

“Christian Giving”
Philippians 4:14-23
April 3, 2022

INTRODUCTION:

Generous giving lies at the heart of Christianity because our God is a generous God. “God so loved the world that he *gave*...” To be like God is to give. Paul concludes his letter to the Philippians by thanking them for their generous giving to his missionary work. What we discover in his words is that there is much more going on with giving than we might at first realize. Specifically, giving is as much about the things we receive as it is about what we give. It is in God’s nature to give. Even in our giving for his purposes, we discover, according to this passage, that we get more than we give. Paul describes at least four things that are happening as we give, things that we might easily miss.

I. Partnership

Our church has been enabled by God to be very generous in giving toward missions. If we’re not careful, though, it would be easy to miss what is really happening when we give to missions. It is not merely the fact that a missionary has a need and we have been given the resources to help with that. There is more going on, and it is expressed in the two words “share” and “partnership” that we read in verses 14-15. **“Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble.”** The word share is that familiar word *koinonia*. In their giving, the Philippians were sharing Paul’s trouble. They were helping bear the burdens on him by taking some of those burdens on themselves. There were numerous teachers and philosophers in the world of Paul’s day who would teach for money. Paul wanted to distinguish himself from that group by teaching without any expectation of support. So he would often take a day job employing the skill he had learned as a boy and young man. It was expected of young Jewish boys that they would learn a trade, and Paul had learned the trade of tentmaking. So he would sit at the workbench all day, and then at night, with tired hands and arms, would tell people of Jesus. The Philippians relieved him of that burden by their financial support, allowing him to devote himself fully to the proclamation when he left Philippi and went to Thessalonica and then Corinth.

The second word he uses is the word “partnership.” The Philippians were the only church that entered into a partnership with Paul in the work of the gospel. All the commentaries point out how the language used in the first few verses of our text is filled with business terms. For example, the words translated “giving and receiving” in verse 15 are words for income and expenses. Partners share income and expenses. When we support missionaries

who are seeking to reach Asian immigrants in London, we are partnering with them. We are partners in the expenses for such an effort. We supply funding and prayers, while our missionaries supply their words, their deeds and their presence. But we also share in the income, meaning that we receive part of the benefit of their labors. When former Muslims in Albania or Bangladesh come to faith in Christ through the efforts of the missionaries we support, it is our privilege to have had a hand in that. When we get to heaven, there will be numerous people we have never met who will come and thank us for playing a part in this effort.

II. Profit

The use of business terms continues in verse 17, where Paul writes, **“Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.”** A footnote offers an alternate translation that reflects the business terms Paul has in mind: “I seek the profit that accrues to your account.” Paul is saying that he wants their financial support not for his own sake but for theirs. The Bible teaches that when we give, it’s not just the recipient who benefits but the giver as well.

What are the benefits of giving? Are the television preachers right after all, those who elicit gifts from their viewers with the promise that God will return even more money to the giver than what was given? These verses from Philippians 4 are frequently cited by proponents of what is known as the “prosperity gospel.” It promises not just that God will meet a Christian’s needs, but supply the man or woman of faith with abundance and luxury. Kenneth Copeland is one of the more popular proponents of this teaching. In his book, *The Laws of Prosperity*, Copeland argues that since the curse of the law involved poverty (Deut. 28:18), and since Jesus has redeemed us from the curse of the law, that the believer has God’s assurance of wealth. They interpret passages like Mark 10:29-30, where Jesus promises a hundredfold return to those who have left property and relationships for his sake, in a literal way. These misinterpretations of Scripture are then leveraged to manipulate people into giving, promising that giving to this ministry is the way to get rich. This false teaching seems to gain the most traction among those who are poor. In the trips I’ve made to East Africa, I have observed that some of the fastest growing Christian ministries there are among these proponents of the prosperity gospel. The ones getting rich from these teachings are those asking for gifts, while the givers just descend into further poverty.

Since this is such a common error in our day, let me mention three reasons why it should be rejected. First, it is an example of what theologians call “over-realized eschatology.” Eschatology is the name for that branch of theology that deals with the future. Christians are promised riches, because we are co-heirs with Christ (Ro. 8:17). But it is a promise for the future kingdom. Second, it

violates all the warnings in the Bible about the dangers of greed and materialism. Didn't Jesus say that a man can't serve both God and money (Matt. 6:24)? Yet prosperity theology depends on the desire of people to want riches. Third, it seems to forget that many of the most faithful, giving people in the Bible were actually poor. Even Paul in this very passage was a poor man. It is an added cruelty to the poor to suggest that the reason for their poverty is their lack of faith.

What then is this passage teaching when Paul speaks of the profit that comes to the giver? I think it is summarized in something Jesus said when he taught that **"where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"** (Matt. 6:21). We normally think that treasure follows the heart, and that is certainly true. But Jesus teaches here that it also works the other way around, that the heart follows the treasure. Giving, then, is a way to weaken the grip money has on the heart and to deepen our love for God and his kingdom.

III. Pleasing Worship

In verse 18, Paul speaks of giving by use of Old Testament worship words. Speaking of the gifts they sent to him through Epaphroditus, he says that they are **"a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God."** Many Old Testament sacrifices were burnt offerings. The smoke from the offering would rise heavenward, reminding the one offering the sacrifice that it was going to the place where God dwelt. The idea is that this is a pleasing aroma, much like someone grilling steak on their outdoor grill. Similarly, this offering pleases God, bringing joy to his heart.

