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 Philippians 4:10-23
 Thirteenth Message
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ESSENTIALS OF GIVING AND RECEIVING

Most of us get requests weekly or even daily in the mail from Christian organizations or missionaries looking for financial support. We get many requests as a church to endorse organizations and individuals. As Christians, we are called to give of our resources for the advancement of the gospel both locally and globally. Are there principles that will help guide us both individually and corporately in this regard? And what should be the perspective of both the giver and the receiver? This is a complex issue in our Christian culture today, one that the elders of our church wrestle with continually.

In the closing section of our study in the book of Philippians, Paul has a great word for our Christian lives and helpful insights into the matter of giving and receiving. I am not going to try and give the definitive word on giving, but our text does have some good insights to point us in the right direction.

As Paul brings his letter to a close, he expresses gratitude for the financial gift the Philippians sent to him via Epaphroditus to help him while he was in prison. In that day, prisoners had to rely on outside sources for food and other basic needs. We wonder why Paul would wait until the end of the letter to say thank you. That would probably have been the first thing we would say. Some think that this is the whole point of the letter. But more than likely, the main reason behind his writing is to address the Philippians' current situation, which was one of external pressures and internal unrest, before Timothy visited the city. Since this letter would have been read to the congregation, these words of gratitude would be the last thing ringing in their ears.

Verses 10-20 has three sections, each beginning with Paul's expression of gratitude for the gift. Each section has something distinct to say with regard to giving and receiving. The first section is verses 10-13.

I. Grateful but Content

But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity. Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:10-13 NASB)

Paul begins by expressing his joy over the gift the Philippians had sent him. As we have seen, joy is a predominant theme of this

book. Paul's appeal is for believers to rejoice in the Lord; obviously the apostle is practicing what he preaches.

When the Philippians sent the gift, they "revived" or renewed their concern for Paul. The word is a botanical metaphor meaning to blossom again, to flourish or sprout anew. Perennials that have been dormant through the cold, dark days of winter come to life again with the advent of the spring sun. In the same way, Paul is joyful that his relationship with the Philippians has been renewed. They had a long history of giving to Paul, as we will see. Evidently, some time had lapsed since the last gift, but now "at last" this friendship has blossomed again. The gift is a signal that the Philippians are thinking of him, the basic meaning of "concern."

But Paul doesn't want them to get the wrong idea. The phrase "at last" doesn't mean that he has been expecting anything. He isn't saying, "Thanks a lot. At last, finally, you sent me some money. It's about time." He knows they had been thinking of him but for whatever reason they lacked opportunity. Perhaps they didn't have anyone to send or they were just too poor.

Paul doesn't stop with that but adds an additional clarification. He says he didn't really need the money because he had learned to be content in every circumstance. For the apostle, every circumstance includes both ends of the spectrum—humble and be prosperous, to be full (meaning well-fed), and to be hungry, to be in abundance (the same word as prosperous), and to suffer want (the same word as verse 11). Paul says that he has learned the "secret," a word used in that culture of one's initiation in to a mystery religion. He has been initiated into the mystery of contentment. This was no small order, since Paul suffered greatly and encountered severe difficulties, as we read about in 2 Cor 11.

"Contentment," a very well known term in that day, conveyed the ultimate goal of Stoicism. For the Stoic, contentment was "to live above need and abundance in such a way as to be 'self-sufficient,' not meaning that one is oblivious to circumstances, but that one is not determined by such. One is 'independent' of others and of circumstances in the sense of being free from their either causing distress or effecting serenity. Serenity comes from being sufficient unto oneself."¹ To have no needs was the ideal of Stoicism.

But there was a huge difference between what Paul learned and what the Stoic attained to. The Stoics sought self-sufficiency. When things went really wrong, they would end their life. Paul had learned the secret, the mystery of Christ-sufficiency. He learned that he could do all things through him (Christ) who strengthened him. How did he learn this secret? By experiencing both poverty and abundance and learning to handle both condi-

tions, to be a man in Christ, independent of circumstances, dependent on the strength that God supplies through Christ Jesus for every situation.

Verse 13 is taken out of context a lot. This verse does not promise unlimited possibilities. It does not mean that we will be successful in any undertaking we embark on. People say things like, God told me to start a business, and I can do it through the strength that he supplies; or, God told me to start a Christian school, and I can do all things through the strength God supplies. It means that in whatever circumstance we find ourselves, whatever the assignment, God is with us. He can sustain us. His strength is sufficient to make us content no matter the outcome, whether success and abundance or difficulty and poverty.

Paul's perspective towards the Christian life is a challenge, an encouragement and a goal for all of us—to learn the mystery of contentment. In the book “The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment,” by Jeremiah Burroughs, written in the 1600's, the author defines contentment as “that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.”² Webster's defines contented as “feeling or showing satisfaction with one's possessions, status, or situation.” Contentment is opposed to the “anxiety” of 4:6. Contentment is opposed to the grumbling and disputing that Paul talks about in chapter 2. Contentment means to not be consumed with want but rather to trust that God is sovereign and is at work in all situations, as Paul refers to in 1:6 and 2:13.

