

“Joy in our Generosity”
Philippians Week 12
Downtown
July 25, 2021

Have you ever had someone come to your aid when you needed it the most? How do you pay someone like that back? In some respects, you probably can't. But, the place you start is by saying, “Thank you.”

And, it's important to remember, this is actually why Paul wrote this letter. Sure, it's to encourage the Philippian church. Sure, it's to impart to them some teaching and wisdom and his prayers for their joy. But, primarily, Philippians is a thank you letter.

He's thanking them for their generosity. They came to his aid when he needed it the most. And, it's important to note that before this was ever a theological document, it was correspondence between people... a correspondence of gratitude.

And this last little section I think really reveals this because Paul's a bit all over the place. This section reads a bit scattered. It very much reads like a friend simply writing to another friend, “I praised God when I saw you did this... but don't get me wrong I'm not saying this... but, listen, the one thing I know is this... and, you're so kind to me, and also, listen I'm excited for you for this... and just all over the place.

But, despite the writing style, there are two themes that rise to the top: contentment and generosity. Two things that I would contend just about everyone would say they want more of in their life... but few seem to find.

So, let's work our way back through some of what Paul writes here and see what it has to say to us...

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.

Contentment can be an elusive thing, right? How many of us can confidently say we've found it? Like, “I don't want a bigger house? Or a different car? Or a different job? How many of us can say that?

No, all of us are drawn to the idea that if things were just a bit different, if I just had a little bit more, or just didn't have _____ in my life, then I think I would be okay and life would feel more full and joyful.

What's interesting, and something that we've pointed out consistently in this series is that there is nothing about Paul's circumstances that says he should be able to say things like this. He's in prison. He's not rich. He's not married... His circumstances are wildly out of his control and yet, he says, “I can rejoice. I'm content.”

And right off the cuff, that tells something massively important: **Joy and contentment are never an issue of having or not having enough.**

JD Rockefeller once responded to the question, “How much money is enough?” He’s famously quoted as saying, “just a little bit more.” And this is the lie we’re all tempted to believe.

“If I just had more then I’d be content or joyful” If I just had a different house, different car, different clothes, a different living room, or a spouse, or kids or a different spouse or different kids... and reality is that just simply isn’t true.

I’ve shared these stats with you before, but every time we talk about the love of money and contentment and the like they just blow my mind.

- There are more self-storage facilities (not units, facilities) in the US, than Starbucks, McDonalds, Dunkin Donuts, Pizza Huts, and Wendy’s combined.¹
- According to the LA Times, the average American home has over 300k items in it.²
- We consume twice as many material goods as we did 50 years ago.
- The average home has tripled in size in the last 50 years. And I wonder how many of us *still* believe if we had a little bigger house, contentment would follow.
- 25% of people who have two car garages do not have room to park either car inside it due to clutter. 32% only have room for 1 (guilty)
- Average American has \$15,000 of credit card debt.

And, honestly, these stats are a few years old. They’ve likely gotten worse since the last time I shared them with you... but the point is we simultaneously have more than we need... and yet still believe we don’t have enough.

Social scientists have dubbed this "the prosperity paradox" - despite living in an age of unparalleled prosperity, human contentment and happiness has not increased in proportion to increased material well-being"

It’s because contentment isn’t actually the product of what we do or don’t have.

I’ve been pretty fortunate over the course of my years in ministry to get to engage with a lot of ministries overseas. And one of the reasons I value short-term mission trips and traveling overseas is because of the exposure. The reality is, you don’t realize just how much you have until you’re around people who don’t have a fraction of it. And additionally, you don’t realize just how little you need for joy until you are around people who don’t have a fraction of what you have, but overflow with the joy you don’t. I’ve spent time with impoverished believers in the bush of Mali, West Africa, in the slums of Guatemala, and the favelas of Brazil - all culturally different, but oddly enough all the same in one respect - I met the poorest of the poor - people that conventional wisdom would say should be miserable and hate their life - yet people who overflowed with joy.

And that seems to be a pretty common experience when 1st world people like us get exposed to the less privileged.

A friend of mine spent some time in Kenya a few years back. And a young man commented to her during her stay, “Y’all must be so content in America. You have so much great stuff! iPhones, fancy cars, big houses!” She responded, “Actually, no. Most of the folks I know are really discontent. I’d say that y’all are way more content.” And she paused and asked, “Why do you think that is?” Her friend responded, “Well, I guess it’s because every day we have to ask the

¹[Self-storage statistics 2020](#)

² All sources for these stats found [here](#).

Lord for our daily bread.”

Now, it'd be a miss to think that I or Paul here is suggesting that you get rid of your AC, sell your house, and force your family to live in squalor for the rest of your days - no, he says he's the secret of facing plenty AND being in need. It's not an issue about how much or how little you have... the point is, that contrary to popular belief, finding contentment - being a person who overflows with satisfaction and joy in life - has nothing to do with what you do or don't have.

Instead, the Scriptures contend that contentment is something we can learn... no matter our circumstance.

Look back at Paul's words... I have *learned* the *secret* of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.

