

Open your Bibles to this morning's scripture text, which can be found in the book of Philippians, Chapter 4 verses 15-23. This can be found on page 832 in your pew Bibles. We conclude "The Joy of Unity" series today. Scripture reveals the joy filled promise of our Lord.

#### Our Fathers Word

Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Greet all the saints in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me send greetings. All the saints send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household.

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

The Word of God for the people of God

God desires to be the center of our life. This is the greatest news we could hear relating to the level of joy we experience in life. Hear this, God, the maker of this earth, the heavens, and everything contained therein, wants to abide with his children one-on-one in an *ongoing*, close and personal relationship. What could possibly bring us more joy than knowing that? God wants to be the *center* of our life, not on the periphery, not as an afterthought, not on the outside looking in, not a hobby or something we do each Sunday and only on Sunday, but God wants to be the *center* of your life and of my life.

Being the *center* means that decisions are His to make, and my life, your life, is His to command. God is a gentle commander, but do not be confused, He is in charge. The hardest lesson I have ever had to learn was that I am not in control of my life. And it is a lesson I have to learn over and over, it seems like each day I have to learn again that my life is not my own, rather, I am a *servant* of the Master. *We* are *His* servants. This is one of the most difficult lessons of life we have to learn, and it is a lesson we must learn over and over again.

This is our eighth and final message on the joy of unity in God. I hope that you enjoy as much as I do, contemplating, God exalts himself by *carrying us* rather than *us carrying Him*, by serving us, rather than having us serve him. Within that truth, we will discover a joy filled promise by God; He will provide *everything* we need in this life, because He is in control.

Paul concludes this beautiful letter of joy and encouragement to his friends, in Philippi, as he closes with one final lesson he is learning, so that they will not worry about him. He wants to leave them with good thoughts.

He begins the end of the letter by saying thank you to the Philippians for sending him supplies for his time in prison. In ancient Rome, the prisoner was *confined* by the state, but not necessarily *provided for* by the state. The regular provisions a prisoner needed to live had to be given to the prisoner from outside sources. One of the ways the Philippian church had ministered to Paul was by sending food and money for food while he was incarcerated. In the midst of saying thank you to the Philippians, Paul manages to teach profoundly.

You can see why the Philippians gave Paul such joy; they shared his mission of converting people to follow Christ, they remembered and followed his teachings, and they honored and supported him by sending money and food for his time in prison. This wasn't a church he had to fight with, to chastise and shame into right behavior, but a church that was functioning well. All of this gave Paul great hope and joy that his efforts in planting a church in Philippi were not wasted.

Paul wants to let the Philippians, his friends, know that he is okay, and not to worry about him. To do that, he lets them in on one last lesson he has learned while being a servant, a slave of Jesus Christ.

Paul has lived an interesting life to say the least: born into the best Jewish tribe, he received the best Jewish teaching as a Pharisee, and was zealous for the Law, so much so that he persecuted the early church. After Jesus had ascended to Heaven, and the early church was growing under the leadership of the other Apostles, Paul was there trying to kill this new religion which believed a mere man was also God.

Paul tried to catch and imprison many early believers. And then, Jesus came to Paul, and changed his life forever.

Once Jesus came to Paul, and Paul discovered all that was being claimed by these Christians about Jesus was actually true, his life became all about Jesus.

Paul traveled all over the known world planting churches in places like Corinth, Ephesus and Philippi. He suffered on an unimaginable level as he taught and traveled. On more than one occasion he probably should have died, but God protected him. Paul endured deadly snake bites, shipwrecks, scorn and laughter, beatings, and jail. All for the sake of Christ.

At the end of his life, sitting in prison in Rome, awaiting his time to plead his case before Caesar, Paul has lots of time to reflect on what he has learned as a servant of Christ, time to reflect on the trials he has endured. He wants to pass on that hard-earned knowledge onto his friends in Philippi who are also radical servants and followers of Jesus.

On one occasion, Paul was at Areopagus, the Mars Hill meeting place, preaching to the philosophers of Athens. This, after walking through the city, seeing the temples, seeing the statues of some unknown gods of their worship, and discovering how religious they are. He wants to make sure that they understand the nature of the *true God* and how unique He is among all the gods they are trying to honor. We read his message to the philosophers in Acts 17:24-25, 24 “The God who made the universe and everything in it, and who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in man-made temples; 25 nor is he served by human hands, as if he lacked something; since it is he himself who gives life and breath and everything to everyone. Let that sink in, God doesn’t need temples made by men, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything. God is not served by us. Well, *how so* you might ask?

We should never serve God with our hands or any other part of our being in the sense that you are supplying some need that God has. That's a dishonor to God. God exalts Himself by being above having needs. God is a *need meeter*, not a *need haver*. Since why? Since ***He gives everything to all mankind***. Life, breath, everything. To all! God is fundamentally giver, not fundamentally needer. He never needs at all! He gives, and He gives, and He gives!

He does not wait to be served, He serves *those* as we have seen, who *wait for Him*. He is not glorious by having billions of servants, slaves who run around supplying His needs. He is glorious by serving *everything* to billions of people. Let that sink in, He is infinitely resourceful. Never having any defect or deficiency or need. *That* is His glory! He spills over to serve those who wait for Him.

To confirm this thinking completely, let's go right to the heart of the Gospel, to Jesus Christ, being the embodiment of the uniqueness of God. Mk 10:43-45 Jesus says, "...but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. 44 And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." He came from The unique God, as His unique embodiment. He came, not to be served, there it is, in the most shocking form. The Son of Man came into this world NOT to be served. But to serve, He came to serve us. Can it be said any more amazingly? He came to serve us.