This teaches us at least three things about giving. First, it is a sacrifice. The giving away of money is a sacrifice. To state the obvious, when you give away money, it means you have less of it. The money given could have been used for something else. It could have been put toward a vacation, some new clothes, paying down your mortgage or just added to savings. But the portion given is "sacrificed" to God, taken from one of these legitimate alternatives and given to God instead. Such sacrifice is the essence of worship, and that is the second truth about giving that this imagery teaches us. Giving is an act of worship. Everyone worships, and you can see what or who you are worshiping by what you sacrifice for the object of one's worship. The person who lives with extreme frugality in order to build up savings is sacrificing comfort for the worship of a larger savings account and all that might bring. Others might sacrifice money in order to look good. We worship what we are willing to sacrifice in order to have. So it is appropriate that we sacrifice to God through our giving. The third truth we learn about giving here is that our giving brings joy to the heart of God. All three of these terms emphasize that. Our giving is a fragrant offering to God. It is acceptable, and it is pleasing. Our giving brings joy to God not because of a need within God, but because of a need within us. Our need is to

join God in sacrificial giving. God's nature is to give. He has given everything to have us with him, sacrificing his Son in order to reclaim and redeem us. We join him when we do the same, sacrificing through giving in order to be like God. It brings joy to God not because he needs our money, but because he wants our hearts.

IV. Promised Provision

Verse 19 is another of those often-quoted verses from Philippians. It's a glorious promise from God. **"And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus."** Paul says "*my* God" not because this God wasn't also the God of the Philippians, but rather to draw attention to the fact that God had supplied all Paul's needs. The same God who had done that for Paul will also do it for the Philippians. Giving is not only a partnership with missionaries, but also with God.

He will "supply every need of yours." This certainly includes financial needs, and everything associated with that. Some of you live with a chronic shortfall of money, resulting in deepening debt with every passing month. Perhaps you've heard that adage, "If you've dug yourself into a hole, the first thing to do is to stop digging." God wants you to know that there is a way out of this. He will supply every need of yours. It may be that his supply will require some major steps you've been reluctant to take. For example, maybe you've been looking to his supply strictly along the lines of increased income, and maybe he wants to supply your needs through decreased expenses. Or maybe he wants to meet those needs through a complete change of direction in your career. Nothing should be off the table, because we all have this wonderful promise from God. It is a promise, I need to remind you, that is bigger than the meeting of financial needs. Your financial needs are not even your biggest needs. Holiness is far more important, because, as the Bible teaches, without holiness no man will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). Yet God will meet that need as well.

He promises to meet our every need "according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." Suppose you have a family member getting married soon, and Elon Musk is a friend of the family who will be coming to the wedding. In case you don't know, he's the CEO of Tesla and one of the richest men in the world. He calls the bride and says, "I'm considering what wedding gift I should bring, and I see that you have a wedding registry. Do you want me to get a gift off the registry, or would you prefer a gift according to my riches?" That would be an easy question to answer. What God promises here is to give us according to his riches all that we need.

Remember that this congregation was having struggles with worry. Several years ago, I cut out an article *USA Today* about insomnia. One of the big

causes of this inability to sleep is worry. What was interesting to me was to read the proposed solution to such worry given by a so-called “expert.” He gave three suggestions. First, he suggested scheduling some “worry time” before going to bed. The idea is that when the scheduled “worry time” is over, the worry will end as well. You know, it’s like you look at your watch and discover that your worry session is over, so you stop worrying. His second suggestion was to keep note cards next to your bed. If you wake up with anxious thoughts, just write them down, forget them, and deal with them later. His third suggestion was the telling one. If the first two fail, he said, just knock yourself out with a good sleeping pill. (March 23, 1999, front page). Paul has a better suggestion here. When those first two suggestions, and all others for that matter, fail to remove our anxiety, go to God, who promises to supply every need of ours according to his riches in Christ Jesus.

CONCLUSION:

Paul closes his letter with his traditional greeting section. This one is a little different in that it emphasizes the importance of greeting every single person, leaving none out. He doesn’t say, “Greet all the saints,” but “Greet every saint,” meaning every single one.

What does it mean to greet someone? The root of this word is to embrace. The particular form of greeting changes according to the specific culture. In America, our normal greeting is with a handshake and some word. In other cultures, a hug is more traditional, and in some there is a kiss on each cheek. In New Testament days, it seems that a kiss was the traditional form of greeting. Whatever the particular form a greeting takes, the essence of it is an embrace that says, “I see you, I value you, I’m glad to be with you.” Further, we can only greet one another with this bodily form one person at a time. Whether it’s a handshake or a hug, it’s done with the person right in front of you. This congregation was battling some disunity, and greetings like this would go a long way toward restoring unity. This is a challenge for us all to value the person right in front of us at the moment, treasuring them as God does.

It is a form of giving to treasure others like this. It requires the same thing that giving does, a willingness to sacrifice oneself and trust in God. Whether it’s giving or greeting, we do so knowing that God has treasured us so completely.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Philippians 4:14-23

1. What is the most joy you've ever had in giving a gift? What made it joyful?
2. What are the biggest temptations you battle in your giving? Stinginess? Giving as routine rather than with a joyful heart?
3. Paul refers to giving as a partnership between the giver and, in his case, the missionary. In other words, the Philippians were sharing in Paul's mission work by their giving. How does this awareness change our attitude toward giving to missionaries?
4. Paul says in verse 17 that there is profit (or fruit) in the act of giving. How does giving benefit the giver?
5. Is there any truth in the prosperity gospel, which refers to the idea that God promises wealth to his people because Jesus has removed the curse of the law (a curse which includes poverty)?
6. Where is the error in the prosperity gospel?
7. In verse 18, Paul uses the Old Testament language of sacrifice to speak of our giving. How is our giving like these sacrifices? How does that apply to us?
8. In verse 19, God promises to supply every need we have. Can you think of a time when God supplied your need, whether it was a financial, spiritual, relational, or any other type of need?
9. It was mentioned that the root of the word "greet" is to embrace. What applications come to mind when you consider greeting as a type of embrace?