

An Attitude of Thanksgiving
Philippians 4:6–20

Dear friends in Christ

It is indeed “good and right, our duty and our delight, to offer God praise and thanksgiving at all times and in all places.” And even dedicating one Sunday a year to declare it a Thanksgiving Day!

So here we are this morning! We all want to be happy and thankful. And most of us are but too often our joys are mixed with apprehension, so our thanksgiving becomes compromised. Will our happiness and joy wane by the end of the day, will our thanksgiving fade too? Our joys and Thanksgiving are so dependent on circumstances. If we have no joy and happiness, seldom we have thanksgiving in our lips.

Today’s reading from Philippians, are Paul’s words set in a letter to that congregation. This letter, believe it or not, he wrote while in prison, “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² 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.” (v. 11-13)

If we are to be content, we have to be prepared to accept both good and bad, often in quick succession. How do we do that?

Well, if we are happy and content, we could sing “Now thank we all our God.” But if difficulty strikes, we could sing the Kyrie, ‘Lord, have mercy, Christ have mercy.’ God walks with you in both situations. And because God walks with you in both situations, then what Paul counsels us is our response, be thankful to God in all circumstances. Come back to God always and give thanks. That Samaritan Leper came back to Jesus the source of his healing, to give him thanks. Jesus is the source of your contentment; he is your source of thanksgiving.

In this world some try find contentment in other things, I find three, and even four things that we can explore.

The first way is making money. Sometimes we say: “If I make enough money and invest it wisely, I should have more financial security, so at least I won’t have to worry about money. Then I can be reasonably content.” Few people would argue with that. Having financial security is important, but financial security is not a secure foundation for contentment, especially when bring us riches and pleasures. And Jesus warned about the danger of placing so much importance to those things. He says that

the “cares and riches and pleasures” will choke out our relationship with God (Luke 8:14).

The second way is positive thinking. “If I could just think more positively, improve my self-image, be more assertive, and learn how to get other people to do what I want, I would be able to take control of my life, feel good about myself, believe in myself, and achieve what I want. Then I’ll be content.” Now aspiring to have a positive attitude is a good thing, especially when it comes to the uplifting of others, as Paul tells us: “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ² complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” (Philippians 2:1-4)

It is a good thing to review your attitude and correct for the better. Sure, we all need to do that. I think that those things are good, but not to control others, that’s not a Christian like attitude. But certainly, in seeing the best in life that God has given you, absolutely! But if a humanistic positive thinking is your goal, you need to ask yourself this question: “Can I really change myself for the better?” And other questions arise: “Am I seeking happiness at the expense of others? At what price will I be content?” And can a positive humanistic attitude produce thanksgiving?

Third, people like to remove themselves from the world. Some people think they’ll be content if they can just escape the whirl of activity and responsibility. “Stop the world; I want to get off.” There’s too much competition, and it’s too confusing. Perhaps they’re exhausted. They seek contentment by sitting on the sidelines. But doing so reduces the possibility of sharing God-given gifts and talents with others who need them and prevents from finding the joy that comes from helping others. There is no real contentment in passivity, is there? How about thanksgiving?

I suppose we all have experimented with these options from time to time. But discontentment is a deep spiritual problem. It afflicts rich and poor alike. We may not want to admit we suffer from it. We may even prefer to ignore it. But for most of us it is a recurring problem, eating away at our souls and robbing us of joy, and if there is no contentment and joy, chances are, there is no Thanksgiving.

But there is a fourth option—another source of contentment. It is a wonderful contentment, which provides joy and peace. And that is in the gift of forgiveness. The forgiveness that Christ achieved for us at the cross of calvary. Because of Jesus sacrifice our sins have been removed. Because of Jesus Christ we now have a free access to God our Creator and our Provider.

For this reason, the apostle Paul had peace with God—a peace that surpassed all human understanding, a peace that did not depend in the least upon his circumstances in life.

If we are unhappy and discontent, it may mean that we have become disconnected from God, that we are not at peace with him. We are connected to God through faith in his Son. “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:1). Paul tells us.

We heard in the first part of the Epistle for today, “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (v 7).

This peace is not just a mood or something we talk ourselves into. It is the forgiveness and reconciliation with God that Christ has provided at great cost. This peace guards us and protects us. We all need a guardian of peace to accompany us through the twists and turns of life.

Here is what Paul wrote to Timothy about peaceful contentment: “Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, ⁷ for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. ⁸ But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. ⁹ But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.” (1 Timothy 6:6–10).

The apostle Paul had an attitude of content because he had learned the sufficiency of God’s grace. Paul describes how he had a thorn in the flesh and that three times he pleaded with God to take it away; but the Lord said to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

The power of God to save is found in the weakness of Christ crucified for us. Paul learned to be content even though he often suffered, because he trusted in the Savior who suffered for him. So, Paul could say, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor 12:9–10).

This contentment, this inner peace, is what led him to say, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” (Phil 4:13).

Certain of Christ’s gracious presence, his strength enables us to resist temptation, to overcome anger, to forgive, to reach out, to make peace, to outlast evil, to be renewed, to survive, and to love again. “I have learned to be content whatever

the circumstances,” we heard from the apostle Paul. That’s the attitude that will express thanksgiving and praise to God.

We all suffer stressful difficulties in life, and a psychiatrist says there are two kinds of stress in human behavior. One is destructive. The other gives us vitality and a spring to our step. This “stress,” is found among those who have what we call “an attitude of gratitude.” These persons live life content and gratefully. When we live life that way, giving thanks is not only an expression of words but also is evident in everything we do, it comes out of the contentment Christ brings us. Thanksgiving, appreciation, gratitude—not only to one another but also to God—are the hallmarks of Christian life. That attitude pervades life. That’s the Thanksgiving attitude that Jesus sacrifice on the cross inspires in us.

One of the most beautiful expressions of Christian contentment came from the pen of the hymn writer Horatio Spafford. He lost his family in a sailing voyage across the Atlantic to Europe. It must have taken great determination and love for him later to make the same voyage. But he came to terms with his God and his grief when he wrote these lines (LSB 763:1)

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way;
When sorrows, like sea billows, roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

When the soul finds rest in Christ, there is peace, contentment, and strength to deal with anything life may bring. And your Thanksgiving will overflow, today and always. Having Christ, we have all we will ever need. Peace be with you this Thanksgiving.

To encourage our continual thanksgiving, it is good to be reminded often what God does for us. In fact, let’s pray that he will teach us always to be thankful in all circumstances. And our prayer will be in the words of hymn 788, “Forgive us, Lord, for Shallow thankfulness” vs. 2, 4,2,6