Most of us struggle with this. I remember my struggles as a young man coming out of college. My first job as an engineer wasn't all that glamorous or satisfying. I was restless and kept looking for other careers and opportunities. Finally, after about seven years of hitting dead ends, I told the Lord that if he wanted me in that place for the rest of my life, then that was fine with me. I surrendered to where God had planted me. After that point, everything changed in my perspective at work and my attitude towards people so that I didn't need to make a change.

It's not wrong to pursue interests and desires in new directions, but most of us think that if we had another career, another job or another spouse we would be content. We think that if we moved to another place or got a promotion we could get the house that would solve our wants. We think that if could just get out of a stressful situation that all would be well. But sooner or later we learn that there is always something seeking to disturb our sense of contentment. Both wealth and want can have troublesome effects on us because either situation can control and consume us. When we are poor, we can be consumed with want. We can be resentful of God, complaining about our lack, and manipulative of others to help us. When we are rich, we can be consumed with riches and possessions. We worry about our portfolio, whether our money is safe, whether we are getting the best return possible, and we fear losing our wealth and becoming poor.

Of course, in our day we don't have to face our discontentment. If we want something, we just charge it. Sadly, we are never satisfied, so we keep on charging. Our problem with credit card debt is a sign of the disease of discontentment. My parents always taught me that if I can't afford something, then I don't need it. But this wisdom is often ignored. No matter our situation or our

desires, contentment comes when we abandon ourselves to God and learn that he is working, that his strength is sufficient to meet the challenges of success or failure, wealth or poverty.

We also learn some important lessons in this first section regarding giving and receiving. We learn that full-time Christian workers or churches should never manipulate people to give money. Paul had every right to expect churches to support him; he started most of them. But in his day, crooked teachers and philosophers were going around selling their ideas. So Paul went to great pains, as we read in 1 Cor 9, to not be a burden on any church or to expect financial support, but rather to offer the gospel free of charge, even being willing to make tents to get by. This is why at PBC we just make the needs known to the body. We don't want to make a big deal about it because we don't want you to get the wrong impression. Like Paul, we want to be sensitive to not put pressure on you.

Many years ago, my wife and I were involved with a church in the Midwest. The leadership wanted to expand the facilities and add a school, and they put their body under tremendous financial pressure. The result was that the church began to get a negative reputation in the community and the gospel was hindered. Paul has the opposite philosophy.

We learn that those who go into full-time ministry as pastors and missionaries should expect that they might have to get by with less. This is a specific application of contentment. I had to learn this lesson. I took a 50% cut in pay when I became a pastor after ten years of working as an engineer. That was a step of faith for my wife and me and our three young children. I drove an old Pinto wagon for 15 years—a very embarrassing situation for my children. Our policy at PBCC is that if we don't have enough money to pay salaries, we pay all our outside obligations first and then our support staff. The pastoral staff is last on the list because pastoring is a life of faith. Fortunately, we have been blessed and that has only been necessary once in the last 26 years. Paul's sense of contentment and not being consumed with want is a great model for all Christian workers.

II. Grateful But Other-Centered

In the second section Paul is grateful but other-centered:

Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction. You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs. Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account. (4:14-17)

Verse 14 brings us back to verse 10 and Paul's appreciation. The Philippians did a good thing, a beautiful thing, by sharing or partnering (the root word is *koinonia*), in Paul's affliction, his imprisonment for the gospel. In fact, Paul and the Philippians had a long history of participating together in the work of the gospel. This began when he first came to Greece and preached the gospel in Philippi and later Thessalonica. Even when he was close by in Thessalonica, the Philippians sent gifts more than once or twice. This continued after he left Macedonia and went to Athens and

Corinth. No church supported Paul like the Philippian church. The apostle began this letter by giving thanks to God “in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now” (1:5), thus ending the letter as he began.

Giving and receiving characterized Greco-Roman friendship and was the language of commerce. The Philippians had opened an account with Paul and there was mutual credit and debit. This metaphor is extended to verse 17: “I seek for the profit or fruit that increases to your account.” Paul’s focus is not on himself, but rather on what was happening to the Philippians by supporting him.

The Philippians are reaping fruit, accruing compound interest. Paul does not mean to imply a works-based theology, earning points with God. But they are laying up treasure in heaven that will be evident at the coming of Christ. The gift that serves Paul’s physical health serves the Philippians more significantly in their spiritual health. The gift is bearing spiritual fruit in the lives of the Philippians. Even in prison Paul is other-centered.

Here again we gain insights into the matter of giving. We learn that the ideal is for missionaries and full-time Christian workers to have a close relationship with a church. This was the case between Paul and the Philippians. His joy was in the relationship, not the financial support. Someone seeking support should be able to say to his or her local church, “I have been serving here for awhile. You have seen how I am gifted. You have observed my character. It seems God might be calling me into full-time ministry. Do you agree?” Our elders always have a hard time endorsing someone who is not relationally connected and has not had his or her gifts observed by people within the body.

