

THE SECRET OF CONTENTMENT

Philippians 4:6-20

Thanksgiving Eve

November 28, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson for Thanksgiving comes from *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, chapter 4, verses 6 through 20. It is on page 832 of the pew Bible. In this epistle lesson, Paul teaches us the secret of contentment. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Philippians 4, beginning at verse 6, we read in Jesus' name.

⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

¹⁰ I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. ¹¹ Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

¹⁴ Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. ¹⁵ And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. ¹⁶ Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. ¹⁷ Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. ¹⁸ I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. ¹⁹ And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁰ To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Prayer has a way of changing the way we think.

Are you anxious? Do you worry? Pray. Pray for whatever it is that makes you anxious. Pray even for your anxiety. Confess it as a sin, because it is a sin, and ask God to take it away. Ask him to grant you peace. Ask him to grant you faith to trust his promises. And thank God for everything he has given you. Prayer—especially thanksgiving—is Paul's secret of contentment (4:6-7, 11-12).

We have a way of thinking about everything we don't have, instead of what we do have. And we dwell on all the things that are wrong, rather than what is good. You know how it goes. We

get something, and we enjoy it and rejoice in it for a short time, but we very quickly turn our attention to the next thing. We don't give much thought to it until that thing breaks, and then we get angry, and we worry, and we can't remember how we ever lived without it. We certainly don't thank God that we have a broken something instead of nothing at all. This is a bad way to live, and it only leads to worry.

There are various different ways we deal with anxiety. On one end of the spectrum is despair. We give in to whatever it is that worries us. We play the victim. We feel sorry for ourselves. We declare that everything is ruined, and it will never get better. This, of course, never makes anything better. And we know this, but when we run out of willpower, we just can't help it.

On the other side of the spectrum is pride or ambition. Something worries you, something is wrong, so you bear down and tackle it head on. You say, "I can do this. I can fix this. I can go out and get what I want." And maybe you can. Maybe you have what it takes to fix whatever it is that worries you. And maybe you have the ability to earn what you want. This might fix your immediate problem, but it doesn't really solve your anxiety, because there's always something else to make you anxious. And there's always something else you will covet.

There really isn't much difference between anxiety and covetousness. They're just two sides of the same coin. And the name of that coin is "idolatry." Anxiety is just the pessimistic version of covetousness, so I'm going to include covetousness in this discussion too.

And I should make a qualification here: I'm talking about normal, run of the mill anxiety. There is also a clinical kind of anxiety that might require extra care. If you suffer from clinical anxiety, Paul's admonition to give thanks is going to be helpful, but it's still okay to seek extra help; there might be another piece of the puzzle. Tonight we're just talking about the one piece.

Now you know how normal anxiety goes. You worry about something until you fix the problem, or someone fixes it for you, or the problem just fixes itself. And when the problem goes away, you might stop worrying about it, but you don't stop worrying altogether. It doesn't take long until something else comes up and you worry about that. Your anxiety just shifts to something else.

Covetousness works the same way. Once you gain something, you stop coveting that thing, but you don't stop coveting altogether. You just start coveting something else, because there's always something else.

I suppose some people struggle mostly with anxiety, while others struggle mostly with covetousness. I struggle with both, and I'm guessing I'm not alone. Sometimes I just go back and forth between the two. Here's one way it might work: It might start out as covetousness when I see something that I want, like a new cordless drill. When I finally get that drill, my mind moves on to something else ... until the drill starts to wear out. Then I start to be anxious about it. I try to fix it, and it consumes my mind, and I feel like a victim because the thing I once coveted is now being taken away. I descend into anxiety ... until my covetousness takes over again, and I realize this is just an opportunity to buy a better drill. So I covet the next model up, and eventually I buy that drill, and my mind moves on to something else ... until that drill starts to wear out. You see how this goes. This cycle repeats itself over and over again with many different things.

And it's not just material possessions. The same thing can happen with relationships, or jobs, or whatever else it is that our hearts desire.

Why do we do this? It's because we turn all these things into idols. The problem is that we are expecting these things to satisfy us. We expect to find meaning and happiness in them. In this

way, they become gods to us. We desire them and become slaves to them. We love them instead of the one true God. And then, when these things start to fail us (because everything eventually fails), we become anxious. In this way, anxiety and covetousness are just two different sides of idolatry.

So getting the thing you want isn't the solution to covetousness, and fixing the problem isn't the solution to anxiety. These desires are not ended by satisfying them, but by extinguishing them. Anxiety and covetousness are insatiable thirsts. Feeding them will not satisfy. It's like drinking saltwater.

Now I realize that it might not seem very constructive to call anxiety "idolatry." You might just despair, *As if these anxieties are not enough, now I have the added worry that I'm breaking the First Commandment whenever I worry.* Then you just become anxious about your anxiety. That doesn't help. But the point of calling worry a sin isn't to make you worry more. As with all sin, the primary point of calling it a sin is so that it might be forgiven. Jesus bled and died for your anxiety. It's atoned for! It's paid for!

