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Date: 10/10/2021

Reading: Philippians 4:10-23

Title: Deeper Joy: Contentment and Concern

Introduction

Friends, if you were here last Sunday then you may remember that Reuben started his sermon in Philippians 4:4, where it says, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” And that’s been such a prominent theme throughout this entire book, that theme of rejoicing, of experiencing a Deeper Joy. For as Christians we have so much to be thankful for, so much to be happy about. We’ve been rescued from judgement and made right with our Maker. We’ve been called to be his own people, even partners in his gospel. We have a God who uses hardship and opposition for our benefit. We have a humble Redeemer who calls us to follow him. And we have an outstanding destination, a citizenship in heaven, not because of anything we’ve done, but by faith and faith alone.

True Christians are supremely blessed. For in Jesus we’ve found peace with our God, purpose for our lives, and the promise of a glorious eternity. But the crazy thing is that as Christians we can yet be so desperately unhappy. And Reuben went on to describe 3 things in verses 1-9 that can steal our joy away. Those were Broken Relationships, Burdened Hearts and Bombarded Minds. And I don’t know about you but I was deeply affected as I listened and realised that I really can allow those things to rob me of my joy.

But today we want to go onto our final section and our final sermon from this book. And what we find here, before Paul’s greetings at the end, is what I’d describe as 2 attitudes that can further heighten our rejoicing, 2 final approaches to life that can boost our joy. And those 2 things are Contentment and Concern. If we can learn both Contentment in ourselves and Concern for others, then our joy will deepen even more.

Contentment

So we begin with Contentment. And we’re basically looking at verses 11-13. Now the passage begins in verse 10 with Paul saying he rejoices in the concern the Philippians have shown to him. And we’ll come back to that. But in verse 11 he takes a detour. Because you see Paul didn’t want the Philippians to think he was buttering them up for more support. He didn’t want them to think he was desperate for their money. Thus in verses 11-13 he declares, “I am not saying this because I am in need, for 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 this through him who gives me strength.”

Then he reinforces this sentiment in verse 17 saying, “Not that I desire your gifts”, and again in verse 18, “I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied”. Paul makes it very clear that even though he’s speaking in the broader passage about his thankfulness for their support, he’s not anxiously seeking it or ultimately dependant on it. And that’s because the apostle Paul was content. But what does that really mean? Well to be content is to be happy with whatever you have. It’s to be accepting, pleased and grateful for your possessions, your situation and your status. It’s to be totally satisfied with your lot in life, no matter what that might be. So what then does this passage teach us about contentment?

Well 1st, it teaches us that it needs to be learned. Paul says “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances”. And again, “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation”. In other words, this is not our natural state. We’re not born as contented beings. But rather we’re born crying out for the things we need and want. I mean, have you ever asked a child what they’d like for their birthday and heard in reply, “Well nothing thankyou, I’m quite happy with what I’ve got.” It just doesn’t happen. But are adults any different? How many people do you know who are truly satisfied with their lot in life? Satisfied with their work, relationships, possessions, health, opportunities, and their church? How many people do you know who can find nothing to complain about?

My friends, contentment is like playing the violin, it doesn’t come naturally, it needs to be learned, and it’s not learned easily. That’s why Paul speaks of the “secret of being content”. He’s not saying it’s unattainable but that it takes a concerted effort to be achieved. For you see it requires us to go against every natural tendency within us. It requires us to cease focussing on and longing for what we do not have. It requires us to stop moaning and whining about the things that upset us. And it requires us to find humble satisfaction in our circumstances, whatever they may be. And we’re not going to achieve that overnight. For it’s part of that process of maturing in your faith. The immature will always be unhappy. But if you truly want to be content, then it needs to be learned. And as we do, we discover a deeper joy.

A 2nd thing this passage teaches us is that contentment can be an issue for both those who have little and those who have lots. So on the one hand, Paul says “I know what it is to be in need”. And he speaks of times when he’s been hungry and in want. And trust me, he’s not speaking theoretically. In 2 Corinthians 11 he says, “Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.”

