

Text: Phil 4.10-20
St Stephen's

Feb 13/14, 2010
Weekend Message

A Free Man in Jail

We finish up our series on Philippians today. It is a great letter.

Highlights:

- 'I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.'
- 'For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain'
- 'One thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.'

And today:

I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Philippians 4:11–13

You remember the **circumstances** of the letter... Paul plants their church → partnership → prison → concern → support. Epaphroditus is sent with a gift. Risked his life to bring it. And now, as we come to ch 4, the Apostle is thanking them for their gift.

Paul's thanks is surprising:

*How I praise the Lord that you are concerned about me again...
Not that I was ever in need, for I have learned how to be content with whatever I have.*

Phil 4.10-11

'Not that I was ever in need'? Wait, didn't 'Fred' risk his life to get it to you? And hey – you're in **a Roman jail**. Not a pleasant place. But he says he has '**no need**'... Why?

Had he **given up**, resigned, quit? No. He says it was because of something different; something that the gospel has done in him. He says he had learned to be **content**.

That word, '**content**', had a lot of history to it in Paul's world. The **Stoics**, talked about contentment a great deal; it was one of their greatest virtues. And they had a plan for getting there.

They proposed to **eliminate all desire**. The Stoics said, *"If you want to make a man happy, add not to his possessions, but take away from his desires."*

Epictetus says. *"Begin with a cup or a household utensil; if it breaks, say, 'I don't care.' Go on to a horse or pet dog; if anything happens to it, say, 'I don't care.' Go on to yourself, and if you are hurt or injured in any way, say, 'I don't care.' If you go on long enough, and if you try hard enough, you will come to a stage when you can watch your nearest and dearest suffer and die, and say, 'I don't care.'"*

Well, Paul obviously meant something different than that.

Most **moderns** believe that contentment can only be found by exactly the opposite – by **fulfilling every desire**. You and I live in a culture that makes gods out of human desires. So, we want something and we go and get it. And it makes you happy for a little while but it won't last because **your heart will always want something else**. You will **want the next thing**. And then the **old thing** doesn't make you happy anymore.

Max Lucado describes what happens to us when you try to fulfill every desire...

Come with me to the world's most oppressive prison. Just ask the inmates; they will tell you. They are overworked and underfed. Their walls are bare and bunks are hard.

No prison is so populated, no prison so oppressive, and, what's more, no prison is so permanent. Most inmates never leave. They never escape. They serve a life sentence in this overcrowded,

underprovisioned facility.

The name of the prison? Rainbowd over the entrance gate are four cast-iron letters that spell out its name:

W-A-N-T

The prison of want. You've seen her prisoners. They are "in want." They want something. They want something bigger. Nicer. Faster. Thinner. They want.

*They don't want much, mind you. They want just **one thing**. One new job. One new car. One new house. One new spouse. They don't want much. They want just one.*

*And when they have "one," they will be happy. And they are right—they will be happy. **But then it happens**. The new-car smell passes. The new job gets old. The neighbors buy a larger television set. The new spouse has bad habits. The sizzle fizzles, and before you know it, another ex-con breaks parole and returns to jail.*

Are you in prison? You are if you feel better when you have more and worse when you have less. You are if joy is one delivery away, one transfer away, one award away, or one makeover away. If your happiness comes from something you deposit, drive, drink, or digest, then face it—you are in prison, the prison of want.

The secret to contentment does **not come from desiring nothing** (like the Stoics) **or desiring everything** (like the Americans). Listen again to Paul...

I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little

Phil. 4:12

He has not just discovered the secret to **living in hard times**, lean times – but also the secret to **living when your stomach is full** and your wallet in overflowing. We need both!

That '**secret**' turns out to be a **key** that has opened the door to Paul's jail. He is **still behind bars**, but he is a **free man**, in every important sense of that word.

- Locked up under Rome's power, he's held safe by a higher power
- He is hungry and poor, but he is provided for, supplied
- He is locked up and silenced, but now the whole Roman palace has heard the gospel
- He is alone and forsaken, but the one he loves most is at his side.
- His life work is under attack, but his life work surges forward
- He is threatened with death – but that promises nothing but gain.