We learn that it is good for us to be participating with others in the work of the gospel in which we are all partners. So on the one hand, the missionary is not to be manipulative but content and trusting, but on the other, every believer is to give generously as he or she is directed by God. Giving bears spiritual fruit in our lives. Paul talks about this in 2 Corinthians 9. The ideal is to be relationally connected to those whom we support. But often that is not possible in a church of our size, so here at PBCC we have a missions fund. Giving to this fund allows the elders to disperse money, as need dictates, to our missionaries. In recent months, we have increased our financial commitment to our missionaries, and the elders plan to review this yearly. Hopefully, this fund will gradually become equal to our commitment.

Giving has spiritual benefit for all of us. A couple of years ago, I was overwhelmed with the task of moving a pile of rocks from my driveway to my back yard. I asked one of my friends if he would help me that afternoon. On the way to my house, he called a half-dozen of his friends. Within a short time we had a task force and they made fast work of my project. I was overjoyed and grateful. But what delighted me even more was the fruit in my friend’s life. He had developed such strong relationships in the community that he could make a few calls and get an amazing response. This is what Paul experienced.

III. Grateful but God-Centered

The third section focuses on God:

But I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God. And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (4:18-20)

At last Paul mentions directly the gift that was delivered by Epaphroditus. The commercial metaphor is continued in verse 18. Paul says that he has been “paid in full.” Not only are his needs covered, he has an “abundance,” the same word used twice in verse 12. He says that he is amply supplied or filled up with the lavish generosity of the Philippians.

Not only is Paul grateful, he is also God-centered. The gift is a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice. This is the language of the OT sacrificial system, the image of the scent of the burnt offering wafting heavenward, a pleasing aroma to God. The Philippian gift is an offering given to God in the person of Paul.

Paul then says that God to whom they have given the gift will supply all their needs. Remember that friendship is marked by giving and receiving. But Paul cannot reciprocate in kind. He says that God will assume the responsibility. God and the Philippians have met Paul’s needs and God will meet their needs. Paul has been filled and God will fill them.

We learn another lesson in giving. The financial gifts we give are not just given to a person, they are an offering to God. Paul uses sacrificial imagery elsewhere in the New Testament. He applies this language to Jesus in the book of Ephesians: believers are to walk in love “just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma” (Eph 5:2). And he applies it to believers in Romans: “present your bodies a living holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship” (Rom 12:1).

We are called to follow Jesus and live sacrificial lives, and this includes our giving. Our gifts are like the sacrifice of Jesus and like the offering of our time and energy in service of God. When we write a check, that is an act of worship. Our gifts are first and foremost offered to God.

We also learn another life lesson. It is God who supplies all our needs. God fills us out of his riches that dwell in his glory, manifested fully in Christ Jesus. This brings us back to the idea of contentment and puts our hearts on God. He doesn’t give us everything we want but he will give us what we need. God knows us and cares for us and he is working to complete what he has begun. And often our greatest needs are not physical. Rather, the things we need most are love, mercy, grace, forgiveness and peace. Money and houses will not give us these things. Our biggest struggle can be letting go of what we want in order to receive the riches of God through Christ. We live content and wait on God. We give of our lives and resources generously and God blesses us in the same manner.

My children are adults now, but often they call asking to borrow something or inquiring whether we still have some item stored in the attic. If possible, my wife and I are always willing to supply what they need because we love them. That’s the way God

is. Sometimes he has a different design for our lives, but he isn't stingy. He wants to supply what we need out of the storehouse of his riches.

With that thought, Paul breaks into a doxology, and we should too: "Now to God our Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen." The "my" God of verse 19 becomes "our" God. In every circumstance, whether poor or rich, everything is for the glory of God. This is the way it is and the way it will always be. Everything else is a means to this end.

V. Greetings and Grace

On that note, Paul ends his letter with both greetings and grace.

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren 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. (4:21-23)

Paul extends his greetings to every saint. No one is named, because he doesn't need to identify anyone. They are all dear friends who share a common life in Christ. The church is not a collection of isolated, individual Christians but a family and a community. Paul's greetings are sent from all the brothers, even those of Caesar's household. "Paul may be in prison at Caesar's pleasure, but the gospel has penetrated Caesar's household."³ In typical fashion, the apostle concludes with a wish of grace, the way the letter began (1:2).

So we conclude our studies in Philippians. The main thrust for believers is to have the mind-set of Christ and follow his pattern of sacrifice and humility. We become conformed to his death but we live in the power of the resurrection as citizens of heaven, standing firm in the face of opposition, all to the glory of God. As we conclude, this prayer by Charles de Foucauld is most appropriate:

My Father, I commend myself to you, I give myself to you, I leave myself in your hands. My Father, do with me as you wish. Whatever you do with me, I thank you. I accept everything. I am ready for anything. I thank you always. So long as your will is done in me . . . I have no other wish my God. I put my soul into your hands, giving it to you, my God, with all my heart's love, which makes me crave to abandon myself to you without reserve, with utter confidence. For are you not my Father?

Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. (Philippians 4:20, 23)

¹ Gordon Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 432.

² Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1648, 19).

³ D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 123.