

Thank God, Dear Christian!

(Philippians 4:10-20) ¹⁰I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹²I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³I can do all this through him who gives me strength. ¹⁴Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. ¹⁵Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; ¹⁶for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. ¹⁷Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. ¹⁸I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. ¹⁹And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁰To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

In name of our Heavenly Father, the Giver of every good and perfect gift, dear fellow redeemed,

It was the most money I had ever received - \$110 – nearly the exact amount I needed to buy the yellow, chrome fendered, Schwinn Varsity 10 speed bicycle I had been dreaming about for more than a year. And now, thanks to the money I had received for my Confirmation, the bike was as good as mine. But first, before I could spend a dime of that windfall, my parents insisted that I send “Thank You” notes. Not a problem! How hard would it be to sign my name 20 times or so in a pre-printed card? That’s not what mom and dad had in mind. They put a stack of 25 empty cards on the table before me and informed me that I was to write a note to the giver of each gift, explaining what the gift meant to me on the occasion of my Confirmation. I couldn’t believe it. Why would I do that? As I stared at those empty cards, I seriously thought about giving the money back – an idea that mom and dad quickly vetoed. So, I wrote out those “Thank You” cards, one by one. I don’t remember what I said or how long it took me. But I do know now that if someone would have pointed me to the text before us, it would have made my task so much easier. Because the Apostle Paul teaches all of us why and how to give thanks. We’ll look at his inspired words with this theme in mind: **Thank God, Dear Christian: 1) for gifts that you receive; and 2) for gifts that you give.**

As we learned over the past several weeks, the Philippian congregation held a special place in St. Paul’s heart. At God’s direction, Paul had brought the gospel to new continent. The Philippians were the very first souls that the Apostle had encountered there and in no time at all, the gospel of Christ that Paul proclaimed gave birth to a small but thriving Christian congregation.

As you might imagine, the Christians in Philippi had a special place in their heart for Paul. He was their spiritual father. They showed their love for him immediately by financially supporting the mission work he would go on to do in places like Thessalonica and Berea. You might also expect the people’s love to fade over time. After all, Paul’s visits to Philippi were very brief. But the gifts continued to come as the people had the means and opportunity to give them. In fact, this letter, written 10 years after the Philippian congregation was founded, is in part, a “thank you” for their most recent gifts. Paul writes: **“I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed**

your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it.” (Philippians 4:10).

Paul receives their gifts after making a dangerous trip to Rome where he now sits in jail awaiting trial because of his preaching. He is happy to reply: **“I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent.” (Philippians 4:18).** Paul is very pleased with these gifts, but knowing the sinful nature as he does, his own and that of his readers, including ours, Paul doesn’t want anyone to misunderstand his motives.

As I mentioned, I don’t remember what I wrote in my Confirmation “Thank You” cards. But this much I do know, even the 13-year-old version of me would have thought of writing something that might bring me more gifts from my generous family and friends: “Thanks so much for the gift. I’m saving up for a bike. Just a few more dollars and I’ll be able to buy it.” (Hint! Hint!) I didn’t have to learn that from anyone. You didn’t either. The sin we inherited at birth makes us naturally greedy and leaves us perpetually dissatisfied with what we have at the moment. The same sin convinces us that if we can just get our hands on a little more (fill in the blank), money, attention, power...then we’ll be content. Of course, that’s a lie that Satan tells us as he sets us up for what he hopes will be a lifetime of unhappiness followed by an eternity of suffering. And so it would be if not for a powerful secret that Paul is pleased to share with us: **“I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.” (Philippians 4:11-12).**

Our lives here on earth often resemble a rollercoaster ride with many “ups and downs.” That was especially true of Paul. But rather than letting the rollercoaster throw him for a loop, Paul lived life completely content at all times. What was his secret? When things were really bad, did he tell himself, “Hang in there, better days are coming!”? And when times were better did he say, “Let the good times roll! I’ll enjoy them while they last.”? Those kind of “pep talks,” as you may know, only go so far in fighting off worry and despair. No, the secret to Paul’s contentment did not come from within. It came from above: **“I can do all this through him who gives me strength.” (Philippians 4:13).**

Rather than relying on pep talks, Paul’s faith rested on the sure promises of Christ’s gospel – a message that assures all Christians that God, who always knows their circumstances, is so loving and so powerful that he doesn’t just get us through our time of need, he actually makes it a time of blessing for us. Can we always count on such love? Oh yes! Paul writes in Romans 8:32: **“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”** It always comes back to God’s love for us in Christ! There’s nothing God won’t do for you. Look, he’s already given you Jesus to save you from your greed and worry and despair – to save you from hell itself. He will do whatever it takes to make sure that you come safely to the heaven Jesus earned for you. This truth furnished Paul with the strength to live life, the good and the bad days, always content that God’s love for him in Christ would bring him one blessing after another.

