

“True Partnership”
Sermon Series on *Christ: the Source of our Joy and Strength*
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(Phil. 4:10-23)

Introduction.

In her magnificent book *Team of Rivals* presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin tells the remarkable story of how Abraham Lincoln, after he was elected President, appointed the men he defeated in the election to become members of his cabinet. He also appointed people who had been the most critical of him to key positions in his government. Seward was appointed Secretary of State, Chase the Secretary of the Treasury, and Bates the Attorney General.

The remaining top posts were given to three former Democrats – Welles became the Secretary of the Navy, Blair the Postmaster General, and Stanton the Secretary of War. Every member of the cabinet was better known, better educated, and more experienced in public life than Lincoln was. Their presence in the cabinet might have threatened to eclipse the obscure lawyer from Springfield, Illinois.

However, it soon became evident that Abraham Lincoln would emerge as the undisputed captain of this most unusual cabinet, and through his strength and humility Lincoln was able to forge this team of rivals into a group of people who together would change the course of American history. And it all began with partnership.¹

Partnership. It's a powerful word, and Paul refers to it in the passage we're studying this morning. As we conclude our sermon series on the book of Philippians today, I want to talk about two matters with you: 1) the gift of partnership; and 2) the secret of contentment.

I. The Gift of Partnership.

Paul ends his letter to the Philippians with a personal note of gratitude. However, as is typical of Paul's writings, even something as simple as saying "thank you" turned into a long paragraph with lots of practical and spiritual insight. Paul thanked his good friends at Philippi for their persistent search for him so they could extend their practical help. It may have been that they lost track of the apostle during Paul's trial in Jerusalem and the two years he spent in custody in Caesarea (Acts 24-26). Or maybe they didn't know where he was during the long journey to Rome and the shipwreck that delayed his arrival (Acts 27). Regardless

of the reason, they finally discovered his whereabouts in Rome, and they sent Epaphroditus, a member from their church, to help the apostle.

Roman prisons in the first century were dangerous places, and if a prisoner didn't have friends on the outside to help with food and other needs, the prisoner wouldn't have regular provisions, and there was no way to care for themselves. So the arrival of Epaphroditus was a Godsend, and he provided very tangible support for Paul in prison. The gift of money was also a great blessing, and this wasn't the first time the church in Philippi helped him financially. We learn elsewhere in the NT that this generous congregation was the first to support Paul in his missionary work, and they sent money to him on several occasions. The apostle makes it clear that their gifts over the years had a larger significance than just one church helping a missionary overseas. Paul speaks of being "filled" by their gifts, and he indicates their generosity lifted his spirits on many occasions.

Isn't it true that sometimes the greatest gift we receive isn't the gift itself but the encouragement that comes to us because of the gift? You realize you aren't alone in this world and that someone cares. They haven't forgotten you, and you really do matter to them. That's what Paul experienced when Epaphroditus arrived with the financial gift from the church in Philippi. The apostle also put their gifts in a broader context by reminding them that their gifts were pleasing to God and that these gifts constituted a fruit, a fragrant offering, and a sacrifice that honored the Lord who is the source of all good gifts. So in gratitude and as a way of encouraging his readers Paul says, "*My God will supply every need of yours according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus*" (Phil. 4:19).

What we see here is the essence of true partnership. There was mutuality in the relationship Paul enjoyed with the church in Philippi, and each was a blessing to the other. A lot has been written in recent years to help us realize that this isn't always the case in partnership in mission, and we've begun to realize that there is such a thing as *toxic charity*. It's when helping someone actually hurts the person you're trying to aid, and it creates co-dependency or robs the partner of dignity and self-respect. It can also foster a dependent or a victim mentality. It's an easy trap to fall into because the desire to help is a genuine one, but sometimes the helping is born out of a sense of guilt or the need to be needed. Sometimes we do it because of how it makes *us* feel rather than truly meeting the need of someone else in a way that actually helps them flourish and thrive in the long run.

Several years ago I heard Wess Stafford, who was for many years the president of Compassion International. He gave a talk about different approaches to partnership, and he said that people look at partnership in a variety of ways. For example, there is the *farmer and the cow*. The farmer may think he has a partnership with the cow, but the cow has a very different view of things. The

benefits seem to go only one way, and the farmer is literally milking the cow for all it's worth.

Another example of partnership is the *cowboy and the horse*. The two ride together, and they're able to travel long distances to where they need to go. But again, the cowboy may think he and the horse have a partnership, but it's a pretty lopsided arrangement. The cowboy is the one who benefits the most, and it isn't a mutual agreement.

The final example Wess shared about partnership was the model of two oxen working together. They're harnessed to the same yoke, and they work on the same task. Each one pulls its own weight, and together they work to accomplish something neither of them could do on their own. It's this last kind of partnership that is the most pleasing to God.

I think of partnerships in which our church is engaged, and I'm excited to see how our ministry can flourish when we partner with others in our community and around the world for the sake of the gospel. We partner with City with Dwellings and help provide check-in and lodging for the guests who stay in our overflow shelter and at other shelters around town like at Samaritan Ministries. We partner with H.O.M. in Haiti and Mission Emmanuel in the DR to build relational connections, provide finances, offer medical care and expertise, and help in construction and other projects on a short-term basis.

How does God want you to be a partner in ministry with someone this year? Who can you partner with to accomplish a task God wants you to undertake. Paul was grateful for the partnership he had with the Christians in Philippi, and everyone benefited from the mutual blessing they were to each other.