The phrase “learned the secret” is actually just one word in greek, the word “μυεο (moo-eh'-o). And historically speaking, it's a pretty interesting word that means “to initiate into the mysteries,” and was most often used in Greco-Roman religions to talk about receiving special or, even, divine knowledge.

And that's essentially the implication of Paul's words here, contentment is not natural. It's learned. It is not the default setting for humans or a feeling that we muster up from within ourselves.

Think all the way back to our first grandparents. Adam and Eve in the garden. They were placed in the garden and told what? That they can eat from any tree in the garden - which just think about that - all the options of delicious and nutritious fruit that would offer - they can eat from any tree except for one. And which one do they want? The one they can't have... and are we any different?

Of course, we aren't. In a world of yes's we always want the no. Because there is always something out of reach.

Every now and again, we'll take our kids to the store to pick out a toy or treat for them to buy with money they've earned or been given or something. They've since grown out of this mostly, but when they were younger they'd go to the store and be all excited about what they were going to get... until they noticed what their sibling was getting... and then all of a sudden - as if by magic - their purchase - the gift that their parents were graciously allowing them to receive - suddenly isn't all that enjoyable. Because it's not what they have...

Notice the role that comparison plays in discontentment. There will always be a “sibling” in your life. (someone or something to compare yourself to). There will always be someone older, or younger, or smarter, or more successful, or better looking or whatever.

It really is as president Theodore Roosevelt famously said, “Comparison is the thief of joy.” And the truth that some of us need to hear today is that the only thing really standing in the way of your joy is you. Your constant looking out and believing that the thing that you don't have, that someone else does, is what you need.

And I don't say that to kick you while you're down. I say it because you just gotta know that if you spend your life locked into believing “if I just had what they have” or believing that the next thing, or the next step, the next relationship, the next zero in the bank account is what you need

to be content you are going to live your life perpetually frustrated, if not depressed. And more importantly, it will rob you of savoring the blessings of God right in front of you.

This is why you have to *learn* to be content. It doesn't come naturally. You have to learn the secret.

And what is that secret? Verse 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Now, when you read this verse in its context, it does start to sound a little different than we're used to hearing it doesn't it? Seems like it might be way less about winning football games and way more about being able to handle losing them.

Paul is saying, the secret to facing abundance and need, prison and freedom, good times and bad, prosperity and poverty... is Jesus. I can do it all, whatever it is, through Jesus who gives me strength.

"I just can't, you know"(serve in kidtown, be in this LifeGroup, give this money, etc) "I can't go back to a point of living below my means..."

Through Christ you can! "It's a secret" it's learned knowledge and unless you become willing to embrace this truth, no matter what you have you won't be content.

Taking Paul off the pedestal a little bit. A lot of times we say, 'I can't do this thing.' Paul is also saying, without Christ he can't do these things. But, *with* it, he can. Don't be impressed with Paul here, be impressed with Christ.

If Paul can learn, you can learn. We have the exact same Spirit. The secret is Christ. You can have plenty or be in want, and if you have Christ you will have all that you need.

But here's the kicker, you will never be convinced that Jesus is enough, until you are convinced that Jesus is what you really need.

Think about what drives our discontentment? It's a belief that this thing, whatever it may be - the relationship, the money, the job - provides something for me. Perhaps a sense of security. Or the feeling of control or power over my circumstances or life. Or an identity or a value that I don't believe I would have without it.

"And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." One of the reasons contentment escapes us - and I would also argue one of the reasons some of us struggle to live generously - is because we don't believe God will actually supply for our every need.

Story: one day earlier on in the life of our church. Brandon and I were pouring over the budget and we realized that at our current operation, we weren't going to be able to make it if giving didn't increase. We just had a significant budget shortfall. We realized, "Oh, if something doesn't change... we're not gonna have a place to meet and one of us was gonna be flippin' burgers.

I won't lie. We were a bit scared. But we prayed. We came to God and said, "Father, we know everything in this world is yours and that we are your church. And we know that if you want us to keep doing what we're doing, you'll provide. God, will you bring it?"

Two days later Brandon got a message from a member who said, “Hey man, we realized that we need to start giving” and without us even saying how much we needed, they covered it all.

For me, that is one of those cornerstone moments and stories in ministry that gives me such confidence in God. I have tears in my eyes just thinking about it.

And, I share that story simply as a means to say, God takes care of his kids. He just does. And it’s all over the place in Scripture.

Psalm 145:16 You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing.

Stephen Covey - 7 Habits of Highly Effective People - coined the terms “abundance” and “scarcity” mindset. An abundance mindset is one that believes there is plenty to go around, plenty of success, opportunity, praise, etc. We can give and share freely because a win for a colleague is a win for us all. A scarcity mindset is one that believes everything is limited. There’s only so much to go around so I have to fight and scrape for my own.

He uses these terms to talk about leadership and working with others and I think they have a lot of value there, but truthfully, as Christians, we have every reason to have an abundance mindset. In fact, discontent leads to a scarcity mindset - a belief that there is never enough.

So, how do we learn this secret? In a word: practice. In more than one word, the practice of consistent, sacrificial giving.

