

Wednesday, November 21, 2018 – Thanksgiving Eve
“The Gift of Contentment”

Philippians 4: 6-20

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Story Applied

Adapted from CPR

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

We have come to give the Lord our thanks and praise, and rightly so; but you can't out-give God, and as a matter of fact God has something to give us – the gift of contentment.

To receive this gift, join me as Thanksgiving pilgrims on a trip to a place called Philippi. “What's so special about Philippi?” you wonder. I don't know, but it has produced an abundant number of contented people.

People like Lydia, Paul's first European convert. Lydia was apparently very wealthy, since she sold very expensive purple clothing – purple dye in the ancient world could only be derived in minute amounts from painstakingly smashing certain seashells and was worth its' weight in gold, hence its' association with royalty, but don't think her wealth was the reason for her contentment. It wasn't, as we will see. In any case, when she and her household heard Paul's Gospel message, they believed in Jesus and were baptized. Then immediately, Lydia wanted to help. She invited Paul and his companions to work out of her home and, according to Luke, she wouldn't take no for an answer (Acts 16:15). Lydia seems to be a very contented woman.

Or how about a man named Epaphroditus? He seems to be a very contented man. He couldn't do enough to help Paul's work! No expense was too great! Paul even writes that “he [Epaphroditus] nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me” (2:30). You must be very content to be willing to do that.

How about the Philippian congregation as a whole? No other letter from Paul is so joyful! They are his partners in the Gospel (Phil 1:5). Of all the places Paul traveled, of all the congregations he served, he accepted support from—you guessed it—only these Philippians. And when the Jerusalem Christians were suffering severe poverty because of drought and persecution, “in a severe test of affliction, [the Philippians'] abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for

the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints” (2 Cor 8:2–4). They were having a rough time of it themselves, but they insisted on helping “beyond their means,” Paul says. Like Lydia, they just wouldn’t take no for an answer. They must have been very contented people to give so much away when they were barely scraping by.

The generosity Lydia, Epaphroditus, and the Philippians displayed can come only from contented hearts. If you aren’t content, you can’t be generous with anything. Rather, you guard it with your life, like a dog protecting his last bone.

There’s one more contented person you must meet, although his actual time in Philippi was very short. It’s Paul. He wrote these words from a prison cell in Rome, in chains for the Gospel. Paul and Silas were arrested, brutally flogged, and thrown in prison right there in their own town (Acts 16:16–24). Amazing that they were willing to suffer that kind of treatment! More amazing still, they filled their prison cell with hymns of praise to God! And when an earthquake broke open their prison cell, rather than escaping and letting the sleeping jailer pay for it with his life, they stayed put, a witness to the Gospel that God would use to save not just the jailer’s earthly life but his eternal life and the eternal lives of his whole household as well (Acts 16:25–34). That’s pretty contented—after a beating and a night in the slammer.

And now, back in prison, this time facing the very real possibility of never getting out but being executed instead, Paul writes to the Philippians about as contented a letter as one could imagine. At least eighteen times in this one little letter he says something about joy or rejoicing. He even repeats it for emphasis: “Rejoice... always; again I will say, Rejoice” (4:4). That’s pretty contented.

What have you found, Lydia and Epaphroditus, that you so gladly throw yourself, your money, and even life itself, into the service of the Gospel? What do you know, Philippians, that makes you beg Paul to take your offering, promising even more, when you’re barely scraping by yourselves? What’s your secret, Paul and Silas, that you sing from your prison cell, with bloodied backs and shackled feet? That you, Paul, write such a contented letter while facing death? Where do you get such contentment?

We are the wealthiest nation history has ever seen. We revel in freedoms many have never even dreamed of. We have more and greater comforts than ever. We have traveled to

more places and done more exciting things than past generations would have imagined possible. We have indoor plumbing and outdoor carpeting, water softeners and air conditioners, central heating and accent lighting, cars with digital sound and cruise control. Our pets have more to eat than many people do.

But are we content? It sure doesn't seem so. Families are disintegrating; people get married for the third, fourth, fifth time. Drug abuse climbs, and with it, the crime rate. Our courts are backlogged with litigation and criminal trials. Is that what a contented people looks like? I don't think so.

So tell us, Lydia and Epaphroditus, people of Philippi, Paul and Silas—what is the secret of contentment? As we stand here, anxiously looking into an unknown future, let us hear and absorb Paul's reply: "I can do all things through [Christ] who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13). When you finally get down to it, Thanksgiving is not just about wealth and abundance, or at least it shouldn't be. Neither is contentment. True, God has flooded us with these blessings, and there are few sights sadder than a church only half full for Thanksgiving. God has blessed us with so much stuff that we don't know what to do with it all. But you won't find contentment buried in that pile of stuff. Paul had no such pile, nor did the Philippians, yet they were content! How so?

They had more than a pile of stuff. They had the God who owns it, and who promises to give it if ever it is needed. Listen again to Paul: "My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:19).

The Philippians and Paul didn't have all that stuff; but they did have the God who gives all that stuff and a great deal more. Or, should we say, he had them! He purchased them back from sin and death by the blood of his Son, Christ Jesus. If that doesn't give contentment, nothing will! "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things" (Rom 8:32)? "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). They had the true God, and he had them. That's the secret to contentment.

"Rejoice in the Lord always," Paul says; "again I will say, Rejoice" (Phil 4:4, emphasis added). In the Lord. That's the secret. From the prison cell in Rome, facing death, Paul writes,

“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (1:21). When I have Christ and he has me, it’s always win-win. That’s the secret of contentment.

Contentment? You can’t find it in earthly things, and if you try, you’re asking them to be your god, something they can only pretend to be. They can’t handle the pressure! But when you have the real God, the one who loves to give because he loves to forgive in Christ—this God “will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:19).

Will his gifts always come in the form of material blessings? Of course not! That would not be good for us! Besides, that would be way too small. All the material things in the world haven’t made us content. No, sometimes suffering is God’s very good gift to us. Sometimes hardship. Sometimes loss. Sometimes pain for the sake of his Gospel. True, we don’t think of these as gifts; but from his hand, that’s what they become—good gifts from the Father who only knows how to give good gifts to his children.

The secret to contentment is Christ. In him, we come to know what Lydia and Epaphroditus, the Philippians, Silas, and Paul had learned so well: “My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen” (Phil 4:19–20).