

Second Sunday of Easter
Stewardship Sunday #1
April 27, 2003
Philippians 4:10-13

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Faithful Stewardship Requires Contentment

1. Covetousness ruins stewardship
2. Contentment comes from Christ alone

NIV Philippians 4:10 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. 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 everything through him who gives me strength.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus, our living Savior,

In the handbook that comes with the *Pursuing Godliness with Contentment* stewardship materials, there's an introductory section that asks a series of questions. *Why do 91% of Americans make more money than ever before but 66% worry about losing what they have more than ever before? Why do 70% of credit card holders carry \$6,000 - \$7,000 in unpaid balances? Why has there been a 29-year decline in the percentage of income Christians give to churches? Why, according to research, do only 5-8% of Christians actually give 10% or more of the annual income to churches?* A way of answering all these questions can be found in the apostle Paul's words in Philippians 4. Paul asserts here that he has "*learned the secret of being content,*" but it's quite obvious that many Americans—and many Christians—have not. When contentment remains a secret, then I can become so busy chasing contentment that I run up big bills, expend all kinds of mental energy worrying that I won't have enough to cover those bills, and discover that I have precious little left over to give for the Lord's work. That's why the thrust of our WELS stewardship program this year is *Pursuing Godliness with Contentment*. **Faithful Stewardship**—that is, faithful management of the blessings God has given us—**Requires Contentment**. This morning let's spend a few minutes to see 1] that covetousness (the opposite of contentment) ruins stewardship, and 2] that contentment comes from Christ alone.

1. Covetousness ruins stewardship

In Philippians 4:10 we come to that part of the epistle which is actually a thank-you note from Paul to his fellow believers in Philippi. He writes to them, "*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.” Most of the Christians in Philippi were poor, but that didn’t stop them from sharing with Paul while he was under house arrest in Rome. They sent a courier named Epaphroditus to take their gifts to Paul. It took a while until they had the opportunity to send those gifts, but they were a heartwarming expression of their love for their Savior and for Paul.

But there’s something a bit peculiar about Paul’s thank-you note. Among us, good manners usually dictate that we indicate in our thanks that the gift received was just what we needed. But listen to what Paul says about need: *“I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.”* Though Paul was not in a dungeon at this time, life under house arrest was surely not easy. He likely had to cover his own living expenses and possibly even his legal expenses. And how do you do that when you’re under house arrest? For that reason the gifts of the Philippians were greatly appreciated. But Paul wants to be careful not to create the impression that he was sorely in need, that he didn’t know how he’d manage without those gifts. He was careful to express himself this way, first, because he believed that God was still meeting his needs even while he was under house arrest and, second, because even under these reduced circumstances he could still be content.

That’s a far different attitude than we find so often today, isn’t it? The list of what people *need* to get by has expanded dramatically. Materialism, covetousness, and the idols of mammon have become a way of life in much of our country. Three-dollar cups of coffee, \$100 pairs of sneakers, and \$50,000 SUVs are increasingly viewed as necessities, not as luxuries. We laugh when we hear the terms of a divorce settlement that includes a lavish figure for shoes or for a personal trainer, and we shake our heads at the billions that Saddam Hussein lavished on his tacky palaces. But we can quite easily be included among those Paul mentioned earlier in his letter—those whose **“god is their stomach,”** as we give in to our materialistic impulses. And materialism, by the way, is a word the Bible never uses. The Bible calls those impulses covetousness and greed. And the Bible says that a greedy man is an idolater.

Covetousness and greed ruin any attempt at being faithful stewards of God’s bounty. When from a heart of unapologetic covetousness I’m measuring my own “needs” against the so-called needs of the church, we know what’s going to win. Until we’ve confronted our covetousness and repented of it, we’re going to be in such hot pursuit of the fulfillment of our own needs that managing our blessings to the glory of God will fall way down the list of personal priorities.

In Greek mythology there was a character named King Tantalus. Because Tantalus had drawn the ire of the gods, he was punished in the afterlife by being chained in a lake. The water in the lake reached his chin, but each time he tried to bend his head to satisfy his thirst, the water receded. As if that wasn’t bad

enough, over the head of Tantalus were branches loaded with delicious fruit. But each time Tantalus reached for the fruit, the branches moved up out of his reach. It's from King Tantalus and his story that we get the English word "tantalizing," which refers to something that's teasingly out of reach. Our experience is a little different. It's not that we can't reach some of the things that tantalize us. It's that when we reach them, they fail to satisfy. They don't bring us real contentment. That's why Paul shares with us here the secret of contentment. He tells us that true contentment can be found only in Christ.

2. Contentment is found in Christ alone

The apostle speaks of his own experience here when he writes, *"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."* The word Paul uses for contentment is rare in the New Testament, but it was quite common among those who had adopted the Stoic philosophy. They contended that you could by your own will power develop an outlook that would free you from being dependent on your circumstances to provide you with contentment.

The Stoics seem to have a piece of the truth, at least. So many times we fall for the idea that if we could change our circumstances we could find contentment. "If I had more money..." "If I had a better job..." "If I had better health..." "If I had a different spouse..." "If I lived somewhere else..." And, of course, the Stoics are right. Contentment doesn't come from the right circumstances. It comes from a changed attitude within. But not quite in the way the Stoics imagined. Contentment comes not by force of my will, but through Christ. Paul says: *"I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation...I can do everything through him who gives me strength."* (The "him" is Christ Jesus.)

The secret of contentment has been right there in the open all the time! It's Christ, who strengthens me. My frequent failures at achieving contentment on my own only serve to remind me of my need for Christ's strength. Jesus made our contentment his mission when he took the very nature of a servant and humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. Now, through the forgiveness Jesus obtained for us, we're the citizens of heaven and we eagerly await the coming of our Savior and the transformation of our bodies that he's promised to effect. Through the good news of what Jesus has accomplished, God is at work in us to this very day, carrying on to completion the good work that he began in us. As the Holy Spirit leads us to find joy in Christ's finished work of salvation, we see other avenues to contentment as the cul-de-sacs that they are. Christian contentment comes not from an act of the will by which I extinguish my desires, but from the promise that I have a loving heavenly Father who has promised to unfailingly meet all my needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. It's from that place of true contentment in Christ, that we find the ability to be not afterthought stewards but firstfruits stewards, giving to God our best and our all. Amen.