And even as he wrote to the Philippians he was in chains for Christ. But yet it’s this same man who writes, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances”. I think Paul’s example puts our own struggles into perspective, doesn’t it? Most of our problems are so minor, petty and self-absorbed by comparison. And so if this man could learn contentment, surely we can too.

But on the other hand Paul also says, “I know what it is to have plenty”. And he speaks of times when he was well fed and prosperous. But he equally applies the need for contentment to those times in his life. Does that seem strange to you? Surely it’s only the poor and needy who are unsatisfied? Surely the rich and those who have everything going for them are abundantly happy? Well nothing could be further from the truth. A while back the late Kerry Packer was far and away the richest and most successful person in Australia. But I saw an interview where one of his best friends was asked whether they admired Packer or pitied him. They replied, “Well, it’s not an either/or. It’s a both.” So the interviewer asked: “Why do you admire him?” “Because he’s ... the best businessman I’ve ever met in this country.” “And why do you pity him?” And the friend’s response, “Because ... he’s very unhappy. I mean money doesn’t buy you happiness, That’s for sure. And so he’s a very unhappy man. Like, a very unhappy man.”

And experience bears that out. Some of the most contented people I've met have had very little going for them, at least from a worldly perspective. But the opposite goes for those who seem to have everything. And so this passage applies to all of us, regardless of our situation. Whether you have little or lots, we need to learn contentment if we want our joy to increase.

But the 3rd thing this passage teaches is that true contentment can only be achieved with the help of the Lord. For Paul says, "I can do all this through him who gives me strength." Now this is one of the most misquoted verses in the whole Bible, especially because in translations like the old NIV it says, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." How often have these words been plucked out of context to support the idea that Christians can achieve anything they desire? But in context Paul is saying that what we can achieve is contentment. But only in the Lord's strength. We can't overcome our old earthly sinful natures on our own. If it were up to us we'd be as dissatisfied as the rest of the population. But when the Lord's at work in our lives, when we're being transformed by his Holy Spirit, then we truly can learn to be content with our lot in life. And that's because we'll realise that in Jesus we have far greater riches than anything on this earth, and we can trust that whatever happens, he will love and care for us and never let us go.

So we should ask ourselves this morning, have we learned the secret of being content in any and every situation? Maybe you don't have much, you're struggling on a pension. Does that mean you can't be happy? Maybe you're going through a hard time, a time of stress and anxiety, a time of change and uncertainty. Does it have to control you, does it have to make you bitter? Or maybe you're doing alright, you've got everything you want. But can you say you're satisfied? Whatever our lot, let us ask the Lord to work in us by his Spirit, to see beyond our earthly circumstances, to trust in his far greater blessings, and to reach a point of genuine contentment. And may that multiply our joy!

Concern

But now we want to go onto the other attitude that can heighten our rejoicing and boost our joy. And that attitude is one of Concern, Concern for others. And these 2 elements are really very closely connected. For you see when a person's unhappy and disgruntled, then they only think about themselves. But as we mature and learn contentment, our thoughts turn instead to others, and how we can be a blessing to them. And that's what Paul talks about in the rest of our passage.

So going back to verse 10, he says "I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it." So Paul's talking about the concern the Christians in Philippi had for his own well-being. You see the apostle Paul had totally and utterly devoted himself to the work of the Lord. And as a result he had certain needs. He needed support and encouragement, he needed intercession and prayer, he needed physical help and companionship, and he needed the basics of life like food and clothing. And at different times this Church had provided. But it seems that for some reason beyond their control, they'd not done so for a while. And so Paul rejoiced that they could do so again, for a gift had been recently received, and we're told elsewhere that it was delivered by Epaphroditus, who stayed on to provide personal support.

But then going over to verse 14 Paul says more. He says, "Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles." Even though Paul was content in all circumstances, he still appreciated their recent support. And that made him think of their past support. In verse 15 he says, "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". There was a time, about 10 years earlier, when this church was first established and they assisted Paul already then. And it's a good thing they did because they were the only ones. But that wasn't the end. In verse 16 he says, "for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need." These were not one-off gifts but an ongoing commitment to the apostle and his ministry for the Lord.