Furthermore, the First Commandment is given to us to protect God's gift of himself to us. When God says, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Ex. 20:3), the very commandment reminds us that God is our God. He has called us his own, and he has become our God. The main problem with other gods is that they are inadequate.

There are two kinds of false gods: the obvious ones and the subtle ones. The obvious ones are the deities in other religions. These false deities are, of course, not real, and, therefore, unable to help us. The subtle gods are the earthly things that we place our trust in: possessions, relationships, careers, etc. They don't claim to be gods, but we treat them as gods when we look to them for our ultimate fulfillment. Both kinds of false gods have the same problem: they are inadequate. They are not able to save us, they are not able to provide for the needs of this life, and they are certainly not able to grant eternal life. This is why God gave us the First Commandment.

It's also why he gave us the Ninth and Tenth Commandments. Those are the ones about coveting. The Ninth is, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house" (Ex. 20:17). This has to do with all his possessions. And the Tenth is, "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his servants, nor his cattle, nor anything that is your neighbor's" (Ex. 20:17). This has to do with his relationships. These commandments protect God's gift of contentment, and they bring us back around to the First Commandment. When we covet something or someone, we make that person or thing to be our god. We expect to find fulfillment from that person or thing. But God knows that all these other persons and things will not satisfy us, and they will certainly not save us, so he warns us against coveting them. God has given us all we need for this body and life. He has promised to supply every need (4:19). So he commands us to be content with what we have. And this is good for us. Being content with what we have is just one form of trusting God. It's trusting that he has given, and will give, all we need.

So we've learned that worry is bad, and it's really a lot like the sin of coveting. But simply knowing that worry is sinful doesn't help us stop doing it. Nobody wants to worry, even if it's not a sin. So what do we do? Here is Paul's advice, and this is really quite practical: pray, and, especially, give thanks. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (4:6-7).

It's not just a matter of quitting worry. It's a matter of replacing it with something better. When anxiety comes upon you, pray. There's kind of a psychological aspect to it, but it's much more than that. It might sound like we're just replacing a negative thought with a positive one, but this is not *The Power of Positive Thinking*. There is a real and substantial power at work here. It's the power of God. Prayer reminds us that God is in control of all things, and he provides all we need. When we pray, we also start to see our prayers answered. We might not get everything we ask for, but when we pray for things that are good, we will see at least some of those good things come to pass. This reinforces in our minds that God is good, and powerful, and watching over our every need. The power of prayer is not in our prayers, but in the One who hears and answers them. It is because of his goodness that we are strengthened in our faith when we pray.

And Paul especially instructs us toward thanksgiving. When we give thanks, we fix our eyes on what God has already given us. Too often we take God's past gifts for granted. But recalling God's goodness in the past shows us his pattern of taking care of us. This gives us confidence that he will continue to do so. We remember this when we give thanks.

And we should not merely give thanks for temporary earthly blessings. All these things fall into the category of "daily bread," which is just one of seven petitions in the Lord's Prayer. Give thanks, even more so, for his spiritual and eternal blessings, for these are his greatest gifts. Give thanks for the forgiveness of sins. Give thanks that your names are written in his Book of Life. Give thanks for the Holy Spirit, who strengthens and preserves us through this life. Give thanks for the Holy Scriptures. Give thanks for the promise of the resurrection of the dead and eternal life in the new creation. Give thanks for all of God's gifts, and, especially, don't forget the big ones.

These big ones are at the core of Paul's secret of contentment. Paul "learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need" (4:12). Paul was content to suffer. He was content to be hungry. He wrote this letter from prison, but he was still content, because he knew that no one could take anything from him that God would not give back in the resurrection of the dead. This is why he says, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13).

That's probably one of the two most misapplied verses in the Bible. In our selfish ambition we take it to mean that Christ will give us the strength to be wealthy, powerful, successful, or whatever else we want. In other words, *Jesus is going to make me a winner!* Taken in context, it means about the opposite. Paul is talking about enduring hardship. *God will strengthen me so that my faith will endure any and every hardship.* It does not mean that you can win the championship, get the promotion, and be wildly successful in the strength of Jesus. God does not promise you that. But he promises that you can endure without those things. Your faith can endure losing, being passed over for a promotion, and being a complete failure in the eyes of the world. That is the strength we have in Christ, because there is nothing this world can take from us that God will not give back in the resurrection of the dead.

The secret of contentment lies not simply in giving thanks for God's temporal and earthly blessings, because everything in this world fades, but in giving thanks for his spiritual and eternal blessings, because these things cannot be taken from you.

Give thanks for all of God's gifts. When there is food on your table, give thanks. When your bed is warm, give thanks. When you have loved ones to share a table with, give thanks. All of these are gifts from God. And do not lose sight of his greater gifts. If you have no food, and your bed is cold, and you are all alone, give thanks, for your name is written in his book. Also, let someone know, because we can fix the hungry, cold, and lonely thing.

THE SECRET OF CONTENTMENT (Philippians 4:6-20)

In all things, give thanks. Pray. Your loving and all-powerful Father hears you. He answers you according to his wisdom and for the sake of Christ Jesus. We have nothing to be anxious about. In all things, “by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.