Specifically, he came to give his life as a ransom for many. *We could not* pay the ransom that had to be paid because of the debt of our sin. God sent His Son as the final, perfect, beautiful, all-sufficient, embodiment of His self-sufficiency saying, "what you cannot do for yourself, I will now do for you."

So, we must beware that we never serve Jesus as though He needed anything.

Paul's final lesson to the Philippians captures the essence of what this joy filled promise is all about in today's scripture text. In Phil 4:19 he joyfully proclaims, "My God will supply every need -- every need, not whim -- of yours according to **his riches in glory** in Christ Jesus." God created the world to show that He is rich in glory. God runs history to show that He's rich in glory. God relates to His saints to show that He's rich in glory. That comes down to the very practical statement, God is the supplier here, not you.

1 Cor 4:7 **What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?** Everything that we have is a gift from God so that He can show how rich He is in glory, in Jesus Christ.

The secret Paul has learned is to put God, to put Jesus at the very center of his life. That is why Paul can be content in times of suffering, because He knows that God is in control of his life. Paul has experienced good times and he has gone through hard times. Throughout all the times, Paul has focused on God, he has placed God at the center of his life.

Because God is at the center, Paul is content in whatever happens. If good things happen, that is great. If bad things happen, that is okay. Come what may, God was the focus of Paul's life. That is the secret Paul is talking about. The secret in being content in all things is knowing, being absolutely sure, that God is in control of our lives. We serve a God who loves us very much. Knowing *that*, deep in our souls, helps us get through the tough times.

We don't serve a God who is far away, who crushes our spirit with His, but rather a God who is close, and loves us very much, therefore we can safely put God at the center of our lives, knowing we can trust our lives to His care.

The odd thing is, that the lesson of placing God in the center of our lives, knowing we can trust our lives to His care, relearning *that* lesson is important in times of plenty and in times of want. Both situations tempt us to trust ourselves, our strength.

In truth, we need Christ's strength during both times of plenty and struggle. In times of plenty we struggle with the temptation of pride, I did all of this and earned all of this myself. In lean times we struggle with the temptation of despair, with the feeling that God has forgotten about us, and that somehow, we have earned God's wrath. Neither temptation is where God would have us dwell mentally.

Placing God in the center of our lives everyday makes certain that we don't fall into either temptation. We aren't full of pride, and we aren't full of despair either. Rather, whether rich or poor, in plenty or want, we are full of God, His love, His strength, and His security.

Part of being confident in God is being confident in God's people. Paul had been supported by the church at Philippi during his time there at Philippi, and then later as he continued to plant other churches and accomplish the mission God had laid out for him. The generosity of the church at Philippi allowed Paul to continue to do the tasks God had laid out for him. So often it seems like God uses people to provide the funds mysteriously. There is a certain mystery about the way God blesses generosity, about the way the money seems to last longer.

It is amazing to watch our feeble efforts on God's behalf blossom. This happens when we give of ourselves, and allow God to work through us. When we are generous with our money, with our time, with ourselves, God blesses that sacrifice. Our sacrifices are not unnoticed by God. He knows how much we give to His kingdom, whether it is like the Widow's 2 cents, or whatever it is we bring. God uses whatever we bring to Him; and logically, the more we bring, the more He uses.

Here in Philippians, is a thank you for the support Paul has received, both physical support and prayer support. Both are vital. The church shares the joys of its members and it shares the troubles as well. This is because the church is full of people who have learned the lesson Paul is talking about; putting God in the center of life, changes lives and hearts. Putting God first changes our actions, and it changes fundamentally who we are. Because of that change, we are able to be used by God. Even though that is true, it is still appropriate to say thank you to the people who have helped us, to the people who have loved us when we needed it.

The church has a symbol for putting Christ first, for taking Him into our lives and allowing Him to make us over into His image. Today, we celebrate communion, that Jesus is the center of our lives. But more than that, we have accepted the position of servant, we have placed our lives in His hands, our futures in His hands.

What we place in Jesus' loving hands is our whole selves, our attitudes, our hopes and joys, our actions, our words, our relationships, our financial well-being, *everything* we put into God's hands. Because we have faith in the joy filled promise of God. This communion is about who we are, and whose we are. The lesson of putting God at the center of our life has to be learned day after day. I wish it were a one-time lesson, but, at least to me, it is an everyday lesson I have to learn.



God' desire for my life is more important than my paltry hopes and dreams, more important than anything else.

So, as you take communion today. Take communion, and let it symbolize your ongoing commitment to learning the lesson of putting God first, every day, in the center of our lives. May God be glorified in our actions here today. Never forget the joy filled promise that no matter what, God will provide everything we need in this life, because He is in control.

Let us conclude this series, just as the Apostle Paul concluded his joy filled letter to his friends at the church in Philippi, with a doxology to God,

Php 4:20 **To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.**

Heavenly Father,

Almighty God, who came to us long ago in the birth of Jesus Christ,

be born in us a new today by the power of your Holy Spirit.

We offer our lives as home to you and ask for grace and strength

to live as your faithful, joyful children always.

Make us humble in faith and love, that we may know the joy of the Gospel

that is hidden from the wise and revealed unto babes.

Thank You, that we can commune with You Lord,

as we come before You in prayer, in the reading of your Word,

and in the blessed sacrament of holy communion.

Thank you for revealing your glory to us through Jesus Christ,

through the creation of this world, of heaven, and of everything therein.

AMEN