

Week 10: Contentment

Chapter 4:10-23

So far... we've seen Paul's affection for the Philippian church, and his desire for them to grow in Gospel-centred love. Paul urges the church to humble Gospel-centred unity, boldly glorifying Jesus whether by life or by death. He calls them to shine like stars in the darkness of the world, following the example of Jesus, and other Gospel-hearted men. He then exposes for them the emptiness of religion compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ, and calls them to press on that they might come to know Him more and live a life filled with the good fruits that come from a relationship with Jesus.

The Blessing of Contentedness

"...for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content." (4:11)

As Paul is beginning to sign off his letter to the Philippian church he takes the time to say thank you to them for their generosity in supporting him in his ministry. However the Apostle Paul also takes the opportunity to use the subject as a time to encourage the church in the area of contentment. He tells them that he has known times of both abundance and also lack, times of having more than enough, and times of not seeming to have enough. In all these situations Paul has learnt what it means to be satisfied with what he has, and not feel the need to run off and try to fix his situation, particularly when he is lacking.

A fascinating part of the picture is that Paul throws into this context one of the most famous verses of Scripture - 'I can do all things through Him who strengthens me'. What else is this other than an acknowledgement that this area of contentment is no walk in the park - it could literally be described as one of the most difficult areas of the Christian life to walk in. To live in such a way that we are satisfied with whatever lot life throws at us is only possible if the power of the risen Christ is empowering us from

within - otherwise to live this way is impossible.

We live in a world where our enemy is constantly throwing temptation after temptation our way, destroying men and women through their lusts and sinful appetites. God wants us to be free of all those chains that can so easily hold us in a life of bondage to our fleshly desires. He wants us to stand strong against the onslaught and to declare ourselves content with what our God has given to us, at the same time bringing Him glory for His gracious provision and enabling us to live a free life in Christ.

Not only that, but this kind of contentment will surely be a powerful testimony to all those around us who are held captive by their desire for more and more material possessions though all the time discovering that however much they own it will never truly satisfy. Our lives can be living testimonies to how good our God is, and how He satisfies the deepest of human desires.

For Discussion:

How can we teach ourselves to remain content whatever circumstances we find ourselves in?

Other Verses for study:

• Mat 6:25-33 • Heb 13:5-6 • 1Tim 6:5-10

The Fruitfulness in Giving

"...I seek the fruit that increases to your credit... a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God." (4:17-18)

Having told the Philippian church that he really didn't need the generous gift that they sent for him, he now says something far more encouraging for them. He talks about their gift as a sweet-smelling offering that rises up to God, giving Him pleasure and causing fruitfulness to be credited to their account. These positive impacts of the gift they gave weren't even dependent on whether the gift was needed or not - it was given with the right motives of love, compassion and a genuine support for Paul's work.

So what does this mean for us? It's a clear encouragement towards us being generous with what we have. An attitude of contentment will certainly serve us in being able to do this, as will a healthy view on the fact that the things of this world are temporal and the fruits of a generous lifestyle will literally last for ever. We'll find it incredibly hard to give away that which we see as truly valuable, and so an attitude which is willing to be satisfied even with little will help us greatly in this area. We need to see that our gifts now are building for eternity.

The Promise of Provision

"And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." (4:19)

Having challenged us literally to the core of who we are as God's people, Paul now gives us a truth that will underpin and empower our lifestyles of contentment and generosity.

First of all we would do well to remember just where it is that our resources come from. The truth is that everything that we have belongs to, and is therefore a gift from God. Even that which in a worldly sense we have earned is ultimately the property of the God who created the universe, and could therefore be taken from us at any moment if He so desired. As we come to realise this more and more it changes the way we see this whole area of giving - our reluctance to give away what we have is not just selfishness when we hold back everything for ourselves, but is a denial that all good things come from God, and that He should be in charge of how they are shared amongst His creation.

This is where the liberating truth Paul shares with the Philippians comes in - God is not just a God who gives good things randomly to those who get lucky in life and happen to fall on good times. Paul tells us

It's also liberating to know that it isn't the effectiveness of the gift that really matters. The world around us would say a gift given when there wasn't even a need as an automatic failure - a waste of time and resources, if not worse. However God sees us far differently than the world sees us - He look straight at our hearts and that is the bit that He really cares about. The right attitude of the heart can transform something that outwardly looks like a failure into something that is glorifying to God and fruitful in terms of eternity.

There is no doubt that, along with contentment, the area of giving is a difficult one for us as Christians. Our wallet may well be the biggest indicator of all just who or what we are really worshiping. Paul reveals as much by telling us that the Philippian church were the only ones who gave to his mission. However, by the power of the Holy Spirit we can also become living testimonies of the generosity Jesus Himself showed when He gave Himself for us.

For Discussion:

What can we do to encourage ourselves in a lifestyle of generous giving?

Other Verses for study:

• 2 Cor 9:1-15 • Matt 6:1-4 • Malachi 3:6-12

that God supplies the needs of those who trust Him. He makes sure that those who belong to Him have everything that they need, regardless of how much they might give away. In fact, our generous hearts demonstrate not only a reflection of the generous heart of God, but are also a statement of the fact that we genuinely trust God to provide for us, and to not allow us to lack that which is essential for us.

We do need something of a reality check sometimes as to what is actually a need, and what is just something we think that we need because our culture and upbringing tells us so but still, this incredible confidence can be so liberating for us. It doesn't give us license to be foolish with our money and resources, but it does mean that when we are running out, or when giving some away would bring us low there is no need to be paralysed by worry or fear, but we can go forward safe in the knowledge that we will never go without that which we need.

For Discussion:

How does a certainty in God's provision change our attitude to life?

Other Verses for study:

• Psalm 34:1-10 • Deut 29:2-5 • Luke 12:13-34