II. The Secret of Contentment.

In the midst of expressing his gratitude for the financial gift the Philippians sent, Paul also offered a powerful statement about contentment. And he said something very interesting we would do well to note. The apostle writes, *"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. 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 all things through Christ who gives me strength"* (Phil. 4:11b-13).

That's a pretty amazing statement Paul makes here. What does he really mean? Contentment is defined as "the state of being satisfied mentally, physically, and emotionally with things as they currently are." It's an experience of the heart which is expressed in a feeling of satisfaction or peace. I think it's rare to find a person nowadays who is truly content with their life circumstances, and most of us battle dissatisfaction. One reason for this is because there's an entire industry that is designed to make you feel discontented, and it's called advertising.

If finding contentment is such a challenge, then what's the key? How do we learn the art of contentment in a world of consumption? I think the secret can be found here in Philippians 4. Paul was a prisoner in Rome when he wrote the letter to the Philippians, and as I've mentioned before that prisons in the first century were dangerous places. Nevertheless, Paul wasn't preoccupied with his difficult situation, and he wanted the Philippians to know that he wasn't discouraged.

In this context Paul shared with them that he had *learned* the art of contentment. The word Paul uses here which is translated "I have learned" is the Greek word *myeo*. It can also mean "mystery" and "to be initiated into a secret." It's like being in a special group that has a secret initiation rite such as a fraternity or a sorority. When I was in the Boy Scouts we learned the Scout handshake. It was a secret way of greeting which signaled to other scouts that you're one of them. What was Paul's secret? What enabled him to take in stride everything that happened in his life? Paul's answer is clear. It was his day-to-day relationship with Christ who empowered and guided him every step of the way.

Abounding prosperity and devastating hardship – Paul had experienced both in his life. And he wanted his partners to know that he had been able to cope with each of them because of the companionship he experienced with Jesus. One of the hallmarks of the Christian life is that if we put our trust in Christ and keep our eyes fixed on Him, circumstances will begin to lose their power over us. Our self-image and our sense of security won't be tied to the things we own or what happens to us in our life. These things are important, but they're not ultimate. And for Paul the most important thing, the ultimate thing in his life, was his relationship with Jesus.

I think another strategy that can help us learn to be content is to let things happen without over-interpretation regarding their significance in the long run. And the reason for this is because Christ has already established what our long-term future is going to be by His death and resurrection. The outcome of our lives for eternity has already been settled because of the victory Jesus won on the cross and over the grave for us. And everything that happens in this life between now and then is a temporary training ground for our eternal life that is yet to come. When I look at my life through the lens of eternity, I'm able to see that a life of abundance or a life of scarcity, a life of ease or a life of hardship, isn't going to last forever. It's only temporary. And what really matters is my relationship with Christ which is going to last for eternity. Do you see what Paul is saying here?

There is one final matter from this passage about contentment I want to mention, and it has to do with this famous text which many of you have probably memorized. And if you haven't memorized it, you should. "*I can do all this through Christ who strengthens me*" (Phil. 4:13). It's a wonderful verse to remember whenever you're in the midst of a difficult season in life or when you're

trying to tackle a big problem. It doesn't mean that I can do all things through Christ in the sense that if I couldn't dunk a basketball before I can now. What it means is that through Christ we can draw upon the power of God to help me overcome any problem, accomplish any task, hurdle any obstacle, or bounce back from any setback. In other words, it is God who can help me be content with whatever circumstance I have to deal with, and He can help me overcome my discontentment. The resources of God are limitless.

What are you dealing with in life today? Has your world been rocked by something that has happened recently? How is God trying to get your attention or help teach you to depend on Him more through these difficult circumstances, and how can you learn to draw upon the strength of Christ in a greater way to face the challenge before you?

Conclusion.

I began this message by saying that this passage is about partnership. As we close I want to share with you a remarkable story of partnership I read last week. I read about a missionary who once rode a bicycle for two days to the nearest African city in order to purchase supplies for his small field hospital. After treating the injuries of a man he encountered on the way, he visited the bank and a supply store, and then continued on his journey home on his bicycle, camping one night in the jungle.

When he returned to that town several weeks later, the man he had bandaged confessed to him that he and some friends had planned to rob the man at his campsite. They knew he had money because he went to the bank, and they were going to take it and kill him. However, they were frightened away by twenty-six armed guards surrounding the sleeping man. When the missionary said he was all alone, the African vehemently declared that the protection of the guards was the only reason they had run away.

The next year when the missionary shared this story at his home church while on furlough, one man asked him the date and the time that this happened. After being told the date, the man said, "At the time this incident happened, I was on the golf course for some morning practice. I was about to putt when I was struck by a sudden urge to pray for you, and it was so strong that I left the course and called some men at our church to join me in praying for you." Then he said, "Would all you men who prayed that day stand up?" One by one the missionary counted them – there were twenty-six men who had prayed for the missionary, the same number of the "guards" the African assailants had seen.²

Friends, there is power in partnership, and we can do far more together than we could ever do alone. Find people with whom you can partner in the cause of Christ. Together we can do all things through Him who strengthens us. Amen.

¹ Doris Kearns Goodman, *Team of Rivals*.

² Cheri Fuller and Jennifer Kennedy Dean, *The One Year Praying the Promises of God*, August 23, 2012.