

Philippians 4:6-20 – Gratitude Is Not Enough

Thanksgiving seems to be all about gratitude. And it is. But gratitude is not enough. It is not enough to be thankful and still be focused upon ourselves, what we have or do not have. Gratitude that surveys all our blessings and says “thanks” is a good beginning, but we need to move past a rehash of all our abundance. We need to focus less on the blessings and more on the One who blesses.

As long as we are focused upon the blessings, we are still in bondage. We live in fear of losing them. We condition our gratitude because of them and if they are gone, we are left ungrateful and bitter. No, it is a good start to be thankful but it is not nearly enough. Once we shift the focus from the blessings to the One who blesses, then we will know true freedom, contentment, and peace. Then we will learn the grace of giving instead of fearful keeping. Then we will find not only that things have changed but we have been transformed.

St. Paul told the Philippians that it was kind of them to share his trouble. It was, in reality, more than kind. It followed the example of the God who shared our trouble – even to suffering and death upon the cross. And that is the key.

It is one thing to give thanks for the blessings God has supplied us but it is another to use those blessings with the same generous heart God has shown toward us unworthy sinners. Giving and receiving are a partnership, according to St. Paul. They are not one way avenues but broad boulevards of giving, receiving, and giving again.

St. Paul describes how the gift is transformed. It becomes a fragrant offering. The sweet smell of gratitude comes when we take what God has given us and use it for His purpose and glory. A grateful heart is the center of it all but a grateful heart leads to a grateful life in which we seek opportunities to give the way God daily and richly supplies all our needs of body and soul and all things. God looks for opportunities to give. Those who receive His gifts with faith will look for opportunities to give too.

This fragrant offering of blessings used to bless others and glorify God becomes an acceptable sacrifice to the Lord. Pastors hear people ask all the time how much should they give. It is an impossible question. But it is often the result of a fear that we are not giving enough. It is the conscience at work warning us that gratitude is not enough. Something is expected of us before the work of God is complete.

Tithes and offerings are acceptable to God – not because they meet a minimum standard – but because they are a result of faith that values God more highly than self and even more highly than the blessings themselves. In other words, when we gift others with that which God has given to us and when we return to the Lord the first fruits of His own generous gifts, we demonstrate that our hearts are not focused on the things we have received but the God who gives so richly and generously.

The work of God’s Church is not a burden upon us but a wonderful opportunity. The poor are not heavy burdens or duties placed on us but opportunities. As Christ focused not upon the cost of loving but its fruit or benefit, so do we focus not upon the gift or the cost of giving to others but the fruits of that giving love at work in us and through us.

At the end St. Paul says that our hearts motivated to give and bless as we have been given and blessed pleases God. Maybe it is old fashioned to talk in this way. We do not worry as much as previous generations whether what we do pleases God as much as we are concerned that we are happy. But St. Paul is instructive here. Pleasing God is the means to contentment of heart and peace of mind. God calls us to do what is good and right knowing it will lead us to contentment.

To receive with thanksgiving is good. To give in faith is better. St. Paul wrote to the Philippians that it was kind of them to share his trouble. It was indeed but it was more than that. It reflected God’s own kindness who looked

upon us in our need and entered suffering and even death that we might be saved. It has pleased Him to do this in love, freely, and without cost to us. And we are grateful. But this is another step. That is the gratitude that moves us to give as He has given.

We are a people who have many blessings. We live in a rich and abundant land. We enjoy a lavish life, especially compared to most other people. We are heirs to a wonderful history and legacy of freedom and the protection of law. We have an abundance of food, shelter, security, medical care, and safety nets for those in need. But we are not always grateful and we do not always acknowledge these blessings. We have come to expect them, to think that we deserve them, and that these are not gifts from God but rights we are due.

It is not enough to be thankful. We are called to learn to return to the Lord the first fruits of His own giving love and to embrace the needs of others as opportunities to demonstrate the faith that lives within us. It is not simply about gratitude but how you use what God has given. Once we learn that, we are freed from the prison of fear and enjoy the liberty of living as the gracious people of a gracious God. Here is where contentment, peace, and joy enter in. Here is where we learn to see how the blessings given can become a fragrant offering and acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. When faith learns that, it is impossible to dampen the heart or any circumstance to steal our joy.