of view.

It is God himself entering our life, bringing us in Christ so that we now live out of a different reality. We live out of God as it were. That is why we must not confuse Christian contentment with detachment.

[11 : 06] I think this is one of the reasons why Buddhism has become so popular in North America. Buddhism teaches that this world is evil and full of suffering and what we need to do is we need to cultivate a detachment in ourselves so that we can go through life blissfully unaffected by the circumstances around us and hope for a better reincarnation next time.

But here is the thing, there's only one person in the Buddhist equation and it's me. And in verse 13 there are two people, me and Christ Jesus.

Christian contentment is not about my personal discipline, it's about whether Christ is sufficient for my circumstances, it's not something I do by my own massive effort, it comes out of my union and communion with him.

It's not about how strong I am, it's about how strong he is. It's not about what's in me, it's about the fact that I am in him. It's not that I am left alone, feebly struggling to detach myself from difficulties in life, it is that the power of Christ is infusing me with the strength to deal with all the different circumstances of my life.

And so I say to you and I say to myself this morning, if you want to be content we need to go to the person of Jesus Christ, we need to cling to him and to know him for only in him is contentment for he alone is sufficient for our circumstances.

[12 : 42] But there is a second issue here and we move from contentment in Christ to generosity in Christ verses 19, sorry, verses 14 to 21.

Now we come to deal more directly with money and I was trying to find a way of getting Play-Doh into this. I thought it was a very brave move of Neil to use penguins standing there in black and white this morning just tells you something about my own psychology.

Now if you look at verse 15 you'll see the Philippian church was the only church that saw the apostles need and sent financial aid. Now you'll also probably know that the apostle Paul was extremely careful that no one should ever get the wrong idea that he preached to make money. When he went to Corinth he tells them that though it was his right to expect financial support he refused to use his rights.

So concerned was he about the gospel he refused all payment from them and worked with his hands making tents supporting himself so that no one could accuse him of preaching to make money.

[14 : 08] and I think there might be something very important in that for all Anglican clergy. But now that the Philippians have sent a generous financial gift what the apostle does is he articulates three pivotal principles of Christian giving in these verses.

Three principles that ought to affect your life and my life and may even lead to change in our lives. And the first is this generous giving demonstrates true gospel faith.

Verse 15 And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel when I left Macedonia which is where they were no church entered into partnership or communion with me in giving and receiving except you only.

So here is the city of Philippi and the apostle Paul with Silas comes into the city and preaches Christ and God opens the heart of some to believe they become Christian and a church is established.

The apostle travels on and when the church at Philippi that the apostle has financial need they immediately send aid. This is the third time that they have sent aid to him. And there can only be

one explanation and it is that they understood the meaning of the gospel.

[15 : 36] You see they love this man because he brought them something of far greater value than all the wealth in the world. Here is the one who came bringing the message and brought into their lives the hope of glory peace with God resurrection power and they owe everything to him and when they see his need the least they can do is fill it.

You see it shows how highly they value the person of Jesus Christ. And when the apostle uses this phrase partnership in giving and receiving what he means is this that it is right for those who receive the ministry of the gospel to give financially to support those who preach that gospel and it is right that those who receive the support of God's people should give themselves to the preaching of the gospel.

It is a partnership of giving and receiving. And if we believe the gospel we must believe that there is nothing more important in this life and in this world than the spread and the propagation of the gospel surely.

And that is why the ministry of the gospel should never lack for funds if there are people around who have genuine gospel faith.

That is why he announces this principle that generous giving demonstrates true gospel faith.

Secondly, generous giving creates spiritual grandchildren.

[17 : 20] Now I said this at the earlier congregation I don't think anyone understood what I was talking about. So let me try and explain it. Our financial advisor has told us that when you invest money you don't just try and make children you try and make grandchildren with it.

Is that a unique concept to my financial advisor? Anyone heard that before? In other words when you invest your money it's not just one return you get you try and reinvest that and it keeps on getting returns.

Let's go back to the Bible shall I? Look at verse 17. He says forget what I just said.

Let's focus on what Paul is saying. He's saying thank you for the gift but what thrills me about the gift is not that it just meets my need but the way in which your generous financial gift bears ongoing spiritual fruit in a way that you can't see.

In other words the New Testament teaches that the way we use our finances and the way that we use all the resources in our lives has spiritual results in the lives of other people.

[18 : 39] This is an issue that can be easily turned around and manipulated but let me say it this way. When we give to God and to the cause of God God takes our gifts away from us and then plants it somewhere that we often can't see and then grows fruit fruit that we can't even imagine.

Two weeks ago I was in England speaking at a conference sponsored by the Proclamation Trust. In 1984 a banker in England who was retired had been visiting a number of Anglican churches and he was utterly depressed at the level of the preaching.

And so he went to his minister who he thought was a fine preacher and he said I want to set up a trust that will train people for the preaching of the gospel. So if you go to London today there is now a little institute where there are a hundred young people who are training for full time ministry before they go to seminary and there are twelve conferences currently running each year which take clergy from all sorts of different parts of Great Britain and Europe and all sorts of different stages of ministry and train them in gospel preaching.

And the man who gave that gift, his name is Ronnie Wilcox, died a number of years ago and the growth of that gift has just been remarkable. And I know it was a large gift because he put himself in poverty by giving the gift.

And I know it's easy for us to look at the large gifts and to see their multiplication and their effectiveness but I want to say that this is exactly the same principle for every spiritual gift even as Jesus says for the widow who gives just two copper coins.

[20 : 24] Because all the money that you have and all the money that I have has been given to us by God. And it is not to be used to make a great name for ourselves or to buy us the best retirement that money can purchase or to just be used only for ourselves and for our family leaving a trap for the next generation.

It is meant to be used for the purposes of God. God. And when we give it to the gospel, when we give it to Christ and to the cause of the gospel in some way that we do not fully understand, God takes what we give and creates children and spiritual grandchildren and spiritual fruit for his own glory.

And the third principle which is the most important is this, that generous giving pleases God. Verse 18. He says, I've received full payment and more.

I am filled, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. Now listen to this, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.

He says, when you, the church at Philippi, gave the financial gift to me, in fact, you were giving it to God. And he says, thank you, it brought joy to me, but you know what?

[21 : 41] It brought joy and pleasure to God himself, a fragrant offering, a pleasing sacrifice acceptable to God. It's an Old Testament picture that when we give generously to the cause of Christ, it rises to heaven and to the very throne of God himself and gives an aroma that pleases God.

Isn't that a lovely picture? And this is the highest reason and highest motive for our giving. Anything we do for Christ, any act, any gift, though we may be doing it and giving it to a particular ministry or to a particular person, is taken out of our hands when we give it and rises in the presence of God and brings pleasure to God himself.

God's sake. And we give it to a God. When we give generously, it demonstrates our true gospel faith, creates spiritual grandchildren, and it pleases God.

And it's no accident that the apostle teaches on generosity and contentment together, because they belong together.

There can be no true contentment without generosity, and there can be no generosity without true contentment. And that is why the apostle finishes with these words, and my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus, in Christ Jesus, you see.

[23 : 18] To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.