

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Thanksgiving – November 24th and 25th, 2010

Philippians 4:10-13

I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. 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 everything through him who gives me strength.

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

It is no big secret that our country has had some economic difficulties over the last couple of years. It also is no big secret that this has had some pretty drastic effects on the people of this wonderful country. We have all heard report after report about rising unemployment numbers, more and more lost jobs, and the many people who have had to severely cut back to make ends meet. Outwardly speaking, there seems little that we can be thankful for this year. To drive this point home even more, I have seen and heard many report already this year of people who have said that this Christmas is not going to be a very good Christmas because of all of the economic troubles.

This leads me to another thought, is this kind of thinking only common among unbelievers, or might this type of thinking be creeping into the hearts and lives of God's people? Do we sitting here today, people who are certainly affected by the same financial downturn, have reasons to be thankful? Today, the Apostle Paul is going to help us look at true thanksgiving. He is going to help us evaluate and take a focused look at what is going on in our lives. He is going to do this by letting us take a look at his life, which in many ways, was far worse than anything we in this country are facing right now. And as we look at Paul's words we will find a different perspective on thanksgiving.

Believe it or not, this sermon is not going to be a how-to lesson on being thankful. It's about **The Secret of Thanksgiving**, but not just about the secret to being thankful. It's about the secret power that being thankful has on our hearts and lives. Follow me? Being thankful is actually the secret to being content. That's the real secret of thanksgiving, you see. If you can learn to be thankful, then you have learned the secret to being content in life. And how does one learn to be thankful? Well, think about two things:

Theme: The Secret of Thanksgiving

- 1. Knowing the source of all blessings**
- 2. Knowing the source of your strength**

The background of this joyful letter that Paul wrote to the Christians in the city of Philippi, is that the Philippians Christians out of love and thanks sent a gift to Paul who was in prison in Rome for preaching the Gospel. Paul could have used this letter to state the obvious that his situation was earthly speaking bad and that things could most certainly be better, but he didn't. He wrote one of the most uplifting and thankful letters that we can study about how God's Gospel is what true thanksgiving is all about.

As we just said before, Paul wrote this letter because of a wonderful blessing he had received, and he wanted to thank the givers of that blessing. In fact, the letter to Philippi has sometimes been called Paul's thank-you epistle. He wrote out of gratitude for a gift that the Christians in Philippi had sent to support his ministry. But, then, Paul made it obvious that the person he was most thankful toward was the Lord.

When the gift came he rejoiced to see that the Philippians were thinking of him and his ministry. But the ultimate source of his joy was the true source of these blessings: **“I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me.”**

“I rejoice...in the Lord,” he said. It was the Lord he was thankful to when he saw the gift from the Philippians Christians. Sure, it was the Philippians that gave him the gift, but saying that he rejoiced in the Lord implied that he had the Lord to thank for the fact that they were concerned about him in the first place. Speaking in this way was certainly consistent with the way he always spoke, for it was earlier in this same letter that he said to the Philippians, **“for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13).**

What’s more, Paul told them, he also had the Lord to thank for the opportunity they had to show their concern: **“Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it.”** God had worked it all out to bring them both joy. He brought the Philippians joy by giving them an opportunity to help a missionary of Christ, and he gave Paul joy by letting him be a beneficiary in this outpouring of pious love. Now, he doesn’t want them to think that he’s fishing for more money—that would completely destroy the point of what he was trying to tell them. So he says, **“I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.”**

And this really brings him to the very best part of his thank-you letter. He would like to thank them by edifying them, by instructing them in the way of true joy—the secret of thanksgiving. **“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 everything through him who gives me strength.”**

What Paul was trying to get across was this kind of idea, *“I know how to be in need, and I know how to have plenty.”* In other words, he hasn’t just experienced both, but he has learned how to weather them both well, how to survive both extremes without getting burned either way. But what’s really cool about what he said, I think, is the way he phrased this next part: **“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’ve learned the secret,” he said, as though he’d endured some mysterious initiation ritual and finally become privy to the secrets held by oh so few!

