

What is one of the first items of business that you and I do after a retirement party, a 50th Wedding Anniversary celebration, or after the Christmas Holidays? That's right, we go to the local card section at Walmart or another store, and purchase Thank You cards. Then we sit down at home, and try to write some personal words on each card to the people who have given us gifts. We want to let them know we received their gift, and that we appreciated their generosity. As a pastor, usually I sit down in early January, and write out thank you notes to many of you, who have given me a special gift at Christmas. If I don't know who you are, I make sure words of thanks go into the church bulletin or Newsletter. Isn't it true, when you have written out maybe 10-20 Thank you notes, you are going, Phew, glad that is over. What a job. That took me several hours to accomplish. Not always a real joyful spirit, when the writing of cards, and the time commitment seems to take us away from something else, we'd much rather be doing. In our lesson today, Paul is writing a Thank you note to a congregation in Philippi. And he is not writing this thank you note out of a sense of duty, or a sense of obligation. But rather, He is filled with joy as he writes this thank you note. So on this Thanksgiving Day, let's join Paul and Give Thanks to our God. 1) Give Thanks for moving hearts to serve him 2) Give Thanks for teaching us the secret of contentment 3) Give Thanks for supplying all our needs

The apostle Paul was in Rome, chained to a Roman guard. He is defending himself against charges that could lead to his execution. While he is in Rome, a man named Epaphroditus comes from Philippi with a cash gift from the congregation in Philippi. He tells Paul that the cash gift is to help support him with his court expenses, and any other physical need he might have. In addition, Epaphroditus tells Paul, the congregation has sent him to be his personal attendant to matters at hand. So Paul writes a thank you note. What is he trying to say with this thank you note? Is he saying, "God really isn't taking care of me here in Rome, I have to depend on myself and others, so this money really comes in handy?" Is he saying, "If I write a thank you note, then maybe they'll send me more money?" Is he saying, "Money is important to me these days, I like to have it so I can buy things with it and be happy." None of these are the reasons he writes. Rather, Paul is happy not for the money itself and what it can do for him, rather he is happy about what the money says about the Philippians. The Philippians were moved to send a gift to him because they appreciated the glorious riches they had in Jesus Christ. The Philippians knew they did not have to worry about their sins and their shortcomings because their Savior Jesus lived the perfect life God demanded of them. They knew they didn't have to worry about the guilt and the punishment they deserved because their Savior Jesus died on a cross to wash their guilt away and endure their punishment for them. They did not have to worry about working their way to heaven because Jesus cried out from the cross, "It is finished," and therefore completed their salvation. They needed not worry about providing for themselves or just making it or surviving in this world because their Savior Jesus promised to always be with them to the very end—watching, protecting, and providing. They wanted to see the work of sharing the glorious riches we have in Christ with others. When I see the members of Open Bible looking for places to serve around church, whether it be as a greeter, usher, kitchen

volunteer, grounds or church cleaner, board member, or committee member, I thank God for all of you. I am thankful not because certain jobs are getting done, but rather the love for Christ that motivates your service. You aren't doing these things for yourself, to feel good about yourself, but rather because you appreciate the glorious riches we have in Jesus Christ.

You, the members of Open Bible know the secret to contentment. A number of years back there was a story in U.S. News and World Report that is just as relevant today as it was when it was first printed. The story was about the so-called "American Dream." I guess that would include owning your own home, and having all your needs met for sure, but also having enough to do all the things you really wanted to do, and have all the things you really wanted to have. The story said that for Americans with household incomes of under \$25,000, polls showed these people believed it would take \$54,000 to fulfill the American dream in their lives. The same survey also showed that for those who make \$100,000, they'd like to make about \$192,000 for their version of the American dream. The point is, it doesn't matter how much you have, it's the natural, human tendency of each of us to think that if we just had a little more, then we'd be set. Then we'd be content. Then we could truly be thankful and happy. And it doesn't matter at what place we are in this life, rich or poor, sick or healthy. Every one of our lives are filled with "if only's", aren't they? If only I had a larger pension and more money in my retirement account, then I would be thankful and happy. If only my healthcare premiums and deductibles and co-pays weren't so high . . . then I'd be content and happy. If only I wouldn't have this back problem, or this really bad arthritis, or these bad knees, I'd be content and happy. If only my loved one were still with me today, then I wouldn't have this empty hole in my heart. If only I could find a companion to share my last days on this earth, and not be alone all the time, then I'd be happy.