When you **learn his secret**, you can be of use to God **wherever** you are, **whatever** circumstances you face, **whenever** he calls. The **Philippians** had learned his secret – Paul wrote to them and said, *"...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 **again and again** when I was in need"*

Phil 4:15-16

They were **"again and again" givers**. That's what freedom looks like. That's how contentment plays out. They gave even to the point of putting themselves at risk. They were **"again and again" givers, concerned** for the work, **committed** to the cause.

They were like **God**; he is **an 'again and again giver.'** I know people who **think God is a taker**, and they are always miserly and mean and nasty and hard to live with. **But not the Father of Jesus. He is a giver.**

He gives us **his love**. The Bible says his love is deeper and wider, higher and longer than you have the ability to know. It **makes you rich**. He gives you **forgiveness** for all your sins. Would you like to put a price on that? He gives you what the Bible calls **"his precious promises"**. They are more dependable than any bank account. They are worth more than gold. He fills us with his Holy Spirit and gives us **his presence and his power**. It makes you very wealthy. This is why Paul wrote these words...

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 everything through him who gives me strength.

Php 4:12-13 (NIV)

Paul called his relationship with Jesus "**the secret**", the secret of his contentment, the secret of his happiness, the secret source of his wealth, the secret of an abundant life, the secret of his peace. His **relationship with Jesus** was the **central asset** of his life. It was so valuable that **it resourced him** for any circumstance, any challenge, any hardship that life would bring. It gave him the confidence to write,

"...my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus."

Phil 4.19

He knew it was true then, and it **remains true today**. **Russ Blowers** knows this secret. He is a minister in Indianapolis who resolved to say more than "I'm a preacher" when his turn came to introduce himself at the local Rotary Club. He did it sort of like this,

"Hi, I'm Russ Blowers. I'm with a global enterprise. We have branches in every country in the world. We have representatives in nearly every parliament and boardroom on earth.

"We perform spiritual heart transplants. We're into life renewal and behavior change. We run hospitals, feeding stations, crisis-pregnancy centers, universities, publishing houses, and nursing homes. We care for our clients from birth to death. We are into life insurance and fire insurance. Our policies are the best in the world and our product is free for the asking [but worth more than you will ever have.]

"Our original Organizer owns all the real estate on earth plus an assortment of galaxies and constellations. He knows everything and lives everywhere. He is wise beyond words and he loves to give. He was born in a hick town, worked as a carpenter, didn't own a home, and has become the most famous person in the world. He was misunderstood by his family and hated by his enemies, but it didn't

stop him. He walked on water, was condemned to death without a trial, and then rose from the dead. For some hard to understand reason, he has a special love for people like us – even me! I talk with him every day.”

Think for just a moment about **the things you have and the things you want**. Put your hand on your **wallet** or your **purse**. Think about that **house**, that **car**, your **money**, your **career**. Gather all your stuff together in your mind and let me say two important things to you as we finish.

It isn't yours. No one takes anything with him. When one of the wealthiest men in history, John D. Rockefeller, died, his accountant was asked, “How much did John D. leave?” The accountant’s reply? “All of it.” It is not yours. **It is God’s**, and he has made you a steward over a small part of this earth, a trustee, to manage some of it for him. It’s not yours. It’s his. And you know what else about all that stuff?

It's not you. Who you are is not defined by the clothes you wear or the car you drive or the neighborhood you live in. Not really. Jesus said,

"Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot"
Luke 12:15 MSG

Life take a new definition and a new value and new substance when you have *'a God who hears you, the power of his love behind you, the Holy Spirit within you, and all of heaven ahead of you.'* (Lucado) **If you have Christ**, you have (what Max Lucado calls) *'grace for every sin, direction for every turn, a candle for every corner, and an anchor for every storm.'*

You have everything you need, and it makes you *content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. Because you can do everything through him who gives you strength.*