

Philippians 4:10 I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹ 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. ¹³ I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

¹⁴ Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. ¹⁵ Moreover, 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; ¹⁶ for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. ¹⁷ Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. ¹⁸ I have received full payment and even more; 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. ¹⁹ And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

²⁰ To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

THE SECRET INGREDIENT OF THANKSGIVING

Dear Friends In Christ,

I would guess a few of you have a similar memory of your mother. As soon as you were done opening your birthday presents, she was writing down what they were and whom they were from. She wasn't writing a list for posterity, it was for the next day. The next day, with a smile on her face, she reminded you of all the wonderful gifts you had received, the \$10 cash, the pocketknife, the Barbie doll. Then she gently reminded you to write those "Thank you" cards. We thank God for mothers who teach us those important little things like that—that aren't so little.

But what if you didn't feel like writing thank-you notes? What is that special ingredient that makes you want give thanks?

Thank you cards are difficult things, especially at age ten. You want the giver to understand that you appreciate that gift, but the more you write, the more fake it sounds. It sounds like you're making things up or hoping for more expensive present next year. On the other hand, if you say very little, the card will sound like an afterthought, something your Mom *made* you do. Which is maybe a little bit true. But you don't want it to sound it.

We probably worry too much about it. A note of thanks is just that, a note. Most givers accept that. But how would you have felt about Apostle Paul's thank-you note here at the end of his letter to the Philippians?

The Apostle Paul was a church planter. He would visit a city, start a congregation, and generally after a couple months move on to start a new church in a new city. Sometimes he came back for check-ups, but he was always on the move. The sandal-makers guilds were glad for people like Paul.

The Philippians loved Paul, too. As a church, in Paul's absence, they gathered money and sent it to him. The purpose of their gift was to keep Paul on his mission. They were so glad for the Gospel of Jesus, that they wanted to keep Paul's stomach full and sandals on his feet. Then he could tell more and more people about Jesus' amazing love and work to save all of us from our sins.

And so Paul did what his mother taught him to do. He sent a thank-you note to the Philippians. But I am not entirely sure his mother would have approved this thank you.

Now when I say that, I should perhaps be a bit more careful. These letters written by the Paul, were not mere friendly correspondence. As an apostle of Jesus, Paul's letters to churches were written under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. God was saying something special and specific to the Philippians and to us. And I think that accounts for some of the strangeness in this thank you note.

I mean, who of you writes to your Aunt Esther, "Thank you for the sweater. But I really didn't need it. I was warm enough anyway" Such light words are heavy enough to crush. That's kind of what Paul said to the gift-givers, ***"I am not saying this because I am in need...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."*** (11-12). Hmm! No more stocking stuffers for you, Paul.

Now, a couple verses later, Paul does voice sincere thanks. He calls their gift ***"a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God"*** (18). But by saying he didn't really need what they gave him, he points out that it's more important that they did something beautiful for God, than for him. That is why he insists on his own contentment.

Which is amazing because Paul wrote this letter from prison. If anyone in the ancient world ever needed a help, it was people in prisons. Without getting into the icky details on a happy day like this, prisons were so terrible that many prisoners committed suicide or actually requested to be executed speedily. But it is from that sort of place that Paul writes, ***"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."***

Walk the world over and you will find this truth: generally, the most grateful and thankful people are people with the least. It's a mystery worth considering.

Now, you could perhaps explain this by saying that when you have nothing, even a crust of bread doubles you financial worth. On the other side, when you have a mountain of wealth even a huge gift is nothing. There is some truth in all that.

But I think here is the actual explanation of it: it is all a sign how fallen is our nature. Living in Africa, we did not live in mud brick houses, but we certainly lived life without a lot of things people in America consider essential. And we were just fine with that. It did not bother us in the least to not have cable television or smart phones. Anyway, when we came to America, several months in, Lisa and I found ourselves sometimes wishing for things, even a little discontent about things that never crossed our minds for 20 years! It is a testimony to the truth of God's Word, ***"I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'Do not covet.' But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire"*** (Romans 7:7-8).

Contentment and coveting are two opposites. Paul's contentment in prison came from knowing that God had given him everything he needed. His contentment was not based on a self-sufficiency or even relying on other, but God-sufficiency. His faith was that God had and would give him everything he needed. ***"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?"*** (Romans 8:32). Paul *knows* that he can be content because of Jesus Christ.

There is a surprise behind two of the most famous Thanksgivings. It's surprising until you stop to think about it. I would suggest that two of the best-known Thanksgivings were the one celebrated by the Pilgrims in 1621, and the Thanksgiving of 1863, which was the first of the string of nationally recognized Thanksgivings in America.

The Pilgrims' Thanksgiving happened after a good harvest. It also happened after a pretty bad year. In twelve months between departing England and their first Thanksgiving, nearly 50% of them died. How many people are in your extended family? 15? 20? Imagine if 10 of them died in the next

12 months. How thankful would you be? Would not all your neighbors, your friends, pity you, talk in hushed tones about what a tough go you have had of it. And then you throw a feast for all, a feast of Thanksgiving. They would probably put you on the suicide watch. But that is what the pilgrims did. Give thanks to God.

In 1863, President Lincoln proclaimed the first Thanksgiving which was to be celebrated annually to our day. Think about the year 1863. The United States was in the middle of the bloodiest war we have ever fought. Swathes of the country had been ransacked and destroyed. And while we can look back and see that the tide had turned in the war, it was not yet a foregone conclusion, just a couple months after the blood-bath of Gettysburg. It would still be most of two years before a treaty. Yet that year was a year where the nation turned and thanked God for all they had, and soon made it into a national holiday.

I think that in 1621 and 1863 these people were not giving thanks to God for the first time in their lives. Because unless you are used to giving thanks, you can't in those circumstances. They were people used to giving thanks to God throughout their lives. The only way you can be thankful in those circumstances is when you truly believe that God will provide what is sufficient.

“But what if I don't feel like giving thanks?” Now that is a tough one.

Thankfulness is like a lot of other emotions. If you have to demand that someone loves you, that is not love. If you must insist that people respect you, the last thing you have is their respect. And thankfulness, if you have to be told to be thankful, the last thing you are is _____, you know.

And yet maybe our mothers were right. Writing the thank you notes was a bit difficult, but the more you thought about it the more thankful you got. Not because you were forced to be thankful, but because you started to think more about your gift. And you realized that Aunt Esther really does love you, and she just loves to think of you a little warmer on a snowy winter day, and you realize by looking at her gift how much she cares.

If you don't feel like saying thanks, if Thanksgiving is just a formality, a custom and excuse for food and football and shopping, then look at the gift. Which, I guess, is why we begin Thanksgiving with a worship service. Here this evening, we look at our Savior, and we become content that God will provide what we need. Contentment in Jesus—that is the secret ingredient of giving thanks.

And the secret to contentment is knowing what verse 19 says, ***“God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus”*** (19). Amen.