

Gospel Friendship | Paul's Letter to the Philippians

On Giving and Receiving

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Philippians 4.8-22

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. ⁹ The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

¹⁰ *But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity. ¹¹ Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. ¹² I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. ¹³ I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.*

¹⁴ *Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction. ¹⁵ You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; ¹⁶ for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs. ¹⁷ Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account. ¹⁸ But I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God. ¹⁹ And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁰ Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen. ²¹ Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren who are with me greet you. ²² All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. ²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*

This summer, we've been looking at St. Paul's Letter to the Church at Philippi. (End of the letter but a P.S.)

It's one of the Prison Letters, Paul writing from a jail cell, which could be a very stressful situation.

Last time (that I spoke) we were looking at *Stress and the Gospel*. Chapter 4 opens with three huge areas of life we often find stressful (1] relational conflict, 2] anxiety or the inner life and 3] change).

Today we're REALLY reminded that this is NOT only written from a potentially stressful jail cell but it's also a missionary letter. That's extremely clear in these final words of the letter as Paul thanks this supporting church for their funding – charitable giving.

This congregation was literally famous for their generosity and charitable giving. Today and for two more weeks we're going to look at that: Paul devotes two whole chapters in his Second Letter to Corinth to THIS Philippian Church and HOW amazing they were in this matter of giving.

So, we move from the topic of STRESS to the topic of FINANCES – and as we think about THIS Philippian Church *we also have opportunity to consider the way WE use money* ...how we spend and give and save and earn – how we all manage money.

And as we look at money for the next three sermons, we hope to see a UNIQUE approach to money and charitable giving and fund-raising that the Gospel enables and empowers – we'll see it today: #1 – What's NOT the idea #2 What's SORT OF the idea #3 – What IS THE BIG idea (“the matter of giving and receiving”).

What's NOT the idea is what we might call fund-raising pragmatism or the idea that the END justifies the means.

We've all seen this kind of fund-raising and we've all (hopefully) been kind of sickened by it when we've witnessed it. This is the idea that what we're doing is SO important and so utterly valuable and urgent and all that ...that the techniques we use to raise the money we need, the techniques really don't matter as long as they work. The end justifies the means – the goal is so significant that we just have to get it done!

And since this very passage tells us to meditate on things that are true and honorable and right and pure and lovely – I won't highlight all the manipulative ways people raise money on religious television. I'll simply say, “Let the viewer beware!”

Paul however is very definitely PRAGMATIC but not a PRAGMATIST. In other words, he will make his plans known, make his needs known, he'll say “thank you” and he'll affirm the givers for remembering him.

But lest he be misunderstood, he's also very clear to say, “Though what we're doing here – i.e. spreading the News of Jesus Christ, planting local churches all over the

Roman Empire – though this is a SUPREMELY important end/goal – THIS DOES NOT JUSTIFY any kind of fund-raising.

And Paul will even say things that appear to impede his own efforts as a fundraiser. For instance: he'll say, "But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity."

That sounds like a good fundraising strategy. Affirm your donors – Hey I know you wanted to give but ya' just couldn't FIND me but now you have!"

But then he says, (v. 11) "Not that I speak from want". That sounds like BAD fundraising! You should let the givers know that you really NEED this money! But Paul's not SIMPLY doing what works...

And on he goes – he affirms them...but sort of makes it clear that strictly speaking...he doesn't really NEED them...though he's glad for them...glad that their gifts are going to good use... not that I really had to have your money...but don't get me wrong it's great! And you were the only church that gave to me... though...you know...I always have all I need – with or without you...with or without you.

Paul is NOT a fundraising pragmatist – because he doesn't want his fundraising to obscure the message. And we'll get to that in a moment.

So, FIRST, What's NOT the idea in Christian fundraising and charitable giving? – It's NOT pragmatism. And second, what's SORT OF the idea?

Paul will use words in his letter that would have had a clear association with NON-CHRISTIAN religions and philosophies. For instance, he'll say, in v. 11, "I have learned to be *content* in whatever circumstances I am". And that word (at least in that form) is used ONLY here in the whole NT but it's used hundreds of times in the Stoics. It means to be self-ruled or even self-sufficient.

And Paul's going to say, "See... I dig what those Stoics are about – and when I say. 'think about the good, true and beautiful' things I'm not afraid to find those things in other religions and philosophies. There are things we can admire in Buddhists or Muslims or Stoics. I agree with the Stoics about being self-possessed... I agree with them...SORT OF.

And he'll use another word, as I mentioned last time, a word used by people who were being initiated into the secret occult world of the so-called mystery religions. Paul writes, "in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry".