I bring that up because I often hear people pray for “contentment.” Whether that’s contentment with their stage in life, contentment with their singleness, contentment with their job—any number of things. And I don’t think there’s anything wrong at all with praying for that...just so long as we realize that when we ask God for contentment, he very well may respond by giving us opportunities to learn contentment.

Do you know how Paul learned contentment with not having much? God had him thrown in prison where he didn’t have much.

I don’t know how many of you have seen Evan Almighty. It’s the less-good sequel to the 2003 comedy Bruce Almighty. But there’s this pretty great scene in it where Evan, played by Steve Carrel, is having a sit-down convo with God (who is played by Morgan Freeman because of course he is). And in the conversation, he says “I thought I prayed for patience.” And Morgan Freeman in his signature voice, that I choose to believe is very similar to how God actually sounds, says “When people pray for patience, do I give them patience, or do I give them opportunities to become patient?” In general, I don’t recommend taking theological cues from Hollywood, but that one, kinda, nails it.

Let me ask you something. If someone prays for patience, do you think God gives her patience? Or does he give her the opportunity to be patient? If he prays for courage, does God give him courage, or does he give him opportunities to be courageous? If someone prayed for their family to be closer, do you think God zaps them with warm fuzzy feelings, or does he give them opportunities to love each other?

And the same is true for contentment.

[14] Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. [15] 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. [16] Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. [17] Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.

Evidently, the Philippian church was one of the most *consistently generous* churches towards Paul and his ministry. In the beginning, they were the *only* church that financially supported him. This seems like a good place to mention that there is a difference between being *situationally* generous and being *consistently* generous. Being *situationally* generous is when we say things like “oh yeah, I totally love to give...*if there’s a need*. If something comes up and I can, I’ll totally be generous towards it.” And that’s great—feel free to be situationally generous.

But I think more what the Scriptures would teach us to do is to be *consistently* generous. To think of all of our money and stuff as belonging to God. And to, as a regular *practice*, set aside money to be generous with, *regardless* of whether or not there’s a need. And if you set money aside and there ends up *not* being a need right away, that means you get to go *look* for a need. There are needs *everywhere*. There are ministries and people groups and initiatives in Columbia right now that have needs you can meet. There are needs within your church—probably even within your *LifeGroup*—right now, that you can meet. And you know what else I’ve found? If I set aside money to be generous with *before* there’s a need, giving feels like an *opportunity* and I’m *excited* about it. If I wait until there’s a *need* to set that money aside, giving feels like an *obligation* and I’m a little more hesitant to part with it. As God’s people, we’re called to be *consistently* generous—not just *situationally* generous. Make sense?

But, notice what Paul says about it... even though he greatly appreciates the gift... and considers it a wonderful, beautiful and God-pleasing thing... what he really is what they get out of it.

Giving gives you something.

Proverbs 11:24-25 One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want. Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered.

In Jesus’ own words, “it is more blessed to give than to receive.” More blessed. Not just as blessed. More.

And to be clear, the promise is not health and wealth, or Bentley’s lake front properties. But giving does give something in return.

Intentional giving is actually a primary way the Spirit loosens the stranglehold of covetousness, jealousy, and greed on our hearts - which are what really lie at the root of discontentment. It’s why we’ve made it one of our covenant practices.

It presses us into the reality that Jesus is more than enough. He is what we need. His kingdom and purposes are the most important things in this life. And, above all, He is the one who always provides.

We tend to think - consciously or otherwise - that contentment precedes giving. That we can’t give until we’re content. But, I don’t think that’s the way it works. I think they have a much more

symbiotic relationship than we realize. Giving helps us learn the secret of contentment.

I love how Paul hints about it in those last few verses. [18] *I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.* [19] *And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.* [20] *To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.*

He calls the Philippians gift a "fragrant offering" "a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God."... that's temple language. That's worship language. He's saying every time that money comes out of our bank account that's worship, and it pleases God.

And to be honest with you guys, this is something I forget a lot. I often feel like giving is just that thing that I'm supposed to do and forget that it's a worshipful thing to do.

And like all worship does, it changes us. The point remains that every time you give it is a declarative action on your part that helps you, deep down in your soul, learn to say: Jesus is worthy. Jesus is what I need. Jesus is enough.

For what it's worth, we're often more concerned about what we'll miss out on if we give, but I believe we should be far more concerned about what we'll miss out on if we don't.

Yes, giving might mean I don't get the house I always wanted. It might mean my wife and I both work longer than we wanted to. It might mean my kids don't get to do every extracurricular under the sun or that I drive my car until the wheels fall off...

But it might also mean that I get to see people meet Jesus who never would have. I might get to see churches planted and thrive when the culture around me is pivoting hard against the way of Jesus. It might mean I get to see someone else's needs met, their life change - see them stay afloat when the bottom drops out.

And more specifically, it might just mean that I become a person who is deeply and unshakably content... a person not controlled by jealousy or the thoughts of what I don't have. A person who lives as though there is plenty to go around... not one who lives in perpetual competition with the rest of the world. A person of peace. A person of stability. A person of joy.

Conclusion