

Our Contributors.

The Joy of Giving and Receiving.

Phil. 4: 10-20.

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Paul closes this epistle with a personal acknowledgment, a warm expression of gratitude, and he does this in a way that shows he lifts these matters of personal relationship to a lofty plane. In declaring our gratitude to God or man, it is easy to drop into empty, commonplace phrases. To Paul, however, this was not easy; he was always original, that is, he spoke always out of a fresh living experience. The Philippians, on their side, were a thoughtful, generous people. The gospel which they had received had been to them such a quickening, joy-inspiring power that they were anxious to show their keen appreciation by ministering to the man who had come to them as the messenger of God. The remarkable thing is that there was a real spiritual fellowship between them and Paul, so that he felt he could receive gifts from them even when he was compelled to decline them from others. Thus, in uttering his personal gratitude he reveals an important side of his life. He is thankful for what they have done for him but he states this in a way that is likely to impress upon his disciples the great principle—which he had embodied in his own life, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

One outstanding feature of Paul's character is a strong sense of independence. Those who think that humility in the Christian man means a weak crawling condition will find no support for that error in the story of this man's life. He was a lowly, childlike man, bowing trustfully before God, he was also a brotherly man seeking to live in noble fellowship with others; he counted himself the servant of all, but he would not be the paid lackey of any man, or community of men. He must maintain a strong independent manhood if he was to do the work committed to him, if that was lost or crippled he could not be either an efficient minister of Christ, or a true servant of men. The manner of his conversion, the peculiarity of his position, standing as he did outside the original circle of apostles, made him specially sensitive on this point.

Paul maintained that, as a matter of right, the labourer is worthy of his hire, and the man who gives up time and strength to minister to his brethren is worthy of their generous, loyal support. If that was not true there would be nothing special in his conduct; the point is that he voluntarily refrained from his right for reasons that some thought foolish but which to him were sufficient and powerful. He worked with his hands; he received private support from friends that he might be unfettered, free to go wherever his large commission called him. This was certainly generous action on his part but as even the noblest action will not please all, it was by some set down to wilful eccentricity or showy pride. In a certain sense Paul was proud, for there is pride that is consistent with high Christian manhood. This passage shows that under certain circumstances he did accept

gifts. He did not accept them as payment for his services, he did not consider that the highest spiritual ministry could in any real sense receive payment. A man can be supported, kept alive, a certain allowance may be made for the wear and tear of life, but there is no price for a man's soul. The greatest poets, preachers and teachers have never received much of this world's coin, and it is just as well, for wisdom and truth, sympathy and love are not marketable commodities. The highest salaries are not paid to men who do the noblest work, but often to those who bewilder and mislead. When you look at Paul's work in the light of these nineteen centuries do you think that any bank cheque could give a full and final payment for it? Paul judged it well to waive the just claim for support and limited himself to receiving gifts which were the real expression of sincere friendship. His feeling in such cases might be expressed in the words of Emerson:

"Gifts from one who loved me,
'Twas high time they came;
When he ceased to love,
'Time they stopped for shame."

Friendship of the highest kind is a difficult and delicate affair. Within a family there should be real family feeling so that its members can give and receive help from each other without any sense of dependence or shame. Even that is not always possible, but how rare it is for two people to be on such terms of friendship that they can give and receive help without obligation or misunderstanding. This rare, noble fellowship existed between Paul and the Philippian disciples, and in this passage he reveals the spiritual basis of that relationship. The passage is highly suggestive and it is well worth careful attention that we may note the character of the apostle's thought, and catch the spirit of his teaching. He uses boldness of speech, the boldness that is the prerogative of the noblest strength and which is not to be confounded with the pretentiousness of ignorant presumption. He recognizes the generosity of the people who had sent a messenger on the long toilsome journey to minister to him during his imprisonment at Rome. This was spontaneous generosity; it was not a tax unwillingly paid but a free gift springing from gratitude and love. The thoughtful friendship that was behind it gave it strength, beauty and acceptability. Paul accepted it gladly and acknowledged it heartily but the boldness of his speech consists in this, that he is able to declare that he rejoices in the gift not for his own sake, but for theirs. He does not deny that he drew help, joy and satisfaction out of it, but he maintains that they who gave freely of their substance gained a great blessing through their generosity. In any case, he would have continued the struggle by God's help and carried on the great work, but if in the presence of his affliction, that had remained neglectful and narrow, they would have missed a God-sent opportunity of holiest service. It is possible for us now to see Paul's life through and through, and to understand the full meaning of its supreme struggle. We can see this life all the more clearly

because many petty things that created misunderstanding and caused misinterpretation have fallen away. We know that it was a true life without a wilful lie in it; we know that this statement was true both to his own feeling and the actual facts of the case. The gift had pleased and helped but the supreme blessing fell back upon the givers.

But how do we receive such tidings from the living voice? Suppose the Christian teacher courteously but courageously addresses a man of wealth in these terms: "God who has called me will care for me, He will feed and clothe; He will also take care of the Church. In proportion to the divine life in her she will accomplish great things whoever gives or whoever withholds, but I am concerned about you. You have the opportunity of rendering a little service before the night closes around you. If you shut yourself up in a small selfish world and have your soul strangled by miserable greed you are bringing upon yourself a present damnation."

Such a speech can only be rightly given by a man of unquestionable strength and sincerity. It is part of the living gospel and reveals the stewardship of life. It places a severe test upon the hearer, to the selfish, cynical man it may seem to be only a plausible form of begging, a clever attempt to capture his money for Church purposes. Paul ventures to take this high ground and maintain that his chief joy in the gifts is gladness over the spiritual fruitfulness, the self-sacrifice manifested by those to whom he has ministered. In stating the reasons for this, he gives us a revelation of his own deepest life.

1. His self-sufficiency. He speaks not from the pressure of need because he has learned in whatsoever circumstances he is placed to be self-sufficient. "Content" is too small a word to express Paul's real meaning. There is a shallow pretence of self-sufficiency which dispenses with God and despises the Christ. That was far from Paul's thought; it was never capable of anything so absurd. He tells us plainly that his power to do and bear all things is from Jesus Christ. This self-sufficiency has come to him through self-surrender. It is a popular misconception of the Christian religion to think of it as the impoverishment of self instead of the enrichment of the whole manhood. The rich, independent man is the man who has a world of his own, a faith in God, an interpretation of life, a sympathy with men, a hope for the future. The weakness of many people is that they have too little of this self-sufficiency, their happiness is too much dependent upon things outside of them, they hunger for more wealth, commercial prosperity or social success. How can people who are always empty and restless inspire or guide others? Paul had gained the independence which comes through complete dependence on God. It was not carelessness or a naturally genial temper, it had come through many struggles and betokened victory over self. Not in any academy or university had he acquired this noble self-sufficiency, but in the arena of life and in the school of Christ.

2. Hence his power of adaptation to varied circumstances. It is quite legitimate to give a general application to this declaration of strength: "I have strength for all things through Christ that strengtheneth me," but it is well to note that Paul uses