"Paul, did you say, 'the secret'? Would you *dare* use that word? That's a patently PAGAN word!"

And here again it's used ONLY once in the whole NT but thousands of times in the ancient writings of the Gnostics and the Mystery Religions. All the Philippian Christians knew about these people (their neighbors and co-workers). And Paul is saying, "I'm not afraid to say that what I'm into is also a kind of initiation ritual...it's also a mystery ...a secret"

So, Paul, is Christianity like any other religion...is it... like so many people say in the modern world, "See! All religions are basically the same – they are all moving in the same direction as long as you're sincere and moderate?" Is that what you're saying Paul?"

Well...sort of...but NOT exactly...see all religions are human beings groping in the dark and once in a while we stumble on some flash of light...like a person walking in a field in the blackest night; no moon, no stars only dense, dark clouds...no light at all but then there's a lightening bolt and we see for one split second.

See, Paul isn't a syncretist (he wasn't synthesizing a religion – a little Buddhism and a dash of Islam) but Paul is a kind of spiritual imperialist. He believes we all have these longings and flashes of light but that Christianity is the Sun itself. The Gospel IS the initiation into the mystery – it is the secret of contentment. If there's anything true or honorable, or right or pure, or lovely or good ... if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things... even if some non-Christian teaches you. Christianity has nothing to fear from any idea that's true – no matter what the source.

It's about contentment; sort of what the Stoics are into but it doesn't come by willpower and discipline and mind-control. It comes NOT by our getting to God but by His coming to US! The Gospel is the answer to the Stoic's longing...and to our dream of learning the secret and being granted access. The God of Jesus Christ IS the unknown God (Acts 17) and He will claim everything – every molecule of the Universe is His.

Paul is NOT a PRAGMATIST, but he WAS a kind of Spiritual Imperialist; he believed he had been transferred into a kingdom that would eventually swallow up every other kingdom. He wants to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor 10.5)... In other words, Paul believed that Christianity was the only way of looking at the world that really made sense of everything. It's not that Christians have no questions or that we think we're better or smarter than Hindus or Buddhists or atheists. In fact, you CAN'T be a Christian until you see that you are NOT better than anyone, until you see that YOU could NEVER grope your way to God.

You have to see that we are so lost and hopeless and weak that God had to come to us...and He did! In Jesus Christ, the secret is revealed and contentment is known. ("Hast thou not seen, how all thy longings have been, GRANTED, in what He ordaineth?")

And that gets us to the BIG IDEA behind a Christian practice of charitable giving and fundraising and money management.

The BIG IDEA is that God is the Giver and we are the receivers. It will always be this way. Paul says, "in the matter of giving and receiving" and that phrase is saturated with this truth.

We come poor and wretched weak and wounded sick and sore – and Jesus ready stands to save you full of compassion and power. Paul knew this and THIS was the mystery that initiated him into this state of unshakeable contentment. He had received a standing before God NOT based of his efforts or superiority. Paul had tremendous guilt and a mountain of smelly, rancid self-righteousness... and God said, "Let it go, Paul...and I will clothe you with beauty and I will GIVE, GIVE, GIVE My very self for YOU – I will give My infinitely beautiful Son to be judged in your place... I will GIVE My own heart, My VERY Spirit to live in YOU... (I will send My Son and then send forth My Spirit to cry out in your heart, 'Abba Father'")

And when Paul saw this grace – which is literally the opening words and the bottom line of this whole letter – the BIG IDEA – when Paul got this...NOT only did it enable Him to rise above extremely hard circumstances – IT ALSO CHANGED HIS FUNDRAISING. He made it clear to all donors, "Look, the main thing, the Big Idea, that I will not obscure (I will not turn grace into karma – like you do THIS and God will do that) THE BIG IDEA is that God has made us infinitely rich in Jesus Christ! That's why we can give away our baubles and trinkets our time and money and our very lives.

“My God is a FANATICAL Giver”, says Paul. “Look at the Gospel and let it sink in and you will sing with me and YOU will give with me – listen – ‘My God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen.’”

I’m going to talk about charitable giving for two more weeks – but don’t worry. You have nothing to fear. You have everything to gain. *You may find yourself so FULL of grace, so secure in God’s embrace, so sensitized to the riches that belong to everyone who repents and believes...* you may find yourself, heart strangely warmed (as John Wesley put it) and liberated in this matter of giving and receiving.

It’s all about the bottom line and the bottom line of this whole letter IS:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ
be with your spirit.