

A Thank You Note
Philippians 4:10-20

This is the season of the year when most congregations engage in what they call “stewardship season.” That means that members are asked to fill out pledge cards, stating what we plan to give to the church in the coming year. The officers of the church then collect all these pledges and make out the next year’s budget based on the projected income.

When I hear other pastors talking about how their stewardship season is going, they are usually amazed when I tell them how we do things in Port Gibson. “No, we don’t make pledges. We just tell the congregation about the needs, and they give generously.”

Yes, this congregation is very good at giving. Just in the year 2008, you supported the Sertao project, the Cistern project and the Linda Bates Preschool in Brazil. You supported Mississippi schools like CEF, Chamberlain-Hunt, and Belhaven College. Through Christian Volunteer Service, you helped local folks pay their utility bills and have adequate housing and have a merry Christmas. All in all, last year 22% of all the funds that came into the church treasury went right back out again in benevolences.

But if we are good at giving, are we equally comfortable with receiving help? Do we find it as easy to say “thank you” as we do to say, “You’re welcome?”

At first glance, it may look like Paul has a similar problem. He puts the “thank you” part of his letter at the very end. Looking at the placement of Paul’s “thank you note,” some scholars have come to the conclusion that Paul is embarrassed by receiving a gift from the Philippians.

But the truth is really deeper than that. Paul does deal with the “thank you” portion of this letter in a careful way, but in part that’s because saying, “Thank you,” complicates our relationships.

Why is it so hard to say, “Thank you?” Well, in the first part of verse 10, Paul introduces the subject, expressing his great joy that the Philippians have at last demonstrated their care for him by sending such a generous gift. But Paul has to tread lightly – he doesn’t want them to think he blames them for not sending a gift earlier. And so Paul quickly, and perhaps a bit awkwardly, turns around in the last part of the verse. He assures them that he knows the only reason they didn’t send help earlier was because they lacked the opportunity to do so.

But this attempt to salve their feelings might also send the wrong message. It might come across as a plea for yet more assistance. Look – Paul’s no televangelist. He doesn’t walk around with his hand stuck out all the time. In fact, in many if not all of the places where Paul preached, he had a habit of working at his trade of tent-making to support himself. We still call bivocational pastors “tentmakers” in honor of Paul.

And so, Paul moves into an honest discussion of his current financial condition. He speaks of his affliction or distress in verse 14 and admits his needs or necessity in verse 16. But at the same time, in verse 11 he says that he isn't really in want, he doesn't really need anything. And in verse 17, he goes so far as to say that he doesn't desire a gift.

Paul is certainly trying to avoid looking like a mooch. But in the process he comes perilously close to looking like an ingrate. It's a fine line Paul is trying to walk. No wonder he has saved this part of the letter until last!

But if Paul has waited until the end of this letter to deal with this touchy subject, perhaps it's because the first part of his letter actually has a lot to say about this problem. For the deeper question for Paul and for us is this: what is a Christian's proper relationship to the things of this world?

Paul's answer seems to be summarized in verse 11 in one word: contentment. Paul says, for example, in verse 12 that he has learned how to get by on very little. In the face of his poverty, he has learned to be content.

Now, I know. We Americans are experiencing some tough economic times, make no mistake. The national unemployment rate has topped 10%, the highest it's been since 1983. Mississippi is perhaps doing a little better, as we reported a 9.2% unemployment rate in September. But in Claiborne County, we have a 15% unemployment rate. In the year 2007, more than 35% of the people in this county were living below the poverty line – and that was before the market collapse last year.

But let's be honest. Even the poorest of us Americans don't really know the kind of poverty Paul was experiencing. Even during this recession we Americans are staggeringly wealthy compared to the way that our ancestors lived, or compared to the way that most people live in most countries around the world. Sure, we may not have as much money as we might like, but very few of us know what it's like to wonder where our next meal is coming from. Unlike Paul, we really haven't learned to be abased, to be hungry, to suffer need.

And that's probably why we haven't learned how to be full to abundance, either. For has all our money made us happy? It doesn't seem so. One of the big reasons we have gotten into the financial mess we are in is because consumers across the board borrowed much more than they could afford to pay back in order to buy bigger houses and drive nicer cars. And even today, after the credit crunch has finally come, our government continues to borrow more and more money to spend it on what voters want today.

No, we Americans don't know how to be abased, and we don't know how to abound. We don't know how to be hungry, and we don't know how to be full. Our wealth is at the same time our greatest strength and our biggest problem. Contentment simply isn't in our vocabulary.

Well, what about Paul? He knew what it really meant to be needy, didn't he? He was chained up in a Roman prison, dependent on gifts from Christians who are equally poor and persecuted. And yet he can say, as he does in verse 18, "I have it all. I am full." Is he crazy?