This great confidence in God’s love made Paul grateful for the Philippians’ gift. Paul could see that God was meeting his needs through the generosity of his fellow believers, and not just his monetary needs. Even better, God was meeting Paul’s need for Christian fellowship and friendship. Paul tells the Christians: **“...it was good of you to share in my troubles.” (Philippians 4:14).**

Maybe you’ve come to realize that one of the ways that Satan attempts to ruin our Christian faith is by tricking us into feeling that we are alone, alone in our beliefs, and alone in the troubles and trials we bear because of them. Picture Paul sitting in jail, far away from the congregations he had

served. Satan must have whispered in his ear, “What’s the point to all of this? Where has your faith in Jesus gotten you? Where are those friends you made in Christ?” Just then, the Philippians’ gifts arrived, reminding Paul that his fellow believers were right there with him. They were holding him up in prayer. They wanted him to know that they cherished Jesus and his gospel as much as Paul did. That meant everything to the Apostle. With those gifts, God sent Paul the encouragement of his fellow Christians. Paul was not alone.

You and I are blessed in similar ways. We enjoy the benefits of gifts given, in some cases, by people we’ve never met, people whose gifts built and furnished this beautiful house of God and provided us with a wonderful Lutheran Elementary School. The gifts of our fellow believers brought called workers to this place whose preaching and teaching laid here the foundation of the faith we hold so dear. These gifts benefit us in so many ways, not the least of which is the wonderful reminder that we are not alone in our confession of Christ. Thank God, dear Christian for gifts that you receive. Understand that their worth cannot be measured in mere dollars and cents. These gifts have eternal value.

But don’t let your gratitude stop there. Thank God, dear Christian for the gifts that you give. Really? Why would you do that? Because the gifts you give point to who you’ve become through your faith in Jesus. Paul puts it this way: **“Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account.” (Philippians 4:17)**. More than anything, Paul loved what the Christian’s gifts said about the Christians themselves. Apart from Jesus, you and I are selfish creatures who are so much better at taking than giving; and if we do give something, it’s only because we’ve figured out that there will be a return on our gift that outweighs the cost. That’s before we knew Christ. Through faith in him, everything has changed. Now, every gift is a way of thanking God for his gift of Jesus. Every gift is an expression of love. We want others to share in the blessings that we have from God in Christ. St. Paul wants all of this to be to our credit, not in the sense that giving gifts is earning us any favors or rewards from God, but in the sense that our generosity is a testimony, a credit to what God has made of us by giving us faith in Jesus.

Jesus makes all the difference! For even in our giving we must count on Jesus to credit us with his holiness. Why? Because even on our best days our best gifts are still tainted by greed that stops us from giving more, or worry that frets over the thought that we may have given too much. And if it isn’t greed or worry, our pride kicks in, swelling our heads with the notion that we’ve gone above and beyond what anybody in our position could ever think or hope to do. Yikes! Can we sinners ever give a gift that doesn’t stink to high heaven? In Christ we can. Because he has paid for our sin and removed its stench from all that we are and all that we do. This is why Paul can say of all our gifts: **“They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.” (Philippians 4:18)**. Whatever we do in Christ, passes God’s smell test!

This gospel truth makes this Commitment Sunday a day of thanksgiving all the way around. It’s a day to give double thanks! First, we thank God in anticipation of the blessings that we, and our children, and their children will receive through the generous offerings of his people – a beautiful place to preach and teach, to hear and learn the life-giving Word of Jesus. And as we pledge our own gifts, we thank him for the privilege of doing so. We thank him for not only providing us the financial means by which to give, but for working in us the desire to give gifts that will convince future generations that they are not alone. We stand with them in faith and will live with them in heaven.

Today, we commit ourselves to retiring our building expansion debt and at the same time finishing the project we started three years ago. All told we need about 3 million dollars. The task before us is great, but by no means impossible, for the Apostle assures us: **“And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁰To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.” (Philippians 4:19-20)**.