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Stewardship

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The Philippians were onto something...- Philippians 4:10-20

“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. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 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. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. 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; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. 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. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

The text for today will be Philippians chapter 4, verses 10-20 if you'd like to turn their in your bibles or tap there on your phones...I'm sure we've all heard a sermon about "Stewardship" before, and it can certainly be a touchy subject. Today, let's avoid the tension and focus in specifically on what Scripture says about gifts and giving...Giving is a complicated, yet sacred game. Some people give out of obligation, some people love the process of figuring out the

perfect gift for a loved one, and some just don't seem to understand the idea of a "good" gift. However, year after year, holiday after holiday, we continue to give, despite the stress and potential disappointment because we know there is something of deeper meaning *behind* the gift. It shows our appreciation and care for each other, regardless of whether or not it's exactly what we want. **When I was younger, my dad's side of the family would all get together at my Grandma's house for Christmas. My dad was one of seven brothers and sisters, almost all of which had children, so you can imagine that us all coming together was...exciting, to say the least. During this time together, all the kids, myself included, would receive gifts from our aunts and uncles. The adults would pass out everyone's gifts as we sat "patiently", on the verge of bouncing right out of our chair from the anticipation. Every year as I watched my gifts being gently placed at my feet, I couldn't help but notice the all-too-familiar 18x12x1inch box labeled "From: Uncle Steve and Aunt Nichole." You'll have to forgive my attitude as a child, but the moment I saw this box, my heart always sank in my chest. For, I knew that year after year, I would receive from my Uncle Steve and Aunt Nichole one of two things: Khaki dress pants or an incredibly unexciting sweater. Now, for those who don't know me, I am not, nor have I ever been one who likes to be "nicely dressed." Of course, when the occasion calls for it, such as today, I will gladly dress up, but if you see me on campus any other day, I'll almost assuredly be wearing jeans and a t-shirt, or as close to it as possible. This presented a problem for me at my Grandma's, because each year when I received my new, neatly folded dress pants or sweater, I had to do my best to express my gratitude to my Aunt and Uncle in the wake of disappointment. As I ran up to them and said, "Thank you so much for the clothes!" Part of me felt a little disingenuous. However, in a very real way I knew I meant the words as they came out of my mouth. I knew that**

deep down I was grateful for the clothes, even if I never wanted to wear them. We've probably all had a similar interaction, and there's clearly a curious nature to giving and receiving. There's something about it that impacts us at the core of our being. Not surprisingly, the Apostle Paul has some input on what giving is about based on our faith, and he has some things to say that might surprise us.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul is expressing his joy and encouragement toward the believers in Philippi. He was excited for how well they were doing and, even though at the time he was stuck in a Roman prison, he wanted to encourage them to continue growing in faith. They were committed to following Christ, were learning more about what it meant to live out their faith, and they even sent Paul a helper, who we'll talk about later, with gifts to support his ministry. This brings us to our passage for today, chapter 4, verses 10-20. This passage falls toward the end of the letter as Paul continues giving thanks to the Philippians, this time, for their help and support of him. Let's break this section down to see what he is getting at.

To begin, Paul says in verse 10, **"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."** This is simple enough. Paul's friends, the Philippians, didn't have an opportunity to express their concern for Paul due to his travels and imprisonment, but they were finally able to get in touch.

Great, we're one verse in a doing well. Nothing too controversial or conflicting...don't get too comfortable. In verses 11-13 we read, **"I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 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. I can do all this**

through him who gives me strength.”...Something’s not right here. Paul made sure to let the Philippians know that he didn’t need their generous gifts. That’s right. Paul, the beloved founder of the Church in Philippi, spent precious space in his letter from prison, where he had virtually nothing, to make sure his supporters were aware of how unnecessary their gifts to him were...How thoughtful. The first time I read this, I pictured Paul, sitting in a dark, dirty Roman prison writing this letter with a freshly gifted new quill, dressed in a new outfit, surrounded by all the other things the Philippians may have given him, completely ignoring all the generosity directed toward him.

Even we no better than this, right? We’ve all gotten a gift for some occasion, be it a sweater, dessert, whatever, that we, let’s say, might have preferred not getting. Either the dessert isn’t our taste, the CD isn’t our style, or the sweater is just plain ugly. Nonetheless, our first reaction is to give an enthusiastic “thank you!” when we receive it. Even if we aren’t particularly grateful for the gift itself, we understand the significance of it. Clearly Paul has something else in mind.

So, let’s keep going. Maybe looking at what he says next will help clarify things. He recovers from what most of us would consider an offensive tone by returning to his gratitude toward the Philippians, saying in verses 14-17, **“Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. 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; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account.”** So, he seems to recover a bit from his previous, potentially offensive tone, saying “it was good” for the Philippians to give. He even mentions all the other

ways they have helped him along the way: Being the only church to provide assistance when he left Macedonia and sending aid multiple times while he was in Thessalonica. He appears to have returned to a spirit of gratitude. But what does he say in verse 17, at the end of that section?

“Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account.” Good ol’ Paul is back to expressing that he doesn’t want their gifts. There’s more here though. When he says, “what I desire is that more be credited to your account,” the message he’s getting at is, “What I really wish is for your sacrifice to be recognized in the life to come.” There’s more to their giving than the gift itself.

Paul seems to be a little hot and cold here. First, he tells the church in Philippi that he’s grateful for their support, then he makes sure they know he doesn’t actually need their support, then he’s right back to thanking them for all the ways they’ve helped him throughout his travels. He even finishes off this section of his letter with verses 18-20, **“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. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”** Two things to note here: First, when Paul says he has “received full payment,” he was celebrating that he had all he needed. He wasn’t saying the Philippians had settled a debt with him, but that all his physical needs had been met through their giving. Again, quite wishy-washy. Second, the man mentioned here, Epaphroditus, was a Philippian sent to deliver the gifts to Paul. He served as a messenger in this way, but he also spent some time working there with Paul. Paul mentions Epaphroditus elsewhere in the letter, referring to the good work he had done. They worked together until Epaphroditus became very ill and was sent back to Philippi.

So, what's going on here? Why can't Paul decide whether he's deeply grateful or fine on his own? He seems to be getting at a deeper truth behind the support he had received, a truth that shows itself most clearly in verses 12-14. This is where his transition from what appears to be ungratefulness to gratefulness happens. He says, **"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. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles."** Did you hear that? **"I can do all this through him who gives me strength. (we all know that verse) Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles."** Paul says, quite confidently, that he can be content in any situation, with much or with nothing, through Christ. **Yet**, it was good for the Philippians to share in his troubles.

Paul is trying to verbalize the complicated, somewhat contradictory nature of giving and receiving; which is that the significance of the gift itself is almost meaningless in comparison to of the act of giving and receiving. Paul was so grateful for the Philippians gift not necessarily because he couldn't have survived without it, and not because he preferred a luxury lifestyle that the Roman prison wasn't living up to. Not even because the funds were especially helpful, though they were. Instead, he's calling out the deep, godly value behind sacrifice and gift in two specific ways.

First, by supporting Paul, they were supporting the greater Church's efforts to share the gospel and make disciples. Paul is one of our greatest biblical examples of a lifetime commitment to this mission, and the support of the Philippians was far greater than the money and gifts themselves. These gifts, in reality, represented the physical, emotional, and spiritual backing of the Church as a whole. By helping to provide his physical needs, they were saying

“we’re here for you, cheering for you as we serve Christ together!” This is especially true of Epaphroditus the Philippian because, while the whole church in Philippi certainly couldn’t be there with Paul, sending one of their own to deliver the gifts and serve with him was a powerful representation of their support. They had given, quite literally, of themselves.

There’s more to what Paul was saying though. He also commended this act of sacrificial giving because of its significance for the Philippians. In the same way that Paul was so adamant that he didn’t need their gifts since he could be content in all circumstances through Christ, the Philippians also needed to be reminded that they shouldn’t seek contentment in possession. Philippian society consisted of many different people groups, but a large number were either Roman soldiers who had colonized the area or locals who had been heavily influenced by Roman culture. This meant that they lived pretty well, with most having plenty of money and food to go around. While a perfectly good thing in itself, this can easily lead to a bit too much attachment. So, when Paul encourages their sacrificial giving, he also intends it as a spiritual practice, pointing them back toward a reliance on God for provision. The Philippians, by giving these precious gifts out of their own pockets, were recognizing that their possessions do not own them, and should be shared for the common good.

To recap, Paul had this slightly confusing interaction with the Philippians. He was thankful, but not thankful, but actually very thankful. Why should we care? Well, it is vital for us to participate in giving, both of our resources and ourselves, for the same two reasons that Paul explains here. When we give to others, we are showing our support of them and their efforts. Whether it be a missionary across the globe or a server at a local restaurant, a simple gift shows that they are not alone and are cared for by us and, more importantly, by Christ.

Similarly, we should remember that Paul knew it was good for the Philippians themselves to support his efforts. Wealth is one of those powerful things that can so easily draw our attention away from our true source of provision. When the Philippians gave, both materially and of themselves through Epaphroditus, they were being divinely nudged back to a reliance on Christ for life. We have the same opportunity through our giving. There's a deep grounding to our support of others and profound spiritual significance to our sacrificial giving. By participating in the Body of Christ this way, we enter into deeper relationship with Christ and are reminded whose we are. May we live more wholly into this Spirit of giving, both of our resources and of ourselves, as we go from this place. Thank you.