

life groups discussion guide

philippians 4: 15-20: generously supplied



LIFE GROUPS

doing life together

"If you have a special need today, focus your full attention on the goodness and greatness of your Father rather than on the size of your need. Your need is tiny compared to His ability to meet it."

-- Bill Patterson

"I still find my corrupt heart longing for tomorrow's bread. I can make a good argument to the Lord about how effective I can be if He would supply me with enough advance funds. It's a little frightening to pray for TODAY's bread. That means I must pray again for tomorrow and believe again for tomorrow. My greedy heart is willing to be corrupted by a little bit of riches so that I see my warehouse full of loaves. I can make a good argument about how God won't have to be bothered with me every day if He would only advance me about ten years worth of bread."

-- Gayle D. Erwin

Though the Scripture portion given as the source for this week's sermon is verse 15-20, we need to look at it more in context. To do so, let's start by backing up a verse to 14. READ Philippians 4: 14-20

Without it's context, it's easy to read this passage in Philippians 4 and only take away that Paul is encouraging everyone to be ridiculously generous. And while that is indeed in there, a little digging reveals there's more than just an encouragement to crack open the checkbook at play here. I think verse 14 holds quite a bit more meat for us than it might initially appear, so we'll camp out there. Let's examine a few things:

For starters, verse 14 begins with "Even so" in the NLT and "Yet" in the NIV, but the NASB is a little better, using "Nevertheless". The Greek word used here is *plēn*, which is a marker of contrast, implying the validity of something irrespective of other considerations. Paul uses *plēn* here to restrict his previous statement. "Nevertheless" frames what is to come by referring back to what was said previously. What was said previously (verses 10-13) was that Paul wasn't actually in need since he had learned to be content with whatever he had. That was a fairly bold declaration. In view of Paul's expressing his complete reliance upon Christ in him, and being content even if he had nothing, the Philippians might have wondered if they should have even bothered to send him the gift. After all why would one who is self-content (in Christ) need anything? Paul wants the Philippians to know that their gift ("nevertheless") was still very much appreciated. Their gift demonstrated that they had a proper spirit as givers. Verse 15 even shows that Paul thought their generosity was exemplary and he seems to be going out of his way to convince them that they were generous like no one else, lest that in declaring his independence of human aid, he might appear to disparage the Philippians' gift.

Q :: Interesting that the Philippians view of Paul's need was different than Paul's, and that is what led to their generosity. Yet, despite his claiming that he was content and needed nothing outside his relationship with Jesus, Paul recognizes and praises them for their overwhelming generosity. Given all this, by what measure should we determine when to be ridiculously generous – and to whom?

Q :: Paul frames their generosity as sharing in his afflictions, which he tells them is a good thing. Explain how our generosity can be equated with sharing in the suffering of the one to whom we give.

Q :: Can we be content and in need at the same time as Paul seems to have been? Have you ever been on the receiving end of someone's generosity that you thought you didn't need only to discover that it was a blessing in ways that you weren't expecting? Explain.

While Paul doesn't say his need is great due to his abiding contentment, he does shed a little contradictory light on his circumstance when he says "Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction." The Greek word Paul uses here for "affliction" is the word *Thlipsis*. The NASB translates each instance of *thlipsis* thusly: affliction(14), afflictions(6), anguish(1), distress(2), persecution(1), tribulation(16), tribulations(4), and trouble(1). It conveys the idea of being squeezed or placed under pressure or crushed beneath a weight. When, according to the ancient law of England, those who willfully refused to plead guilty, had heavy weights placed on their breasts, and were pressed and crushed to death, this was literally *thlipsis*.

John MacArthur writes that "*Thlipsis* (tribulations) has the underlying meaning of being under pressure and was used of squeezing olives in a press in order to extract the oil and of squeezing grapes to extract the juice... In Scripture the word *thlipsis* is perhaps most often used of outward difficulties, but it is also used of emotional stress."

Clearly, the word Paul uses here indicates that while he was content in Christ no matter what came his way (be it very good, or terribly bad), the harshness of his situation was very real. The use of the word *thlipsis* only underscores Paul's claim that he had learned to be content whatever the situation...which, by the way, had been *really* bad.

In his *Bible Study Notes on the Word of God*, Dr. Thomas Constable makes this observation:

"We know that God loves a cheerful giver, but I believe we also need to stress that God loves a cheerful receiver. Cheerful receivers make giving and receiving a joy. It is especially important that the called workers of the church learn to be gracious, cheerful receivers. This is not necessarily an easy task. The art of being a gracious, cheerful, thankful receiver may be even more difficult than being a cheerful giver. If we learn to accept the compliments and the special personal gifts which we receive in a gracious, cheerful manner, we will help make giving and receiving a joy for ourselves and for our people."

Actually, I think receiving gets a bad rap. There are some negative connotations tied up in the idea of receiving. We even told in Scripture that it is more blessed to give than receive (Acts 20:35). People who overdo it on giving are admired, branded as givers and considered to have a generous spirit. People who overdo it on taking are looked down upon and branded as being takers and are considered to have a selfish spirit.

Q :: What are some things we can find in Scripture that we are told to receive?

Do you think that the greater the *thlipsis* in our lives, the easier it is to be a gracious receiver?

Some questions based on Dr. Constable's thoughts above:

Q :: Explain how "Cheerful receivers make giving and receiving a joy."? Also, identify and contrast the attitudes in a receiver that can make your giving less of a joy.

As you can see, there's more going on even in this one small transitional verse that first meets the eye. We see so much modeled in the life of Paul in this short passage in terms of not only his contentment in his Savior, but in his heart for those under his pastoral leadership. He goes beyond just being grateful for the tangible demonstration of love from the Philippians believers. He uses their generosity as an opportunity to build them up, to let them know that their heart was right, to prove to them that their generosity truly was great by telling them how much more they were doing than others, and to encourage them that their gift meant that they were partners with him in ministry – ALL things that would be a tremendous blessing to the hearts of those believers.

The Philippians teach us how to give out of a loving, generous heart and Paul teaches us how to cheerfully and graciously receive in a way that adds to the joy of the givers – and that may be the tougher lesson for us to learn.