

“Thankful to be Content”

Good Grace, Good God, part 2

Philippians 4:10-20

[title slide] *Welcome, prayer*

[stone man] Do you know the story of the stonecutter? A simple stonecutter works every day cutting stones out of boulders. One day, a duke passes by in his carriage. The stonecutter stops and watches. He thinks, “I wish I were him. If I were the duke, I’d have all those people to wait on me hand and foot.” The next morning, surprisingly, he wakes up to find his wish is fulfilled. He is the duke and has a grand time ordering his servants and enjoying his riches.

However, that same day, the king summons him. The duke must bow to the king and pay taxes. The duke thinks, “I wish I were the king, then I wouldn’t have to bow to anyone, and then I’d be content.”

The next morning, he wakes up, and once again, his wish has come true. He is the king. His treasury is full of gold, and people wait on him hand and foot. He bows to no one. But that same day, as he is out surveying his kingdom, the sun beats down on him from the sky. He becomes hot and sweaty, and he says, “If I were the sun, then I would truly reign supreme, and I would be content.”

Sure enough, he wakes up the next day, and he is the sun. He shines down on everyone – rich and poor – and watches them toil under his hot rays. He is supreme in the sky; no one can even look directly at him. But then, a cloud appears and blocks him. He thinks, “Ah, but if I were the cloud, then I would truly be content.”

He awakens the next day, and he is the cloud. He blocks the sun; he chooses whether or not it rains, causing crops to flourish or wither and die. He controls floods and droughts. People raise their fists and curse him. No one controls him...until the wind starts to blow. As the wind pushes him away, he thinks, “Ah, if I were the wind, then I would truly be content.”

The next day, he is the wind. He blows the clouds away, topples huge trees and destroys people’s homes. He can bring a gentle refreshing breeze, or he can create havoc with a tornado. All creatures, small and mighty, are at his mercy. Everything moves before him...except for a large boulder on the road. No matter

how hard he blows, the rock remains. He thinks, “So, the rock is greater than I? Then I wish to be the rock.”

And finally, he is the rock. The sun beats down, but it doesn’t affect him. The rain falls, and he doesn’t care. The wind blows, and he is never moved. “At last,” he thinks, “I am finally content.” And then he hears the tapping noise of a stonecutter’s hammer. Of all the forces in nature, he must submit to that which he once was. And his search for contentment fails.

[woman, crowd] It seems a lot of us are searching for happiness and contentment. Yet no matter what our station in life, contentment can remain elusive. I’ll admit, I tend to preach a better sermon after my Northwestern Wildcats win a football game on Saturday. And that bugs me. Why should a game played hundreds of miles away by a bunch of twenty-year-olds affect my state of contentment? Yet, somehow, it does.

[quote] English essayist Joseph Addison once said, “A contented mind is the greatest blessing a man can enjoy in this world.” And when we are content, we tend to be thankful and generous. Have you ever noticed, the word “gratitude” rhymes with “attitude”? Contentment and generosity go hand in hand, fueled by our attitude. There are many things in life that we can’t control, but our attitude is our own choice. We can choose to be content. We can focus on how we are blessed, instead of complaining every time something doesn’t go our way.

[Cornucopia] Thanksgiving is just around the corner, when we usually focus on food, especially pumpkin pie and turkey. But that’s not all there is to Thanksgiving. I submit to you that the mark of a Christian life is gratefulness, and it should be expressed year-round. We can always be grateful, because God loves us and forgives us. We are blessed.

We live in a world that can be very cynical and ungrateful. Yet if everyone enjoyed a loving relationship with God, how would the world be different? There would be more grateful people, for one. There would be better attitudes. We would see gratefulness expressing itself in patience, generosity, and kindness.

[hand fountain] Here is the truth I want you to know today: When you focus on what God has given you, you can be content in any circumstance. And when you are content, you will be generous.

Is there anybody here who would like to experience contentment in their lives? Real peace? I know I do. The Apostle Paul said he learned the “secret” to contentment. Let’s dig into this scripture. (Philippians 4:10-20)

[Paul] Paul was a missionary. He traveled from place to place preaching Christ and starting churches. This was not glamorous work. In fact, he wrote the letter of Philippians from prison. Paul knew about needs and blessings, poverty and abundance. Whether he had a little or a lot, he was content in any circumstance. He spelled this secret out in one sentence: Christ gave him strength.

