

Even the Smallest Gift Helps!

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.

¹² 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. ¹³ I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

¹⁴ Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. ¹⁵ 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; ¹⁶ for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. ¹⁷ Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. ¹⁸ I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. ¹⁹ And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

²⁰ To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

A number of years ago, we went through some of my mother's things in Michigan. There was a box of mementos. There was a letter in there that caught my attention. It was a personal letter written by her pastor at that time. His name was Ernie Wendland. Apparently, my parents invited him over to the house after church one Sunday. My mother served him a piece of pie and a cup of coffee. This meant a lot to him. Shortly after that, he was departing for our Synod's convention where they were deciding on whether to retain or break fellowship with the Missouri Synod. Those matters weighed heavily on his mind and that piece of cake and coffee and time with his members was a refreshing break from the heavy decisions that lay ahead. It wasn't much, but it meant a lot to him, so much so that he wrote a letter of thanks.

Philippians is written by Paul. He had a lot on his mind. He was in prison awaiting the verdict. The members in Philippi sent him a gift and Philippians is Paul's thank you letter. Let's go back into our epistle reading for today and let's see how even the smallest gift can help. First let's see what this gift meant to Paul.

I. What this gift meant to Paul.

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.

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A special bond develops between a pastor and his congregation. One developed between Paul and this small church in Philippi. More than once they raised gifts to help him out in his mission work. This reminds me of my home congregation. A former vicar came back to preach on mission Sunday. He then was a missionary in Africa. They collected a door offering of hundreds of dollars for him to buy bicycles so African missionaries could go from village to village. The same with these Philippians.

But they didn't help him once and forget about him. When they heard he was in prison in Rome, they wanted to help. Something got in the way; we don't know what. So, they couldn't help immediately. Once that obstacle was removed, they went into action. They sent one of their Elders to him with a gift. Again, we don't know what it was. I am sure it wasn't much. Philippi was a retirement community with a very low cost of living. They were considered at the poverty level.

But what did this small gift mean to Paul? He rejoiced greatly in the Lord. He sent this letter as a "thank you." But did you notice how he said it? He said he would have been fine if they didn't send it. Let's say you gave me a Snickers bar. I respond by saying, "Well, thanks. I don't need it, but thanks anyway." That might hurt your feelings. Did Paul appreciate that gift? Immensely. So what did he mean? Paul was still being their pastor. He was teaching them a lesson about God and the world. Their gift meant much to him. But even if they had forgotten about him, he still had a reason to be content and rejoice. In other words, he didn't want them to think his happiness is connected to how much he had. ¹² **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.**

Ever seen those old fashioned puppets where the puppet is controlled by a series of strings? Often we are like puppets and the strings that make us dance are the circumstances in our lives. Good things happen so we have a good day. Bad things happen and we have a bad day.

Yet Paul says he has found the secret to contentment so that bad things do not make it a bad day. Please, Paul, an anxious world is waiting for you to share this secret. What is it? ¹³ **I can do all this through him who gives me strength.** It didn't come from stoic philosophy where you just accept the bad. It didn't come from the Optimist Club where you always look for the silver lining. It came from Christ, Christ the Savior from our sins. Earlier in this letter Paul confessed that to live is Christ and to die is gain. Paul can't lose no matter what. If they released him from prison, he goes on living for Christ. If they executed him, Paul is still a winner as he is with Christ in heaven forever. See what the cross does to us? For Paul, being hungry meant he still had a good day. He is satisfied that

God loves him and he no longer hungers for righteousness. Christ satisfies that with his own righteousness. If he is alone, Christ is still with him. If he is with friends, Christ is still there. It is the promises of Christ that cuts the puppet strings so we are no longer tossed back and forth by good times or bad times. Christ, his cross, forgiveness and the love of God always make it a good day whether it is a good day or not.

And yet even the smallest gift makes a good day better. ¹⁸ ... **I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent.** Just as ravens fed Elijah in the wilderness, God provided for Paul through this congregation. It made life easier. But it brought Paul great joy in another sense. ¹⁷ **Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account.** Paul isn't flattering them so they give him more gifts. Rather, Paul is ecstatic that he sees the fruits of Christian faith. Paul shared the gospel with them. They said they believed. Now he sees it in their gift. He wants to credit it to their account, he wants the world to know what the Philippians did and that they just don't say they believe in Christ. Their faith took action.

II. What it means to the Philippians.

And this is what this gift means to the Philippians. ¹⁴ **Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles.** ¹⁵ **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;** ¹⁶ **for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need.** It was good for Paul that they shared in his troubles. But it was also good for them. Paul shared the gospel with them and they shared back with him even when he was hundreds of miles away. I am sure the right arm is happy that the left arm is there to help pick up a box. And the left arm is happy to help. The left arm has a good purpose. It doesn't just hang there. It is useful as it helps the rest of the body. Sharing is good for all.

And God also attaches a promise to our sharing. ¹⁹ **And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.** The Philippians had less because of that gift. Or did they? God promises that he will meet their needs, so a gift to a struggling missionary in prison will not put their own lives at risk. He doesn't promise to give back dollar for dollar. Nor does he say we should empty out our bank accounts, cash in our investments, sell our homes and cars and give every penny to charity. No. He is saying that his promise to provide for our needs can give us the freedom to be generous.

II. What it means to God.

Finally, what does this gift mean to God? Our garden is producing. We are getting green beans now. Soon we will have cucumbers. We see tomatoes forming and squash and peppers. What a joy to see a garden actually produce food. Imagine how God feels when his believers produce fruit. **They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.** This gift meant a lot to Paul. It even meant a lot to the Philippians. But it also meant a lot to the Lord. They smelled very good to him. It gives God great joy that his garden isn't full of weeds, but wonderful plants producing all sorts of wonderful things.

The Scriptures comfort us that God saves us from our sins and death with Christ. That is wonderful. But God doesn't save us and then pack us in bubble wrap and put us in a box and hide us in the attic. Remember, we are God's workmanship, created for good works which he has prepared in advance for us to do. Yes, Lutheran ministers are afraid of emphasizing good works. We don't want folks to ever fall for the false doctrine that our works are what earn heaven for us. But the Bible doesn't shy away from good works. Zacchaeus responded to Christ with generosity, half to the poor and undoing any wrongs he had done in the past. A woman anointed Jesus' feet with oil in anticipation of his upcoming death on the cross. Acts records the congregation gathering money and other items for the needy. It is no coincidence that the vast majority of hospitals were started by Christians and all the major charities. God saves us in Christ, but not as trophies. He saved us to serve and love like him.

Was this the only gift Paul ever received? No. Was it a big one? Probably not. But that doesn't matter. Even the smallest gift helps. It helps others, it helps ourselves, and finally it is pleasing to God. Amen.