So in all this we see that Paul is focussing on the concept of Concern, the concern the Philippians had shown to him. And right at the beginning he told us that this gave him reason to greatly rejoice. Their support of him had boosted his joy. But what's not so obvious is that their concern should also boost their own joy. For when you support others in mission and ministry and doing the Lord's work, there are benefits for the giver. For example in verse 17 Paul says, "Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account." In verse 18 he says that their gifts "are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God." And to top it off in verse 19 he says in response to their support, "And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Jesus Christ."

You see my friends, the act of giving and supporting and showing concern for God's people is not just a worldly transaction. It's not just about finances and accounting and helping to meet the budget. No, the act of giving and supporting is a way of expressing your love and thankfulness and worship to the Lord. And the Lord notices, and he responds. Paul says through giving something is credited to our account, it pays spiritual dividends. He says our gifts are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God, they are a good and proper way to express gratitude for what the Lord has done for us. And he says that as a result God will meet our needs. For when we give from the heart, it's a sign of true faith and being a true child of God, and the Lord provides for all his precious children.

Now don't get me wrong, this is not a prosperity gospel. I'm not suggesting that God will turn our support for others into great earthly riches for ourselves. But what I am suggesting is that as our concern for others increases, that we'll increasingly experience the Lord's blessings, be they physical, or more importantly spiritual. And not least among those blessings will be an increase in our rejoicing and a deepening of our joy. And so it's little wonder that Paul concludes saying, "To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

But friends, just as we asked earlier whether we've learned Contentment in ourselves, so we should ask whether we've learned genuine Concern for others. Clearly Paul commends these Christians as an example to follow. But do we? Do we have a heartfelt concern for the people of God?

What a wonderful thing it is when Christians support missionaries and ministries, those who've given up everything for the sake of the gospel. We can think of overseas missionaries like Simon and Lydia or GOSPEL church planters like Rajesh and Ishram. We can think of organisations working in other countries like World Transform, the Middle East Reformed Fellowship and International Justice Mission. We can think of those working closer to home like Crossroads Prison Ministries, Australian Indigenous Ministries or Luke Hansard and FOCUS. And we can think of those working right here in Launceston like Teen Challenge, Uni Fellowship, the City Mission, Scripture Union and WayFM. We can support them in our prayers, support them with our money, support them with personal letters or emails of encouragement, and in some cases we can support them with our own labour and involvement.

But it's also a wonderful thing when Christians support the ministry of their own Church. Of course there's plenty of opportunity to support through our prayers and with our money. But at a local level there's also so many more opportunities to support through our own participation. In a church like Riverbank there are opportunities galore to serve in an outreach ministry, a children's or youth ministry, a growth group, as an office bearer, on a committee, in music, welcoming, pastoral work, or just helping out behind the scenes. But even when we're not serving, we can support those who are. Because everyone who serves does so at a cost, and serving can be tough and discouragement is never far away. Did you know that people who serve in children's ministries are rarely thanked by the parents of the kids they serve? Did you know that musicians are often criticised and almost never encouraged in their ministry? Did you know that Elders can serve a 3-year term, making significant sacrifices for the sake of the Church, and they can reach the end of their term without one person ever saying something positive about the effort they've put in?

My friends, I don't think we want to be that kind of church, do we? And so just as the Philippians were concerned for Paul, let us be concerned for those who work hard for the gospel. Let us actively show our support through our prayers, our giving, our encouragement and our involvement. And let us do so knowing that it will not only boost their joy, but it will boost our own. For it will be credited to our account, it will be a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to our God. And the more we are concerned for the needs of others, the more we will know that the Lord will supply all our needs, according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

Conclusion

So my friends, as we reach the end of this sermon series, I truly hope that along the way you've been encouraged and that it's actually helped you to rejoice. I hope that you've found a deeper sense of joy in the Lord and his glorious salvation, and in our partnership in the gospel. And I hope that today you've seen how these things can be boosted even more. So as we go into this coming week, let us learn to be content whatever our circumstances. Let us rise above bitterness and complaining and instead ask the Lord to give us a deep satisfaction with our lot in life, to truly be at peace with our own situation. And as we do, let us also learn to have a far greater concern for other people. Let's really think about who we can support, whether near or far, knowing that as we not only increase their joy but also our own. Amen.