Who doesn’t want to be content? It’s been said, eliminate anxiety from society, and we will solve 90% of all mental illnesses. Contentment is the cure for anxiety. This is an urgent need for all of us. This is something the world wants to know. Just think of all the discontent people experience in the winter holidays! People want to know the secret to contentment. Can we be content like Paul?

I think we can. The first thing I noted in this scripture is that Paul was thankful. What was Paul thankful for? The church in Philippi gave him a gift. Several gifts, in fact. Paul was a missionary, and he wrote a nice thank you note to the church for their offering.

Paul wasn’t begging. He wasn’t bragging. He was simply thankful. He wanted to give credit where credit was due. He was saying, in effect, “I couldn’t do this without you. You are receiving the fruit of your gift.” And it’s not the size of the gift that matters, it’s the fruit that comes from it.

[Grace UMC] Like Paul in his ministry, I have a lot to be grateful for at Grace United Methodist Church. I stand here in front of you because of your generosity. But this sermon is not about me or my salary. Like Paul, I want to represent Christ to the world. I want to thank you and encourage you to keep giving.

Now, there are several attitudes you can take when the offering plate goes by. As you watch this video, I hope, this is not one of them.

[Video: “Mr. Like to Make Change in the Offering Plate Guy”]

I hope that’s not you. I hope you’re thinking of something else. Like how great it is to worship together. Like the amazing ministries this church supports. I hope you’re thinking about how we can grow. How we can invest in people.

[Thank You] The point is, we must choose to have an attitude of gratitude. Together. The whole church. We must choose to respond to God’s grace by supporting the work of God’s kingdom.

I want to support that kingdom. Even if I wasn’t your pastor, I would still tithe to this church because I believe in what this congregation can do. I want to have an attitude of gratitude. I want to be content. Look at Paul. He was in jail, and he had an attitude of gratitude. He believed God would provide his every need. He told the Philippians the same thing.

[Faith Promise Card] We are in the midst of a church-wide stewardship campaign, which I’ve called, “Good Grace, Good God.” We give because we acknowledge that God is good, that we have all received grace in abundance, more than we could ever deserve. Next week we will have the opportunity to turn in our Faith Promise cards, also known as pledge cards. How we choose to respond will determine our budget for next year. But this isn’t about one pastor or one church. This is about our whole community, our world. This is about loving Jesus. This is about doing together what none of us could do alone.

[hands] Let me give you a few practical examples. In the past four years, I have assisted veterans struggling to get by, counseled students who were depressed and anxious, prayed with people struggling in their marriages, and married couples asking for God’s blessing. All of them came into our church and received the help we could offer. How many of you have attended a funeral or wedding in this place? Have you thought about why they came here? It is because they expected to find someone who cared, someone who would help in Jesus’ name. That speaks to our generosity. That is our attitude of gratitude.

We have a mission to fulfill. We are making disciples of Jesus Christ. And the fact is, if you believe in that mission, you will support it with your prayers, your presence, your service, your witness, and your gifts. This week, we are asking you to pray about how you will support our church in the coming year. I have faith in you. This is a generous church. But we are not giving to a budget. We are giving to people, because we believe in what the church stands for, and because, like Paul, we believe God will provide our every need.

[title slide] When you focus on what God has given you, you can be content in any circumstance. That’s Paul’s promise, and I believe him. I will choose to

have an attitude of gratitude. I will be content in any circumstance, and I will do all things through Christ who gives me strength. I will be one who makes disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Will you join me? This is a mission worth living for and worth giving to.

Let's pray.

Memory Verse: Philippians 4:19 - "My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus."

Reflection Questions

1. Recall a time in your life when you were in want. How did it feel?
2. Why was the Apostle Paul content in any circumstance?
3. How does recognizing God as the source of all gifts affect your contentment?
4. What ministries are you glad to support as a part of the church?
5. What are you willing to commit to the church in the coming year in time and finances? (Next week, each family will have an opportunity to fill out and turn in a "Faith Promise Card.")

Go deeper: Read Matthew 6 this week, which includes many of Jesus' sayings on giving, prayer and worry.