So what is the secret? Well, it’s not a big secret with you, although you may not think too much about the contentedness that goes with it. The secret is knowing the Source of All Blessings well enough to know how badly he desires us to be superabundantly blessed! I remember that the Apostle Philip said to Jesus on the night before he died for us, **“Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us” (John 14:8).** Jesus was like, “What are you talking about, Philip? Look at me! You’ve already seen what the Father is like!” And Jesus was not talking about one of those Three-in-One mystery things, either. He was saying that if you want to know what the True Source of All Blessings is like, then you need look no further than our Lord and Savior!

Jesus shows exactly what God is like by showing that he is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for people who spit in his face. In fact, the very next day that’s exactly what Jesus did: he made the ultimate sacrifice for people who spit in his face. I mean, look at us! We put aside a holiday for thanksgiving in part simply because we spend our entire lives taking advantage of the generosity of our Father and rarely if ever saying thanks for it. He provides the sun, he provides the rain, he provides the seed, the food, the resources, and the paycheck that we receive only because he has provided us with the skills and strength to earn it, and how many days in a year do we spend thanking him? All he’s ever asked from us is to enjoy the fulfillment that comes from living in harmony with him, and all we do is bristle under his instruction because we believe the lie that he is trying to keep us down in some way! How would you feel about someone who treated your kindness and generosity in that way?

Well, to know God is to know that he treats such people with mercy. To know God is to know that he

treats people with love, even if they don't deserve it. And the secret to being content is to be constantly full of thanks because you know that whether the Lord has given you much or the Lord has given you little, it must all work somehow to your advantage, or else he would take the difficulty himself—as he did when he himself suffered the eternal consequences for our sins just because the consequences would have been removal from him forever!

2. **Knowing the source of your strength**

That's why Paul can say that he not only knows what it is to be poor and to be rich, but that he knows how to be poor without falling into despair and how to be rich without becoming attached to his possessions. Paul says, **“I can do anything through him who gives me strength,”** Paul wasn't stating that he thought God would keep him from all harm and danger. He wasn't saying that God had the strength to make everything good, earthly speaking. He was stating a fact that all of us, as thankful Christians need to remember that God has promised us his strength which will get us through each and every situation that comes into our life. God never promises smooth sailing and a life full of roses, instead he promises that we have the assurance that God's strength will lead us to accomplish everything we need to spiritually survive on our journey to heaven.

Honestly, my sinful nature makes it a very difficult thing to remain thankful all the time. My sinful self can spot with pin-point accuracy all the bad things going on in my life. My sinful nature is very good and practiced at finding the things that are going wrong. That is why it has been wonderful this Thanksgiving Day to gather in God's house to hear God's Word which clearly teaches us the **“The Secret of Thanksgiving”**. It takes strength to maintain an attitude of thankfulness when our patience is growing thin. That's why Paul focuses on the one who gives us strength, on our Savior, Jesus Christ. As you consider what he has done for us, he becomes a continual source of strength that prevents your attitude from getting out of line. When you see the patience he exercised with us sinners, it provides patience for dealing with the sinners around us. When you consider that he himself is on the throne in heaven choosing what to allow and what not to allow in our lives, your contentedness is fueled by the thanksgiving that wells up toward such a gracious benefactor!

We're all going to go our separate ways in a little while. We have our Thanksgiving festivities to attend to. Perhaps you're just headed home for a relaxing day. I wonder, though, if we can all make an effort to go our separate ways with a common look on our faces. I'm talking about the kind of look that people who know a really good secret have. It shouldn't be too hard considering that this is a holiday made for thanksgiving, and thanksgiving just happens to be the secret to our contentedness. Let's spend today with the kind of smile that says we're thankful for a Savior who always provides the best.