Paul writes here in our lesson that contentment, being happy and thankful for what we do have, and not longing for more or better or different, is a secret. It's a secret in the sense that it's not something that comes naturally, it's not something you're just born with. If you need proof, just watch two toddlers trying to play together fighting over the same toy in a room full of toys. Contentment with what we have been given is a secret that has to be learned.

And how right he is. Paul writes that the secret is that "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." Verse 13 is a passage that many Christians abuse by pulling it out of context and using it to say "you can succeed in anything you choose by trying hard enough." That is not what Paul is saying at all. He is saying instead, "no matter what situation I am in, no matter how bad or difficult it is, I will have the strength to come through it because my strength is what God has given to me." It is not my power that makes me succeed and gets me through hard times. It is Christ working his power through me. This reality and certainty is what every Christian has from God. This is why we can rejoice and give thanks in each and every circumstance. Think of the life of Paul for a moment. He knew what it was to have much. He had been a well-off man, not having to worry about the physical things of this life. At least until the risen Christ appeared to him on the Damascus Road to be his missionary. And then Paul knew what it was to be in need. To go hungry and thirsty, to be without clothing, to endure

physical suffering, physical and mental torture, persecution, imprisonment. He says that he had to “learn” this secret, to know that whatever the situation in his life might be, no matter how much he has or how little he has, in joy and in sorrow, in life and in death, that contentment in any situation in life is found in Christ. And like Paul, the secret for you to be content in all circumstances and situations in your life is your relationship with Christ. You can only be truly content when you are connected to Christ.

Even a little boy putting together a make-shift puzzle figured it out. His dad found a full-size map of the United States in a magazine, tore it out, cut it into pieces, and gave his son the assignment to put all the pieces together. To the father’s amazement, the son had completed the task in a matter of minutes. When asked how he did it, the son explained how easy it was. At first, when he tried to connect the little lines and dots and small print of all the individual states, it looked like it would be impossible to ever get it all together. Then, on the back of one of the pieces, he noticed a part of man’s face. He then turned over all the pieces, and when he put together the man’s face on the one side, the map of the United States was completed on the other.

He focused on the right picture and it made sense. Life will not make sense if we are staring at the picture of everything we don’t have instead of the picture of everything we do have. That picture is the cross. That picture is Christ. And by faith that picture has been placed so clearly on our hearts. When that picture is our focus, the rest of the pieces of the pictures of our life start to fall in place, no matter how mismatched each might appear to be on it’s own. It all comes together when we focus on Christ. Then we know what contentment is. Contentment is not about how much you have or don’t have. Contentment is realizing that God gives us exactly what we need, and us finally being happy and thankful with what we do have, and not discontentment in what we wish we did have or think we should have.

Finally, it is that contentment which then prompts thanksgiving. And when it comes to giving thanks, it may be beneficial to think of it in a couple of ways. It is one thing to speak of it. In the past couple of days and in the days to follow, we hear comments from people speaking about how thankful they are for this and that. Certainly our prayers will also reflect a little additional emphasis on thanksgiving. It is most appropriate to speak and to pray words of thanksgiving.

But the believers in Philippi remind us that there is another way to give thanks: we can show it. They no doubt told Paul repeatedly how thankful they were to God for his ministry to them, but they didn’t only give thanks to God through words, but also through their actions. Moved by the message of the gospel that Paul had shared, a message by which individuals like Lydia and the jailer had been converted, the members of that congregation took offerings to support Paul and his mission work. They gave thanks by showing it.

Let us do the same. May we take the time this year and always to speak of how thankful we are for God’s blessings, and may we also take the time to show him how thankful we are for his many blessings.