Not at all. Remember, this passage comes at the end of a letter which is focused, not on worldly things, but on Jesus Christ. Back in chapter 2, Paul recalls vividly Jesus' selfless sacrifice on our behalf on the cross, and calls us to a life of similar humility. Back in chapter 3, Paul has renounced everything in which he might have been tempted to take pride: his race, his good works, his ritual purity. Instead of looking to any of these things, Paul says he considers all of them rubbish, desiring only to "gain Christ and be found in Him." To Paul, Jesus Christ is all that matters.

So, why should we expect his attitude about money to be any different? After all, if knowing Jesus Christ is superior to anything we can do or anything that we are, if knowing Jesus is better than heritage or ritual or respectability, doesn't it stand to reason that knowing Christ is better than anything we can own? And wouldn't having Jesus Christ make the most grinding poverty bearable? Isn't Jesus the key to contentment?

Christians around the world certainly seem to think so. To see where the Church is growing the fastest today, don't go to the wealthy parts of the world. Don't go to Europe, where the magnificent cathedrals and the humble parish churches are alike empty of worshippers. Don't come to North America, where many once great denominations are now shedding thousands of members every year.

No, if you want to see the Holy Spirit moving in a powerful way, drawing multitudes to faith in Jesus Christ, go to the desert areas of Northeast Brazil, where congregations are springing up and where passionate young men are clamoring to be missionaries and pastors. Go to India, where the people who were once considered "untouchable" are coming to Jesus Christ by the thousands.

The bad news for us wealthy Americans is that Jesus' words have proven themselves true time and time again over the 2,000 years since they were first spoken: how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God. How easy it is for the things that we see to steal our hearts and our minds from the much more important things that we can't see.

So, what can we do? How can we connect the teachings of Paul and Jesus to our credit-crazed, consumption-dependent, debt-addicted society? How can we avoid the sin of that rich young man who preferred his money to a real relationship with the Prince of Peace?

Well, we Mississippians know how to be generous, and giving is in fact a good way of gaining perspective on what we keep, as well as on what we desire. In verse 17, Paul says that he takes delight in the Philippians' gift mainly because he knows that as they have given it, it has borne fruit in their spiritual lives. As they have given of their substance to meet Paul's need, they have done something that pleases God as much as an Old-Testament burnt offering.

But one reason that the Philippians' gift was so beneficial to them is that it proved they were sharing in Paul's distress, or as the King James puts it in verse 14, they "communicated with his affliction." Does this mean that the large amount of their gift caused them to suffer along with Paul? Or does it mean that as they gave, they became partners with Paul in his difficult, dangerous work of proclaiming the gospel?

Either one is possible and both are equally beneficial, for ancient Philippians and modern Americans alike. For if we would please God and further the work of His Kingdom, how can we doubt that our giving must be as strategic as it is sacrificial? How can we doubt that if we give God not just our leftovers but our firstfruits, not just our offerings but His tithes as well, that we will be as greatly blessed as we greatly bless others?

But none of our efforts and none of our gifts will change us or the world around us if they don't flow out of a real relationship with Christ. We find the heart of this passage in verse 13, where Paul writes, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." This is a popular memory verse, and we often quote it in times of temptation or weakness. But notice that Paul speaks these words in the context of wrestling with money issues. He can be content no matter how little he has through the power of Christ. Just so, he can be content, no matter how much he has, through the power of Christ.

And so can we. The more real Christ is to us, the more precious Christ is to us, the more Christ fills our horizons, the less the things of this world will matter to us. Through the power of Christ, we can be truly content, even in our abundance, so that we won't want to have more and more things.

Why is that? In part it's because of the promise Paul gives to all Christians in verse 19: As we trust more and more in Jesus, we can know that God will supply all our needs. We won't need to cling to what we have, and we won't have to focus on getting more and more – all those in Christ can be sure that God will take care of our needs.

But our contentment also depends on the focus of our lives – on God and not on ourselves. Look at how Paul ends the passage in verse 20. The reason Paul can be so content is because he wants God to get the glory. Paul’s passion is that God’s reputation would be magnified, not that Paul himself would get lots of things out of this life. For Paul, all the things of this world pale in comparison to God receiving all the glory and praise.

David understood this two-fold key to contentment. What does Psalm 16 say that we sang this morning? “I have set the Lord always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth: my flesh also shall rest in hope.” And why is David so satisfied? Why is David so contented? “The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup,” he says. It is in God’s presence that he finds fullness of joy, and pleasures forevermore, because God Himself is David’s greatest desire.

This is the good news: if we have Jesus, we have all we will ever need – all the riches, all the fullness, all the joy we can imagine. May we seek Him first, last and always.

Hymn 344 Be Thou My Vision